



Institution Led Quality Review: Key areas of focus for colleges

Introduction

From January to March 2026, QAA staff met with staff within Scotland's colleges to discuss their experience of designing and implementing Institution Led Quality Review (ILQR) processes. While some colleges have already implemented a process, others are in the early design stages, with all colleges expected to begin implementation in 2025-26. These conversations were intended to explore where institutions were on their journey to ILQR and support reflection on the efficacy of their processes. This report summarises the themes of these discussions, including the most common queries and areas of good practice, to support Scotland's colleges and universities to continue designing, implementing and evaluating ILQR.

The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) has published [Guidance on Quality for Colleges and Universities AY 2024-25 to AY 2030-31](#) that sets out the expectations that institutional ILQR processes must meet. QAA would encourage college and university staff to become familiar with the expectations set out in [Appendix A of the Guidance on Quality](#). QAA continues to expand [its resources](#) to support the implementation and enhancement of ILQR processes within Scotland's tertiary education sector, which can be used alongside Appendix A.

Key Themes

Granularity of the Reviews

As colleges look to implement ILQR, the proposed review schedule must balance the need for a sufficiently granular scrutiny of programmes alongside the potential for drawing meaningful themes and conclusions across a subject area. Furthermore, the structuring of review areas should consider the resource required for reviews, particularly given current staffing and workload constraints.

In most cases, institutions reported they are planning to divide their reviews along existing subject lines, resulting in a total of three to 24 reviews. This significant variance largely relates to the size of the institution—ILQR should be proportionate. On average, most institutions intend to conduct two to three reviews annually in the six-year cycle.

SFC's Quality Guidance states that 'the aggregation of programmes and subjects in the review process should have sufficient granularity to allow adequate scrutiny of programmes,' with particular focus on the external panel member's ability to provide meaningful input on the programmes included. In most cases, conducting reviews at discipline level will be sufficient, but it may be advantageous to further divide subjects where there are significant differences, such as in student profiles or mode of delivery. Institutions may also elect to conduct thematic reviews of particular types of provision that may be overlooked in a subject review, such as National Qualifications, Core Skills, or Modern Apprenticeships.

Institutions are also required to review all professional services 'contributing to the student experience.' This will likely include services such as careers, academic support, fees and funding, and admissions, amongst others. Non-student-facing services such as HR and Finance are not required to be reviewed, but some colleges have elected to include them within their ILQR cycle. As with academic programmes, professional services should be reviewed with sufficient granularity to ensure adequate scrutiny, but similar services may be grouped together to reduce the number of reviews.

Relationship with Annual Monitoring

ILQR should build on and reinforce existing annual monitoring processes. It is not meant to replace annual monitoring. As a six-year cycle, ILQR offers long-term oversight, identifying trends and areas for strategic development. Data from annual monitoring may provide a foundation for review discussions, when considered over the full six-year review period.

Crucially, ILQR is reflective and enhancement-led. It is not a risk-based activity and so must be undertaken by all programmes within the six-year cycle, regardless of their annual monitoring results. In contrast to annual monitoring, ILQR is strategic and evaluative and is not primarily operational.

Panel Membership

Institutions can determine the size of their review panels, with most consisting of 5 or 6 members. SFC guidance states that 'team size and composition must take account of the range and volume of provision to be reviewed and the balance between understanding of specific context and broader critical perspectives. It is good practice to ensure that review teams can bring a range of experience to the process and hence are able to act as "critical friends".'

All ILQR panels should include a student reviewer. This student reviewer may be a sabbatical officer or the institution's equivalent of a course representative, and institutions should work with the students' association to identify other potential reviewers. It is important that the student reviewer is not enrolled on the programme or subject area under review. Colleges and universities will need to consider how the student reviewer can be supported and empowered to make a meaningful contribution to ILQR (e.g. briefings, training, etc.).

The ILQR panel must also include externality, which will likely come in the form of an external reviewer. The external reviewer could be a subject specialist from another institution or an industry expert. Depending on the nature of the review, it may be beneficial to have both an external subject specialist and an industry expert on the review panel.

Internal members of the panel usually consist of a quality professional and an academic from another discipline. It may be beneficial to invite programme leads whose discipline is about to undergo ILQR to participate as panel members, to familiarise themselves with the structure of the event. Members of relevant professional services may also be included. The panel should be large enough to include all relevant parties, but small enough to maintain the supportive, enhancement-led nature of ILQR.

Student Partnership

Students play a key role in ILQR, from the initial collation of data through to active participation in the review event. In addition to the requirement for a student member of the review panel, the student voice should be foregrounded in the data gathered in the lead-up to the event and on the day itself.

Institutions engage students through a variety of new and existing methods, including surveys, focus groups, workshops, and carousel events. When working with students, the subject area under review should consider the existing data available, as well as the appropriate opportunity in the academic calendar to gather any additional information. Proactive planning for student engagement is essential as the most appropriate time to gather student data may be some time before the review itself. sparqs' [Student Learning Experience Model](#) can be used to organise existing data, identifying any gaps and key themes.

It is important that the review panel can engage directly with students from the subject area under review as part of ILQR. The ILQR event will typically involve a meeting between the review panel and students from the subject area under review. While this meeting usually forms part of the day of the review, it may be preferable to hold the meeting in advance and/or with a subset of the panel to make the event more accessible for students. It is also important to consider the format and location of the meeting with students to encourage openness and confidence and ensure accessibility for all students.

sparqs provides guidance and support on [engaging students with ILQR](#), including guidance on engaging students in review processes and training materials for student panel members. For further support, institutions should speak to their sparqs key contact about their approach to student partnership in ILQR.

Enhancement and Quality Culture

A primary goal of ILQR is to develop the enhancement and quality culture within an institution. ILQR is not a risk-based process – it should focus on celebrating good practice and identifying areas for improvement. The SFC Quality Guidance clearly states that review outcomes should include both areas for improvement and 'good practice for dissemination.' ILQR findings should be regularly reviewed and reported through respective institutional governance committees to support enhancement across the institution.

As institutions implement ILQR, they may choose to begin with high-performing programmes where significant areas of good practice can quickly be identified and shared across the institution. Alongside ILQR, institutions may wish to run sharing practice events or to publish case studies, thus promoting good work and rewarding colleagues' excellence. Similarly, where areas for improvement are identified, institutions should consider how best to support enhancement centrally, providing targeted support and resource.

The ILQR process itself should be owned by the subject area under review and encourage reflexivity, rather than functioning as a top-down evaluation. Alongside relevant data, review documentation will often include a reflective analysis, provided by the subject area, evaluating and reflecting upon their development as a subject. At the conclusion of the process, it may also be beneficial to provide subject areas with a mechanism to respond to review outcomes and develop action plans to respond to any recommendations or areas for improvement. These mechanisms should feed into existing monitoring and reflection processes.

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