

Overview of Quality and Enhancement Activity in the University sector during 2008-09

Introduction

1. This is the first annual overview report from QAA Scotland to the Scottish Funding Council. It covers academic year 2008-09 and draws on the full range of QAA's activities to provide a strategic view of the sector's engagement with quality and enhancement work. Key achievements are bulleted and analysis is provided under three main headings:
 - How well are institutions assuring and enhancing quality?
 - What progress is being made in national enhancement activities?
 - What trends are emerging in quality assurance and enhancement?
2. QAA Scotland has been active in a wide range of areas to support the sector in its assurance and enhancement of quality. The annex to this paper provides a brief overview of these areas. QAA Scotland would be pleased to expand on any of these activities on request, either in presentation to the Committee or in a follow-up report, and would be interested to receive feedback from the Committee on whether future reports should have a different balance between strategic overview and detailed reporting of activities.

Key achievements and features of 2008-09

- First year of the revised ELIR method including the introduction of international reviewers on all ELIR teams
- Three ELIRs in Spring 2009 and annual discussion visits to all 19 higher education institutions
- Launch of the new national Enhancement Theme, Graduates for the 21st Century: Integrating the Enhancement Themes
- A range of outcomes were published for the First Year and Research-Teaching linkages Enhancement Themes
- International benchmarking activity was launched with a focus on student support
- Scotland was the only country to be identified as all 'green' on the scorecard in the 2009 Bologna stocktaking exercise, confirming that the Scottish university sector is fully engaging with Bologna
- The Protocol for managing potential risks to quality and academic standards came into effect from 1 October 2008

How well are institutions assuring and enhancing quality?

3. **Addressing ELIR outcomes** – it was evident from work undertaken during 2007-08 (which included a set of reports analysing action taken at each institution) that the institutions pay careful attention to the outcomes of their ELIR reports. This continued to be apparent from the annual discussions held during 2008-09.
4. **Outcomes of the 2008-09 ELIRs** – because it was the first year of the revised ELIR method, only three reviews were run, which is clearly a small sample. The reports were published in August 2009 but the draft reports were considered by the institutions during 2008-09. In all three cases there were judgements of confidence in the institutions' management of quality and academic standards. In two cases the judgements included a caveat where the institutions were asked to undertake work in specific areas. One was asked to carry out work, including programme reviews, as separate exercises from the institution's enhancement-orientated Curriculum Reform project. The other was asked to review its approach to assuring the academic standards and quality of its international validated provision. All three ELIR reports highlight significant areas of good practice including in the management of the student experience.
5. **Restructuring and reorganisation** – During 2008-09, the majority of institutions were undergoing reforms of processes and/or restructuring exercises. A number of significant reorganisations were underway in relation to learning and teaching including curriculum reviews and reforms, and changes to student support structures and delivery were also evident in many institutions. A striking feature of many of these reviews was the extent to which international practice was being sought and referenced by the institutions.
6. **Developments in institution-led quality review** – The QAA report to SFC providing an overview of the first ELIR cycle confirmed that the institutions have effective arrangements in place for assuring quality and securing academic standards. Notwithstanding the soundness of those processes, during 2008-09 several institutions were engaged in reviewing their methods of periodic review and annual monitoring. Often this was to bring about greater alignment with other institutional processes, for example the strategic planning arrangements. In other instances there were revisions to the unit of review (for example moving from reviewing at the subject to reviewing at the programme level). In addition, a number of institutions have introduced periodic processes for reviewing their research degree provision. Revision of all these processes by the institutions was characterised by evaluation of practice and external consultation involving other institutions and stakeholders (typically professional and statutory bodies).
7. **Review of support services** – the majority of institutions have included consideration of support services as part of their institution-led quality review arrangements for a number of years. During 2008-09, in response to the 2008 SFC guidance on institution-led quality review, several institutions were evaluating their

mechanisms for doing this. Some institutions engage support service staff as part of the review of an academic area, while other institutions conduct periodic reviews of the support services themselves, and a small group of institutions adopt both approaches simultaneously. In all cases, the support services have arrangements in place for gathering student views on the quality of the service provided.

8. **UK-wide dimension** – there is considerable evidence of the importance Scottish institutions place on being part of a UK-wide system of higher education. This can be seen in the institutions' use of UK-wide references points, such as the QAA Code of Practice, and the close attention colleagues pay to developments outside of Scotland, such as the National Student Survey.
9. **Student engagement and support** – there is a strong trend towards increased, or better embedded, student engagement across the sector. Student reviewers are involved on every ELIR team and, by 2008-09, all but one higher education institution had included students as regular members of institution-led quality review panels. There is evidence of increased engagement with sparqs by institutions, notably as part of efforts to engage students in learning and teaching issues more widely and not only training for student representatives on institutional committees. Also apparent were some changes in language relating to the provision of student services, for example with more explicit use of the term 'student-facing'.
10. **Linkage between review methods and Enhancement Themes** – there is growing evidence of linkages between ELIR and the Themes. For example, the ELIR reviewer pool includes more colleagues who have direct involvement in managing their institution's learning and teaching enhancement work than was the case in the previous ELIR cycle. A number of the international reviewers on ELIR teams have had previous engagement with the Scottish sector through the Themes work. It can also be seen that the topics arising from ELIR activity (reviews and annual discussions) have a resonance with Themes work, for example the nature of the first year experience is a significant topic in one of the ELIR reports as a result of work undertaken at that institution. Discussion on research-teaching linkages and, in particular, work on graduate attributes is evident in most institutions.

What progress is being made in national enhancement activities?
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11. **Engagement with the Enhancement Themes** – there is evidence of greater alignment of institutional enhancement priorities and the national programme of Enhancement Themes. This may be a benefit of the planned approach adopted by the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC) and it may also be associated with the arrangements in place for managing the Themes, which include links to institutional groups rather than individual colleagues. A key area of interest for institutions has been the nature of the graduates they are seeking to produce. For many institutions this has involved detailed consideration of curricula and institutional portfolios which has included consultation with a very wide range of stakeholders from across the UK and internally. There is also a growing awareness of the likely

impact of change in school level education arising, in particular from the Curriculum for Excellence. In addition, a number of institutions are seeing marked changes in their student populations with greater variety of entry qualifications and routes, and in some cases, different study modes being offered.

12. **Student engagement with enhancement** – there was a range of work in relation to student engagement during the year, with a focus on sharing and embedding good practice. This is true within institutions and at sector level, for example virtually all institutional groups which link to the Graduates for the 21st Century Theme include students in their membership and all engage with their student populations in a meaningful way. Although at an early stage in 2008-09, one observation from the International benchmarking project on student support was that, in Scotland, the focus for providing student support tends to be the institution, whereas in Scandinavia more student support is provided by the students themselves, for example via a student association. Further outcomes from the Benchmarking project have become available during 2009-10. While institutions would not wish to be complacent, this work is indicating that the provision of support in Scottish higher education institutions compares favourably with that in other countries.
13. **Recognising learning** – the sector engaged in a wide range of development work on the recognition of prior learning, work-based learning and employability more widely (for example through the SFC initiative which was coordinated by the Scottish Higher Education Employability Network, and which built on the previous national Enhancement Theme on Employability). Many institutions have also been working on personal development planning (PDP). There is long-standing evidence of PDP being used effectively in those subject areas where PDP is a professional requirement. Wider engagement with PDP is more patchy but there are signs, for example through the increased focus on graduate attributes across the sector, that there may be renewed interest in prioritising PDP more generally.

What trends are emerging in quality assurance and enhancement?

14. **Student engagement** – as will be evident from earlier text, there is a clear trend towards increased student engagement in learning and teaching at a range of levels within institutions and across the sector, including recognition of the student voice in strategic decision-making.
15. **Internationalisation** – international dimensions to institutional activity are apparent both in ELIR and the Themes. A number of institutions were developing international strategies and most had drawn on international experience to inform elements of institutional learning and teaching practice, sometimes through colleagues visiting Scotland in connection with the Themes activity, or International Benchmarking work, and sometimes through institutional contacts. International engagement within subject disciplines is a traditional element of higher education and this work continues; in addition a small number of institutions have engaged international reviewers to act as panel members on institution-led quality review. This represents a

significant investment and institutions have highlighted that the costs of such direct engagement can be prohibitive; it is not universal in any institution.

16. **Use of IT to support learning and teaching** – it is evident that institutions' use of technology are increasing and many significant improvements have been identified, notably through institution-led review at the subject level. It is clear that there is more widespread use and embedding of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) and there is widespread use of web-based information sources by both students and staff (eg web portals). There is some evidence of social networks (eg Facebook) being used as informal support tools, often by students themselves, and there has been some piloting of such networks in some institutions as an aid to collaboration and group work. Overall, through ELIR and institution-led quality reviews there is growing evidence of student satisfaction with the use and accessibility of technology to support learning and teaching.
17. **Linkages and integration of processes** – as highlighted in the overview report on the first ELIR cycle, there continued to be evidence of growing links between institutional processes, notably between institution-led quality reviews and institutional planning processes. Many institutions have undertaken work to align their research strategies with those for learning and teaching, and this is a further example of the embedding of the Themes within institutional practice.
18. **Links to the rest of the UK** – during 2008-09, there was heightened public interest in the quality and academic standards of awards, one outcome of which was a Select Committee Enquiry. In England, the main focus of review (or audit) work continues to be on assurance and compliance, without the accompanying focus on strategic enhancement or the student learning experience which have been central features of the Scottish arrangements. QAA, along with colleagues across the sector, continues to be vigilant in monitoring developments across the UK and QAA officers are engaged in discussions about the future shape of the quality framework in England.

Activities during 2008-09

This annex provides an overview of QAA Scotland's work with the sector during 2008-09. Further detail on all of these activities can be provided on request.

Enhancement Led Institutional Review (ELIR)

- i. 2008-09 was the first year of the revised ELIR method; the ELIR Handbook 2nd edition was published prior to the start of the year.
- ii. Three ELIRs were run in Spring 2008 at: RSAMD, Edinburgh College of Art and Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh. Annual discussions were held at all 19 higher education institutions. These annual discussion meetings form a key part of the ELIR method, providing an opportunity for QAA Scotland officers to discuss with institutions progress being made in addressing ELIR outcomes as well as key outcomes arising from institution-led quality review.
- iii. A number of publications, drawing on the experience of the first ELIR cycle (2003-07), were made available. These included two guides: one on good practice in producing reflective analyses (key documents in support of the ELIR process); and one on good practice in institution-led quality review. A range of 'learning from ELIR' reports were also produced, drawing on the outcomes of the ELIR reports. These covered the following topics: combining assurance with enhancement in institution-led quality review; student engagement; the impact of information and communication technologies on enhancement; employability and personal development planning; and aligning enhancement strategies with staff development.

Protocol for managing potential risks

- iv. The Protocol for managing potential risks to quality and academic standards came into effect from 1 October 2008. The Protocol provides an equivalent mechanism to the Causes for concern arrangements that are in place in England and Wales. During 2008-09, three cases were raised but, following informal enquiries, none were pursued using the formal protocol (this remains true at the time of writing).

Enhancement Themes

- v. The First Year Enhancement Theme concluded in June 2008 and a range of outcomes were published during the course of 2007-08 and 2008-09 on topics including: the nature and purposes of the first year; Personal Development Planning; curriculum design; transforming assessment and feedback; and student expectations and experiences.
- vi. There was a significant dissemination event for the Research-Teaching Theme outcomes in November 2008. During the life of this theme it became clear that several institutions had been giving consideration to the nature of 'their' institution's graduates. While this work was at different stages of development within institutions,

a key benefit of this Enhancement Theme has been the emergence of a shared vocabulary across the sector, which has led to greater sharing of ideas between institutions.

- vii. The new national theme, Graduates for the 21st Century: Integrating the Enhancement Themes, was launched with the first meeting of the steering committee in February 2009 involving Professor Phil Winn as the chair and including representatives of all the higher education institutions. Significant attention has been paid to ways of securing engagement from a wider range of staff within the institutions, such as each steering committee member linking with a team within their institution (often using pre-existing institutional structures) to promote engagement and dissemination. Another development has been the dissemination of outcomes during the lifetime of the Theme, rather than waiting for the end. In a move towards shorter outcomes publications for the Themes, three leaflets were published in 2008-09 covering: a general guide to the Themes; Research-Teaching Linkages; and Graduates for the 21st Century.
- viii. The annual Enhancement Themes conference was held in March 2008 and attracted over 370 delegates. The main conference topic was the Graduates for the 21st Century Theme. Another important strand of discussion was the International Benchmarking work, Supporting Student Success, which was drawing to a close at the time of the conference. The international speaker, Professor Simon Barrie from the University of Sydney, in addition to participating in the conference, made contact (covering a variety of activities) with 14 of the 19 institutions during his visit to Scotland. Professor Barrie provided a strategic and a practical overview of the national graduate attributes project in Australia.

Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC)

- ix. SHEEC comprises vice-principals with responsibilities for learning and teaching from each Scottish higher education institution. The Committee takes a strategic view of enhancement activity across the sector, including the programme of national Enhancement Themes, international benchmarking and work to support institutions in selecting and applying appropriate indicators of enhancement.
- x. The SHEEC International Benchmarking project has sought to inform teaching and learning practice in Scotland by looking at practice in other countries. Student support was identified as an area for exploration over the period 2008 - 2012. Work during 2008-09 included a sector-wider conference, in November 2008, involving international contributors and participation from all higher education institutions across Scotland. In addition, in June 2009, a group of colleagues from Scotland undertook a study visit to Denmark and Sweden. In April 2009, development work was undertaken to support a further benchmarking project on the research degree student experience. This activity is supported by another QAA project on the 'nature of doctorateness', exploring the nature of research degrees across the UK.

Credit, Access and the Recognition of Learning

- xi. QAA Scotland is one of the joint owners of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) Partnership and the Assistant Head of QAA Scotland chairs the SCQF Quality Committee. The main activities have been the preparation of the SCQF Handbook (which was launched in October 2009) and the extension of credit-rating to a wider range of organisations. QAA Scotland and representatives from the higher education sector also engaged with the SCQF recognition of prior learning (RPL) network which, in turn, links with the higher education RPL network.
- xii. The recognition of prior learning (RPL) is an area of increasing interest across the sector. Institutions are engaged in a higher education forum on RPL (facilitated by QAA Scotland) which focuses on sharing good practice and learning from practice elsewhere, including other sectors and international experience. A Bologna conference on RPL is to be held in 2010.
- xiii. Taking place alongside considerable work to support the progression of learners from Higher National qualifications to Degree programmes, the sector has also engaged with a project to support transfer from Degree to Higher National qualifications. Work in 2007 led to the publication of a report and conference at which participants from the University and the College sectors shared and addressed ways of supporting such progression.

International developments

- xiv. In addition to international contacts which arise through the Benchmarking work and the Enhancement Themes activity, QAA Scotland hosts or participates in a wide range of international visits. For example, in April 2008, QAA Scotland coordinated a study tour of Scottish institutions by the Director of the Ethiopian Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA). In July 2008 a study trip was organised for a group from the Ministry of National Education in Poland.
- xv. During the 2009 Bologna stocktaking exercise, Scotland was the only country to be identified as all 'green' on the scorecard, confirming that the Scottish university sector is fully engaging with Bologna.
- xvi. The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), the umbrella organisation for quality assurance agencies in the European Higher Education Area, carried out a review of QAA during 2008, with the final report being considered by the ENQA Board in November 2008. The report confirmed that QAA retained 'Full membership' for the next five years. Full membership indicates that QAA complies with the European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance in higher education. Compliance with these standards is checked every five years through an independent review.