

## **Analysis of institutional annual statements from the University sector: 2015-16**

### **Purpose of the paper**

1. This paper provides an analysis of the annual institutional statements submitted to the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) by each Scottish Higher Education Institution. The paper can be used as a guide to the most common outcomes arising from institutional-led reviews. This analysis is produced primarily for SFC but it is intended to be useful to institutions, to compare their outcomes with those across the sector, and to agencies by identifying themes arising across the sector, enabling agencies to highlight areas that could benefit from cross-sector dissemination and/or development.
2. Each Scottish Higher Education Institution provides an annual statement to SFC about their institution-led quality review activity for the preceding academic year. Institutions also share the statements with QAA Scotland officers who use the statement as part of the information set for the ELIR annual discussion meetings held with each institution. In addition, the statements form part of the Advance Information Set submitted to ELIR teams before each review. In accordance with SFC guidance, each statement is endorsed by the institution's governing body and covers a number of topics including:
  - a summary of outcomes from the main quality assurance and enhancement activities, including Institution-led reviews, support service reviews and PSBR reviews
  - details of Institution-led review methods
  - the role and nature of student involvement in institutional academic quality matters
  - identification of good practice and areas for development from institution-led review
  - an indication of plans for institution-led review for the forthcoming year.

### **Summary of key points**

3. The annual statements show that, in common with previous years, a substantial volume of activity was carried out by institutions. During 2015-16, 86 academic periodic institution-led reviews took place across the Scottish higher education sector. In addition, 135 professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) engagements were carried out accrediting in excess of 340 programmes. Comparing the figures with those from the 2014-15 analysis shows that there were less institution-led reviews in 2015-16 (86 compared with 110 in 2014-15) but more professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) engagements carried out (117 took place in 2014-15 compared to 135 in 2015-16).

4. The institutional annual statements confirm that the outcomes of institution-led reviews are positive overall indicating that academic standards are secure and a high quality student experience is being provided. Evidence from ELIR highlights that the institution-led reviews are evaluative processes providing constructive challenge to the institutions with significant external engagement both through external review panel members and the systematic use of external reference points.
5. Many of the outcomes are specific to the provision being reviewed but trends or themes can be seen across the sector and are summarised here.
6. Across the sector, the themes emerging as positive practice include:
  - learning and teaching practices and curriculum design
  - quality and commitment of staff
  - links with industry
  - employability
  - assessment practices and review of assessment practices
  - feedback to students
  - student support
  - commitment and engagement of students.
4. Themes that can be identified as areas for development across the sector include:
  - assessment and feedback
  - student retention
  - postgraduate student experience
  - staff and physical resources
  - communication with students
  - academic and staff development
  - development of strategy at departmental/ subject level.

<b>What are the outcomes of institution-led review?</b>
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7. This section provides additional information on the themes identified from the institution-led review outcomes.

**Areas highlighted as positive**

8. **Learning and teaching practices and curriculum design** – 14 of the reports highlight positive areas of learning and teaching practice. These are wide ranging from student-centred approaches used in curriculum design allowing the student voice to be heard, to flexible and inclusive approaches to programme delivery. Five institutions mention research-led and/or research-informed teaching. Across the reports, learning and teaching enhancement staff are identified as those who help staff to develop and implement new learning and teaching approaches as well as providing a conduit for sharing good practice across their institutions. Six institutions made explicit reference to their annual learning and teaching conferences where staff are able to share ideas and discuss aspects of enhancement.
9. **Quality and commitment of staff** – eight of the reports commented on the quality and commitment of staff and the relationship between staff and the student body which creates a strong sense of community. In addition, five reports identified the mentoring and/or peer review support in place for staff.
10. **Links with industry** – ten of the reports identified the industry links as good practice. The strong industry links are indicative of positive collaboration and, in many cases, provide opportunities to collaborate with industrial partners through interdisciplinary projects and/or offer industrial and industry-related placements. The panel of one institution-led review commended the area for the excellent industry-relevant education which had been highlighted in the review by alumni, demonstrating that graduates had reflected on their degree and found the skills and knowledge gained to be useful and relevant in the workplace.
11. **Employability** – employability continues to feature as an area of positive practice. Eight reports made reference to employability so it was perhaps less of a focus in ILR compared to previous years as it becomes more embedded in institutions. For example, one institution reported that a new professional skills course, led by the Careers Service, has been embedded in all first year degree programmes. The involvement of employers and practitioners in co-creating the curriculum was also mentioned in two reports.
12. **Assessment** –the theme of assessment practices was cited in more than half of the reports (11 reports). Four institutions made reference to an institutional review around assessment. Two of the institutions are implementing the Transforming the Experience of Students Through Assessment (TESTA) methodology. From the reports there is evidence that the breadth, depth and variety of assessment instruments has increased and that innovative practices are being introduced.
13. **Feedback to students** – linked to the theme of assessment, half of the reports (nine) comment on positive practice around giving students feedback on their assessed work. Ten institutions mentioned that they are taking specific steps to improve feedback, for example by developing policies, monitoring feedback times and improving consistency. Five of the reports specifically mentioned that the work is being carried out in partnership with students. In addition, there are initiatives to enhance student engagement in assessment feedback. The annual returns show that there is an increased use of online methods for submission and providing feedback.

- 14. Student support** – eleven annual returns included information around positive practice in the area of student support. The support described is wide-ranging including comments around teaching staff providing a supportive environment, high levels of effective and accessible academic guidance and pastoral support, the introduction of personal tutors, improved online support, and support within service areas such as disability and counselling. Two institutions specifically mentioned having student support staff on the institution-led review panels or including aspects of student support in the review methodology.
- 15. Commitment and engagement of students** – this continues to be an area of good practice across the Scottish sector and was mentioned in six of the annual reports. Many comments focus on the positivity and commitment of students giving a strong sense of community within the organisation. Improved engagement of postgraduate students was also noted by one institution. In addition, there were examples in the reports of student-led initiatives. In one institution, the students' association carried out an academic feedback survey which sought to investigate students' perceptions of academic feedback and what students wanted from feedback. This type of activity shows students' commitment to improving their learning environment.

### **Areas highlighted for development**

16. The majority of reports mentioned arrangements for addressing development points at different levels within the institution, separating discipline or school specific matters from those areas considered at institutional level.
17. **Assessment and feedback** – assessment and feedback was identified as positive practice in several reports but it was more frequently identified as an area for development (12 of the reports included this as a development area). Many of the development points (in six of the reports) related to the need to improve the consistency and timeliness of feedback. This suggests that, while assessment and feedback is viewed positively by students in some subjects, there is still improvement to be made in this area. Four reports indicate the establishment of university-wide projects to review assessment practices across the institution.
18. **Student retention** - student retention was identified as an area for ongoing development with six institutions referring to the ways in which they are seeking to improve retention and a further five mentioning that it is being monitored.
19. **Postgraduate student experience** - the postgraduate experience has emerged as an area for development within many of the ELIR 3 reports promoting its selection as a topic for one of the Focus On projects in 2016-17. Similarly, it has been mentioned in four of the institutional annual returns. The particular development points focus on creating an equivalent postgraduate student experience across the institution, addressing space issues for research postgraduates and challenges relating to gathering feedback from postgraduate students on their experience.
20. **Staff and physical resources** – staff resources (in terms of the management of the staffing resource across the programmes) and physical resources were cited as development points in seven reports. The physical resource areas related to learning

resources including library and ICT as well as availability of adequate suitable physical space for teaching.

21. **Communication with students** - communication with students was cited in five annual returns as an area for development. This mainly focused on 'closing the feedback loop' so that students are aware of the actions the institution has taken as a result of their feedback. In one report, the issue was around improving communication between campuses particularly for teaching and meeting rooms.
22. **Academic and staff development** – overall, the provision of academic and staff development continues to be highlighted as a strength across the sector with institutions introducing new developments including peer review and mentoring. Eight reports highlighted the need to provide additional development opportunities for staff and, in particular, three reports specifically referred to the development of graduate teaching assistants. Staff across the sector are being encouraged to engage with the staff development opportunities in their institutions and especially with the academic development area. Three institutions are reviewing their staff development offer, for example to ensure suitability for all staff including those staff working outside the UK and across all disciplines. Three reports referred to the need to share best practice across the institution, which could also promote staff development.
23. **Development of strategy** – in previous years there was evidence of institutions undertaking significant strategic review and change initiatives such as curriculum reform and portfolio review. This continues to be the case, however five institutions highlighted a development need for departments/subject areas to develop strategies. There appears to be a need to translate the overarching institutional strategy into a meaningful and clear strategy for departments around articulation, progression, student experience and communication.

#### **Additional topics included within the institutional reports**

24. Institutions reported on a range of activity beyond the outcomes of institution-led review, matters raised included:
  - i. Use and analysis of KPIs at institutional and departmental levels to support monitoring
  - ii. The collection and analysis of student feedback data including NSS, PTES and PRES to drive enhancements to the student experience

<b>What do the institutional statements tell us about the nature of review in the university sector?</b>
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25. It is evident from the annual statements that institution-led review activities in Scotland are thorough, providing institutions with assurance that academic standards are being achieved and that the quality of the student experience is high and is being enhanced. The annual statements show that students are engaged with enhancement activities and a number of student-led activities are taking place including:

- a student-led survey on feedback at Edinburgh Napier

- the student-led support teaching appreciation and recognition (STAR) awards at Robert Gordon University
- students at Glasgow School of Art designed and held a cross-GSA student and staff workshop: *We Need to Talk about GSA*
- the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland holds a Bridge Week as a unique and entirely student-led feature of the Conservatoire's undergraduate curriculum
- at Abertay, a student-led annual conference attracted 300+ delegates across the UK.

26. The statements show that institutions are using the findings from review activity, as well as other important information such as student feedback from institutional and national surveys, to improve provision at both programme/subject level and institutional level. An example at the programme level within the reports is the implementation of strategies to improve student communication. This involved closing the student feedback loop by informing students which programme changes had been made following their feedback. An institution level example is the introduction of institutional policy on academic feedback. Two institutions state that a Feedback and Feedforward policy has been introduced relating to the nature and timeliness of academic feedback given to students.

27. **Volume of activity** – the sector annual statements provide considerable evidence that there is a significant volume of review activity taking place within institutions. Across the sector there were 86 academic periodic institution-led reviews. Two institutions (one university and one small specialist institution) had no periodic reviews scheduled during the year. The university had conducted a significant portfolio and curriculum reform exercise involving all of its undergraduate and postgraduate provision in 2014-15 and planned to review all of its provision in 2017-18 following the first year of operation following the curriculum reform. The small specialist institution had scheduled a comprehensive review of all undergraduate programmes for 2016-17 and used the year to prepare for this review. In addition to periodic review of academic disciplines, reviews were also conducted of specific units including graduate schools and partner institutions.

28. **Methods of review** – within the SFC guidance and the expectations in the UK Quality Code, institutions have flexibility in the design of internal academic reviews. All programmes are monitored on an annual basis and subjects are periodically reviewed within a maximum of six years. The unit of review varies across institutions depending on their structure, size and subject mix. In all institutions, a report is produced following the periodic institution-led review and the area under review produces a response or action plan. A central or school committee considers the review outcomes and response, and nine institutions mentioned an interim or follow-up progress report being required from the area under review. Six institutions mentioned training or guidance documents on institution-led review for student panel members. Annual monitoring takes place in all institutions either at programme or school level. Four institutions highlighted that they hold annual meetings or discussions to consider the outcomes or to share information from annual monitoring.

29. **Student engagement in review** - student engagement in learning & teaching and quality processes is a strong theme in the reports. All institutions include a student as a member of the institution-led review panels. Six institutions mentioned that they provide briefing or training for student panel members. Details vary across the reports but, overall, students appear to be engaged with reviews from the institution and subject perspective, examples include, meeting with the panel as part of the review, being involved in the preparation for the review or in discussion of the outcomes. Within institutions, student membership of key university committees allows them to fully engage with quality matters, learning and teaching policy decisions and enhancement as well as outcomes and responses to institutional reviews. Two institutions reported that regular meetings take place between sabbatical officers and senior university staff which give students a valuable opportunity for engaging with discussion on various institutional matters.
30. **Professional service area review** – the SFC guidance states that institutions should review the impact of their professional support services on the student experience. The extent to which institutions review professional service areas varies greatly across the sector with four institutions not conducting any separate periodic reviews while others have a rolling programme of reviews. Four institutions include the review of professional service areas as part of the academic institutional review and this may include having a professional service area representative on the review panel. Similarly, one institution engages professional service areas in annual monitoring activities by requiring areas to submit an annual report and by including staff in annual monitoring discussions. Of the nine institutions who are conducting periodic professional service area reviews, some use a thematic approach, for example, 'Provision of work-related experiences' while others review support service areas individually.
31. **Professional body activity** – in 2015-16, across the sector 135 professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) engagements took place accrediting in excess of 340 programmes. Out of the 135 engagements, 121 were confirmed as successful and 14 were awaiting an outcome. The figures for 2015-16 show an increase in PSRB engagements compared to the 2014-15 figure of 117. This reflects the cyclical nature of the engagements and no particular conclusions should be drawn from this change in number.
32. **Sharing practice in institutional evaluation and dissemination of positive practice** – institutions have systematic approaches for identifying and disseminating good practice. Institutions have a variety of ways to share good practice across the institution some of which are formal, for example through learning and teaching committees, and others have informal methods. Learning and teaching conferences, events or specific academic development activities are cited in eight reports as a means to disseminate good practice. Annual monitoring events or discussions are another method of sharing good practice and this can rely on staff cascading information to colleagues in their areas. In one institution (Strathclyde) annual reports are peer reviewed, which acts as a mechanism for sourcing examples of good practice to share.
33. At sector level, the Teaching Quality Forum (TQF) is a mechanism for sharing good practice and discussing developments in the sector. During 2015-16, topics for

discussion have included alignment of internal and external reviews, contextualised admissions and student module evaluations.

34. **Annual monitoring** – all institutions monitor academic provision on an annual basis usually at the programme level. The specific details of annual monitoring vary between institutions, however, in the majority of cases, reports on annual monitoring are discussed at institutional level in the learning and teaching committee or at a specific annual meeting. Two institutions have developed the annual monitoring process to showcase good practice through an annual monitoring dissemination event including academic and professional service area involvement.

<b>Comparison with analysis of institutional annual statements from the university sector in 2014-15</b>
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35. Of the eight themes identified in this analysis from across the annual statements as positive areas of practice from the institution-led review activity in the 2015-16 analysis, five of the themes were also identified as positive in the 2014-15 analysis, these were:

- Student support
- Student engagement
- Assessment
- Feedback
- Employability.

36. Seven themes have been identified in this analysis as areas for development across the annual statements in the 2015-16 and of the seven themes, the following five were also identified in the 2014-15 analysis:

- Assessment and feedback
- Postgraduate student experience
- Staff and physical resources
- Communication with students
- Academic and staff development

Two additional themes were identified for development in the 2015-16 analysis - student retention and development of strategy. Both of these themes were identified as areas of positive practice in the 2014-15 analysis.

<b>How is this information followed-up?</b>
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37. QAA Scotland officers discuss the content of the institutional statements with the individual institutions during the ELIR annual discussions. Where trends in institutional activity are identified, these are picked up as the themes of ELIR events or at sector meetings, such as the Teaching Quality Forum, where good practice can be disseminated and challenges shared.
38. During 2016-17, QAA is leading a Focus On Institution-led Review project. Drawing on the outcomes of ELIR 3 reports and following a short scoping exercise, a sharing good practice event was held in January 2017 to support institutions to continuing enhancing policy and practice around ILR. Around 80 delegates attended including staff and student

representatives from all 19 Scottish higher education institutions and 7 students' associations. Of those, 9 institutions provided a total of 10 case studies on aspects of ILR addressing the topics identified during scoping including:

- Engaging students in institution-led review
- Effective use of data
- Sharing of good practice from institution-led review
- Links between institution-led review and institutional strategy
- Linking annual monitoring and institution-led review
- Aligning professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) and institution-led review
- Linking assurance and enhancement
- Review of postgraduate research provision
- Unit of review
- Thematic and professional services reviews.

39. By the end of the current academic year, QAA Scotland intends to publish to a summary of institution-led review methods being used across the sector.

QAA Scotland  
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