

SFC Guidance on Quality for Colleges and Universities AY 2024-25 to AY 2030-31: refresh

Scottish Funding Council
Comhairle Maoineachaidh na h-Alba

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FAO:	Principals and directors, Quality managers and practitioners of Scotland's colleges and universities, and the general public.
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Section 1: Introduction and context

New for AY2025-26

1. SFC has reviewed and updated this guidance in response to feedback received during the implementation year of the TQEF. Recognising institutions' need for certainty as they adapt to the new arrangements and embed TQEF within their own quality processes, we have made only a small number of necessary changes and clarifications to this Guidance for AY2025-26. Key changes are highlighted below for ease of reference:

    - An update on progress with the Scottish Governments post-16 education reform programme, from **paragraph 17**.
    - Clarification on the roles and responsibilities of SFC's delivery agency partners, from **paragraph 47**.
    - The structure of SFC Guidance on Self Evaluation and Action Plans (SEAPs) has been simplified for greater clarity and readability, with key changes including clarification on the scope of the document, and the content of annual quality discussions with SFC.
    - General updates to the text recognising that we are now in year 2 of the TQEF cycle.

2. This Guidance is for the current TQEF cycle, AY2024-25 to AY2030-31. The main document sets out the quality landscape in Scotland and outlines how the key aspects of the TQEF combine to give assurance on the quality of provision in our colleges and universities**. Those looking for direct access to detailed guidance and information on TQEF delivery and reporting mechanisms can access these through the following links:**

    - Tertiary Quality Enhancement Review (TQER), see QAA Guide for Institutions.
    - Scotland's Tertiary Enhancement Programme (STEP), see STEP web resource.
    - Institution Led Quality Review (ILQR), see **Annex A**.
    - Self-Evaluation and Action Plan (SEAP), see **Annex B**.

Introduction

3. This Guidance is to inform colleges, universities, and our stakeholders of the arrangements for quality assurance and enhancement of provision delivered at funded institutions. This guidance covers the first cycle of Scotland's Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework (TQEF), AY 2024-25 to AY 2030-31. The initial cycle will be for seven years to incorporate an implementation year. We envisage that subsequent cycles will be for six years, although this will be decided following an evaluation of the first

cycle in consultation with colleges and universities. Throughout this document we use the term 'universities' to denote all Scottish higher education institutions, and the term 'institution' to refer to both colleges and universities.

4. TQEF has been developed to deliver on our vision for a more coherent and streamlined tertiary education system that delivers the best learning experience for students. It will seek to answer the question 'Is the provision delivered by Scotland's colleges and universities of high quality and does it continue to improve?'.

5. We recognise that it will take time for institutions to adjust to the arrangements. We are therefore committed to evaluating the experience of colleges and universities. We will work in partnership with our institutions, and their students, to identify appropriate adjustments and refinements, and will provide institutions the time and space, flexibility, and support, to make the necessary adjustments in the early phases of the Framework.

6. TQEF is a co-creation with our key partners, colleges, universities, sparqs, and our delivery agency partners. It is an evolution of Scotland's highly regarded approach to quality assurance, building on the strengths and characteristics we value and that are now embedded in our shared Principles. Scotland has been at the forefront of practice in this area and is recognised internationally as sector leading in its approach to quality assurance and enhancement. TQEF is a natural evolution of our approach to deliver greater cohesion across the sector. And as you would expect in an enhancement-led approach, the process of co-creation and refinement is constant. This guidance marks the start of a process and not the end. It is only in its use and application to the diverse missions and contexts of our institutions that we will identify those improvements and enhancements.

7. We know that many people will have questions about TQEF and how it will impact on quality assurance processes in their institutions. To aid understanding of the Framework we have compiled a series of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) that can be found on the SFC website. We will refresh these FAQs in response to queries on the arrangements.

Scotland's Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework

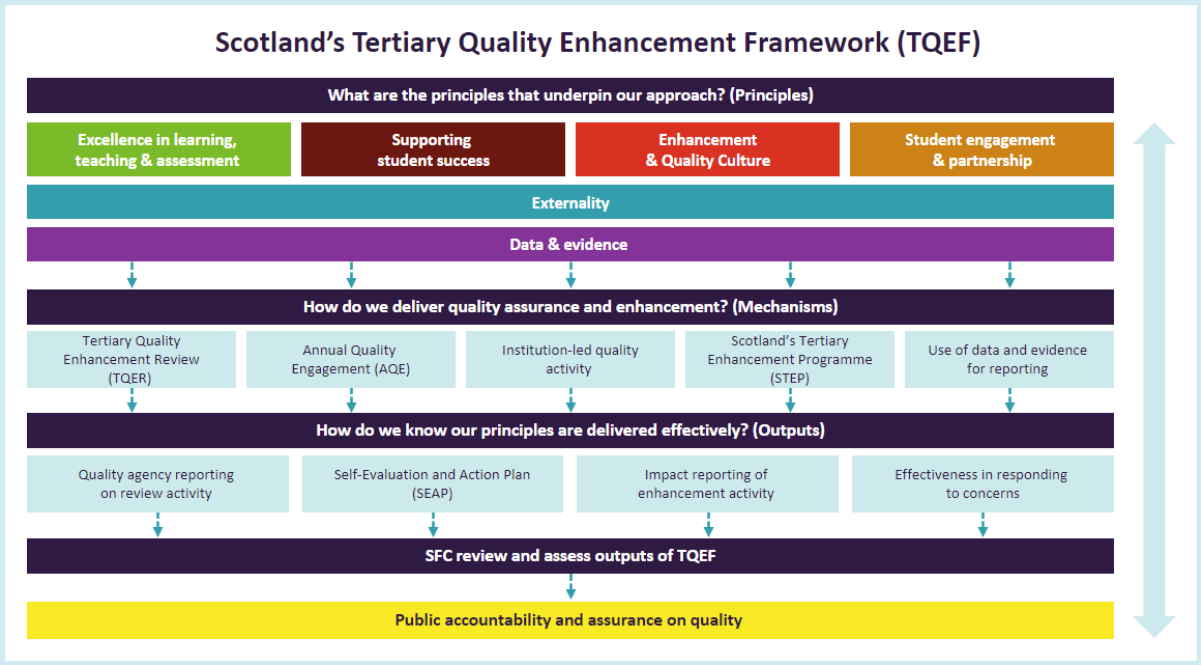
8. The TQEF is the quality assurance and enhancement framework for Scotland's colleges and universities. It comprises a shared set of Principles, delivery mechanisms, and outputs that can be applied to the different contexts of our colleges and universities to give assurance on academic standards and the quality of the student learning experience, and ensure accountability for public investment in learning and teaching.

9. SFC has taken a partnership approach to the development of the TQEF working closely with colleges, universities, the TQEF delivery agencies, and students, reflecting our belief that in Scotland:

   - Quality assurance should be done with and not to institutions.

- Institutions retain ownership of the quality of the provision that they deliver.
- Students should be full partners in their own learning.

10. SFC has oversight of the TQEF with responsibility for ensuring that all the component parts work effectively and coherently to provide assurance on academic standards and the quality of the student experience – in line with its statutory duties.



A shared vision and commitment

11. The TQEF has been co-created with the sector to deliver our shared vision for a more coherent and streamlined tertiary education system from the student perspective that delivers the best learning experience for students. To realise this vision, it is critical that our colleges and universities are fully engaged and committed to the Framework that they have done so much to shape and deliver. We have set out the roles and responsibilities of each of the partners in the TQEF from paragraph 47. The high-level expectations for all our colleges and universities as partners in the process are set out below.

- **Staff and student external reviewers:** the process of external peer-review depends on maintaining a pool of staff and student reviewers that reflects our college and university sectors in all of their diversity. We expect every institution to encourage, facilitate and support their staff and students to put themselves forward as TQER external reviewers. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) recommend that each institution nominate at least two reviewers (including one student reviewer) to participate in reviews. As we know from past experience, one of the most effective

ways for institutions to prepare for external review is to have amongst their staff those who have been trained in the method and have experienced the process as a member of a review team. QAA will provide training in the method for all staff and student reviewers (see paragraph 54).

- **National thematic enhancement activity:** all colleges and universities are expected to engage in Scotland's Tertiary Enhancement Programme (STEP). The extent and nature of institutional engagement with STEP will vary depending on institutional context and capacity (see paragraphs 100-105).
- **Critical self-evaluation:** all the delivery and reporting mechanisms of TQEF rely on institutions capacity for, and commitment to, critical self-evaluation. Enhancement can only take place where there is trust and openness, and where institutions are prepared to share and discuss areas for development alongside instances of good practice and innovation. Our TQEF delivery agency partners are working together to develop and deliver a coherent programme of support for leaders and practitioners to develop their capacity in this area (see section on roles and responsibilities from paragraph 47).
- **Complaints:** From AY 2024-25 onwards SFC will seek greater openness, consistency, and accountability from institutions in the recording and reporting of complaints and complaints handling, consistent with the requirements set out by the Scottish Public Service Ombudsman (see Section 6 at paragraph 144).
- **Trans-national education (TNE):** as indicated in SFC 2023-24 Quality Guidance, participation in the QAA-developed Quality Evaluation and Enhancement of UK TNE scheme for trans-national education (QE-TNE) is a requirement for all Scottish degree awarding bodies engaging in TNE from AY 2024-25 (see from paragraph 30). The process is designed to provide confidence for the wide range of international stakeholders, showing the care the UK has for the quality of the student experience and consistent standards of UK awards.
- **Student partnership:** effective student engagement and partnership is a key Principle of our Framework. We believe that a strong student voice is critical to the delivery of improved outcomes for students and a key strength of the Scottish sector, although we recognise ongoing challenges in securing effective and meaningful engagement. We expect all institutions to use the sparqs-developed resources as a reference point and tools to focus on and challenge approaches to student partnership in all aspects of the TQEF and to embed a culture of student partnership into their systems and processes, including Scotland's Ambition for Student Partnership, and the Student Learning Experience Model, Guidance for institutions (SLE Model). sparqs will continue to develop this resource and associated guidance over AY 2025-26 – including guidance to support engagement

with TQER – to further support institutions to enhance their approaches to student partnership in quality and will make them available on their website.

Context

12. The context against which the TQEF has been developed and implemented includes Scottish, UK and European elements and a combination of statutory aspects and agreed requirements or expectations summarised below.

SFC's statutory duties

13. The Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005 sets out SFC's duty to secure coherent, high-quality fundable further and higher education provision, and to ensure provision is made for assessing and enhancing the quality of this provision. Previous to the implementation of the TQEF in AY2024-25, SFC met its statutory duty through two frameworks for quality in the college and university sectors. *How Good is our College* (HGIOC) and the *Quality Enhancement Framework* (QEF) supported self-assessment, improvement and enhancement, and the sharing of good practice in the college and university sectors, respectively. Through these frameworks SFC supported institutions to manage the quality of the student learning experience and uphold public confidence in academic quality and standards. From AY 2024-25 SFC will meet its statutory duties through the TQEF.

SFC Review of Coherence and Sustainability

14. The final report of SFC's Review of Coherence and Sustainability published in June 2021 sets out our response to Scottish Ministers' request that we review how we might best fulfil our mission to secure coherent, good quality, and sustainable tertiary education and research. The overarching ambition outlined in the review report is to make Scotland the best place to be a student at college or university. To support this ambition the review report makes a specific recommendation to: *'develop a single quality assurance and enhancement framework for tertiary education, to uphold academic standards, and enhance the learning experience of all students'*.

15. SFC wishes to see a more coherent approach to quality assurance, improvement and enhancement across the college and university sectors that supports public confidence and reflects our ambition for a more integrated tertiary system supporting seamless learner journeys. It is also our ambition to foster closer collaboration and joint working between and across our partner agencies to support this.

16. The Scottish Government welcomed SFC's proposed development of a single quality framework that recognises the distinct contribution and interconnectedness of each part of the tertiary education system. From 2021, SFC worked closely with colleges, universities, student groups and our delivery agency partners to develop and implement interim arrangement for AY2022-23 and AY2023-24 which have provided assurance on

quality and the student experience, while allowing SFC and its partners the opportunity to co-create, test and adjust a tertiary approach.

Scottish Government post-16 education reform programme

17. The Scottish Government is currently undertaking an ambitious reform programme of Scotland's education and skills public bodies as part of its ambition for the public sector to become more efficient and financially sustainable. The reforms are intended to strengthen and streamline assurance processes, simplify funding pathways, and secure greater coherence across the tertiary system.

18. In June 2024, the Scottish Government published a consultation seeking views on proposals to simplify responsibilities for apprenticeships and student support. In February 2025 Scottish Ministers introduced the Tertiary Education and Training Funding and Governance (Scotland) Bill to the Scottish Parliament that seeks to confer responsibility for the funding and administration on national training programmes to SFC. The Scottish Government is also committed to consolidating all student awards funding within the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS) including further education student support funding currently administered by SFC. It will be for an incoming administration in 2026 to determine when those changes should happen in practice.

SFC Outcomes Framework and Assurance Model

19. The Outcomes Framework (OF) and Assurance Model (AM) has replaced the Outcome Agreement process in providing assurance for SFC's investment in the sectors from AY 2024-25. The OF and AM sets out expectations of colleges and universities in return for the funding, but does not specify targets or bespoke expectations for each institution. Outcomes are instead expressed more generally across the broad range of areas that matter to students, employers, the Scottish Government, and other key stakeholders. These include, but are not limited to, high-quality learning and teaching, good governance, high quality research, and financial viability and sustainability of colleges and universities.

20. TQEF forms an integral part of the OF and AM. No additional information on high-quality learning and teaching and the quality of the student experience is required of colleges and universities beyond that outlined in this document as part of TQEF. Thematic reviews that take place as part of the OF and AM approach are separate from the enhancement activities within the TQEF and are managed to minimise burden on institutions and avoid duplication. The outcomes of the TQEF are used to support assurance in other areas of the OF and AM, such as 'Skills and work-based learning' and 'Student interests, access and success'. Further information and SFC Guidance on the OF and AM is available on the SFC website.

UK context

21. While each nation of the UK has their own policies and systems for quality assurance and regulation of university provision, there are shared underpinning principles, as agreed by the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment (now the Quality Council for UK Higher Education, which gave rise to a common approach on the expectations for quality and standards for universities. TQEF has been developed to align with these shared principles:

    - Delivering a high-quality academic experience.
    - Providing excellent learning and teaching.
    - Supporting student participation in quality.
    - Encouraging student engagement.
    - Maintaining high-quality academic standards.
    - Promoting international recognition.

22. Approaches to quality assurance of colleges also diverge significantly across the UK. While there is no articulation of shared principles, colleges across the UK deliver learning which meet the needs of learners, industry, communities, and universities in their respective regions.

UK Quality Code

23. The UK Quality Code embodies a shared understanding across UK higher education for quality practice. It protects the public and student interest, and champions UK higher education's world-leading reputation for quality. The Code articulates fundamental principles for higher education quality across the UK (see paragraph 21) and embodies the cooperative approach that underpins UK higher education.

24. The Code was originally developed by and for the university sector. The current edition of the Code is intended to have application beyond the university sector in recognition that many parts of the UK are seeking to develop tertiary approaches to education.

25. Institutions across the UK are able to use the Quality Code in line with their educational mission, national quality arrangements and regulatory requirements. Externality is one of the key underlying principles of the TQEF and it is our expectation that the Quality Code will be used as a key reference point in internal and external review to support enhancement, and as a starting point for students' engagement with their institutions on the quality of their education, and the extent to which the expected outcomes have been achieved.

26. The Code was last reviewed in 2024 and has been mapped to the Standards and Guidelines for the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and the principles of the TQEF

to reduce duplication of effort for institutions.

European Standards and Guidelines (ESG)

27. The Scottish and UK Governments are both signatories to the Bologna Process and members of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), and as such must ensure that their regulatory and quality arrangements are aligned with the expectations set out in the ESG. ESG provides the framework for internal and external quality assurance, and provides the basis for enhancing trust, mobility, and recognition between higher education systems across Europe. **Recognising the importance of maintaining the international standing and reputation of Scottish higher education, the TQEF has been developed to be fully compliant with ESG. SFC is committed to working closely with QAA to ensure continued compliance in subsequent iterations of the Framework.**

28. The 2024 EHEA Ministerial Communique mandated the European Association of Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) to work with its agencies to review ESG to ensure they keep in line with developments, challenges and expectations. It is intended that a revised draft be adopted by the EHEA Ministerial Conference in 2027.

29. ENQA, conducts periodic reviews of members' compliance with ESG at least every five years.

Trans-national Education (TNE)

30. Assurance and enhancement of TNE is through:

    - Tertiary Quality Enhancement Review (TQER).
    - Quality Evaluation and Enhancement of UK TNE (QE-TNE).

31. TQER includes consideration of the effectiveness of an institution's approach to collaborative provision, which incorporates TNE.

32. In July 2020, Universities UK (UUK) and Guild HE commissioned QAA to develop a new approach to reviewing and enhancing the quality of UK TNE. In consultation with the sector, QAA developed its new method for the Quality Evaluation and Enhancement of UK trans-national education. The Scheme is UK-wide and enhancement led.

33. The process is designed to provide confidence for the wide range of international stakeholders, showing the care the UK has for the quality of the student experience and consistent standards of UK awards.

34. The QE-TNE programme consists of a published schedule of country-specific activity, while the quality enhancement approach is designed to identify shared challenges, areas for development and effective solutions, through highlighting innovative and effective practice. This approach will complement internal and external quality assurance within the UK and provide confidence for the wide range of stakeholders, both in the UK and

internationally.

35. Institutions participating in QE-TNE will also be listed on the QAA website as participants of the Scheme, and they and their international TNE partners will be eligible to use QAA's QE-TNE Statement of Participation as a public statement of their commitment to quality.

36. SFC indicated in its refreshed Guidance to Colleges and Universities on Quality published in 2023 that it would make participation in QE-TNE a requirement for Scottish degree awarding bodies engaging in TNE from AY 2024-25. The cost of participation should be met by institutions.

Section 2: Scotland's Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework

Development of the TQEF: partnership and co-creation

37. SFC has taken a co-creation approach to the development of the TQEF. With our key partners and stakeholders we have developed a shared understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement in both sectors, identifying areas of commonality and differences to refine a set of shared principles that will underpin and inform every aspect of our arrangements. Building on this shared understanding SFC convened cross-sector workshops and workstreams to help shape different aspects of our approach, supported by guidance from the Tertiary Quality Steering Group (TQSG) comprising representatives from both sectors and our key delivery partners.

Scope of the TQEF

38. Continued compliance with the ESG is important for universities' standing and reputation in an international context. However, ESG states that it applies to "all higher education offered in the EHEA regardless of the mode of study or place of delivery. Thus, the ESG are also applicable to all higher education including transnational and cross-border provision". ESG also notes that "the term "programme" refers to higher education in its broadest sense, including that which is not part of a programme leading to a formal degree". Therefore, higher education delivered in colleges is also subject to ESG. Although further education programmes do not need to meet ESG requirements, it is likely that institutions' quality arrangements would span all of their provision.

39. SFC's statutory duty is for assurance and enhancement of quality of fundable provision in fundable bodies (i.e., colleges and universities). The arrangements in colleges and universities for quality will be applicable to all of their provision and therefore institutions have a strong interest in ensuring these processes are appropriate across all of their provision, notwithstanding SFC's interest is only in the fundable provision. To ensure students have access to high quality provision, whatever they are studying, and to avoid duplication, the TQEF is designed to cover all provision. This enables quality arrangements to be considered as follows:

    - By SFC as relevant to the fundable provision. Details of how this applies to the delivery mechanisms of the TQEF are set out in the relevant sections of the guidance.
    - By QAA as relevant to the scope of the Tertiary Quality Enhancement Review (TQER).
    - By institutions as relevant to all of their provision.

TQEF review and oversight

40. The SFC is responsible to Scottish Ministers for securing effective quality assurance and enhancement arrangements for Scotland's colleges and universities. In its oversight of TQEF SFC is committed to continuing to seek strategic advice and guidance from the TQSG. This group will include representation from all the partners in the Framework: colleges, universities, students, the QAA, ES, Student partnerships in quality Scotland (sparqs), and the College Development Network (CDN). TQSG is co-chaired by colleagues representing colleges, universities, and students, with secretariate support provided by SFC. We will seek advice from sector representative groups on refreshing the membership of TQSG as appropriate.

41. SFC recognise that it will take time for institutions to adjust to the requirements of the Framework. We are therefore committed to evaluating the experience of colleges and universities in the early stages and throughout the duration of the cycle. We will continue to work in partnership with our institutions to identify appropriate adjustments and refinements, and will provide the time, space, flexibility, and support, necessary for the implementation of these arrangements.

42. SFC will undertake a comprehensive evaluation of the effectiveness of TQEF and all its component parts at the end of each cycle. This review will be carried out with the sectors and our delivery partners and with advice and guidance from the TQSG. SFC is committed to seeking independent expert advice in taking forward its evaluation. This evaluation will be conducted in line with public sector best practice and will include a full equality impact assessment. As part of the evaluation of the TQEF, SFC will require QAA to conduct its own comprehensive evaluation of TQER and STEP. The outcomes and recommendations of this work will feed into the evaluation of the wider Framework.

43. The evaluation of the TQEF will seek to answer the following overarching questions:

44. To what extent does the TQEF support assurance and enhancement of high-quality provision in the tertiary sector?

45. To what extent is the TQEF meeting the needs of stakeholders? (This considers the acceptability and preliminary impact of the TQEF)

46. What is the impact of the TQEF for the tertiary sector, bringing together the learning from implementation, feasibility and acceptability.

The partners in the TQEF: roles and responsibilities

47. We have asked our delivery agency partners to work together to deliver aspects of the TQEF to maximise their contribution, eliminate duplication and secure efficiencies. The detail of this collaborative support for colleges and universities with respect to the TQER and STEP is well-advanced, and details will continue to be developed and refined in

discussion with the sectors. The following is an articulation of the roles and responsibilities of the TQEF partners as we move into year two of the TQEF. Roles and responsibilities of our delivery agency partners may evolve as we evaluate the experience of colleges and universities, and assess the implications of the Scottish Government reform programme.

48. From AY2025-26 SFC will no longer be commissioning Education Scotland to support the delivery of the TQEF.

Scottish Funding Council (SFC)

49. Under the 2005 Act the statutory duty for securing provision for quality assurance and enhancement of further and higher education provision in Scotland lies with the SFC. To meet this duty SFC has adopted a partnership approach to develop the TQEF, reflecting our belief that quality assurance and enhancement is best done with institutions and not imposed on them. Nevertheless, SFC is ultimately responsible to Scottish Ministers for the effectiveness of the TQEF and ensuring that the delivery mechanisms and outputs collectively give the necessary assurance on academic standards and the quality of the student experience.

50. As the TQEF develops, SFC will continue to seek advice from the TQSG, and consult directly with the sectors, to ensure that the Framework remains relevant and fit-for-purpose. SFC will review and assess the outputs of the TQEF, including the Self-Evaluation and Action Plan (SEAP), to ensure accountability to the Scottish Government for the effective use and impact of public funding for learning and teaching, and delivery of its statutory duties.

51. The SFC is a national source of data (as a provider of Official Statistics), intelligence, and insight on Scotland's colleges and universities. SFC will share such outcomes of its analysis of institutions' performance with the QAA that are necessary to support the external review process and public accountability.

Colleges and universities

52. Colleges and universities have been partners in the development of the TQEF and the Framework can only succeed with their full and active participation. Our institutions are autonomous with responsibility for the quality of the provision that they deliver, but they are also in receipt of significant public investment for the delivery of high-quality learning. They must therefore have in place robust arrangements to evaluate and review their provision, appropriate to the context of the institution and within the parameters set out in the Guidance on Institution Led Quality Review (ILQR) in **Annex A**.

53. While Scotland's Tertiary Enhancement Programme (STEP) of national thematic activity is administered by QAA and CDN, it belongs to colleges and universities. It is expected that all institutions engage in the STEP programme, identifying aspects of the STEP topic

that are aligned with their own mission and context – sharing innovation and good practice across the sector to support better student outcomes.

54. Institutions must engage positively in the external peer-review process in a spirit of openness and 'no-surprises'. We would also expect all institutions to encourage and facilitate their academic, teaching and professional services staff and students to put themselves forward as peer reviewers. A diverse pool of peer reviewers, representative of the tertiary sector, is critical to the success of the TQEF. And we also know from experience that the knowledge and insights of peer reviewers offers one of the most effective ways for their institutions to prepare for external review.

55. An essential element of an enhancement-led approach to quality assurance is the capacity of institutions for honest self-reflection and evaluation. It is the responsibility of institutions to be open and frank in their engagements and submissions to SFC and the QAA, and clear sighted around their areas for development as well as their strengths. We have asked our TQEF delivery agency partners to work together to offer institutions a toolkit of support to enhance their capacity for reflection and self-evaluation in all aspects of the TQEF.

Quality Assurance Agency

56. QAA are an independent expert quality body that operates across the UK and internationally, with over twenty years' experience in delivering key aspects of Scotland's quality assurance arrangements in the university sector, including external peer-review and national enhancement activity.

57. The QAA has been commissioned by SFC to lead on the delivery of a multi-year external peer review method for colleges and universities, TQER. QAA manage the TQER, including recruiting and training a pool of peer and student reviewers, manage review visits and follow up activity, including annual Institutional Liaison Meetings (ILMs) and maintain the TQER review methodology guide. The QAA's status as an autonomous body acting independently of SFC and government also ensures continued compliance with ESG, with respect to independent external review of institutions.

58. QAA will lead the design and deliver of sector-wide enhancement activity on themes identified through quality assurance activity, including but not limited to TQER, ILMs and SEAPs.

59. QAA and CDN jointly deliver STEP, the national enhancement programme for all our colleges and universities. While STEP is sector owned, QAA and CDN are responsible for the supporting structures and processes, including secretariat functions, that allow staff and students from institutions to focus on the delivery of projects and activities.

60. QAA will lead the design and delivery of a sector-wide programme to support effective institutional enhancement with TQEF which is informed by consultation the sector to better understand their needs. QAA will work with other delivery agency partners where

appropriate on topics including supporting institutions to develop their ILQR processes and enhance their capacity for effective self-evaluation as required.

61. QAA also support SFC in its review of annual SEAP submissions, providing analysis and evaluation of SEAPs to SFC and advising SFC on how effectively and accurately they reflect their own understanding of institutions' performance, and progress with achievement of actions from TQER. QAA will report to SFC annual identifying key themes from their analysis of the documents.

62. QAA has also been retained by SFC to continue to manage the Scottish Quality Concerns Scheme for universities for AY2025-26. Over the course of AY2025-26 QAA will support the SFC-led development of a tertiary approach to concerns for implementation in AY2026-27.

College Development Network

63. CDN is the national enhancement and improvement agency for the college sector in Scotland and will play an important role in supporting colleges to fully participate in the TQEF as well as supporting the wider tertiary sector in some key deliverables.

64. CDN and QAA will jointly deliver the national enhancement programme for all our colleges and universities, STEP. And while the STEP is sector owned, CDN and QAA will be responsible for the supporting structures and processes including secretariat functions, that allow staff and students from institutions to focus on the delivery of projects and activities.

65. CDN will lead on the development of a suite of services and resources that support institutions to fully participate in national thematic activity/STEP. They will do this with the support of QAA and sparqs. In taking this forward, they will lead the development and implementation of a process which ensure there is a robust evidence base for identification of enhancement priorities to inform ongoing sector enhancement activity including the STEP programme.

66. Working with QAA, and in consultation with the sector to better understand their needs, CDN will deliver a sector wide programme to support effective institutional engagement with TQEF, including leading on the development of a toolkit that supports institutions to develop their ILQR processes and enhance their capacity for effective self-evaluation.

67. CDN and QAA will continue to develop and implement a coordinated programme of support to enhance the capacity of colleges. CDN will refocus its 'offer' to colleges' leadership and staff to lead on the development of coordinated support for the sector to ensure that they are able to develop internal quality assurance processes that meet the requirements set out in SFC's guidance. The type and mode of delivery of this support will be developed by CDN and its partners in response to the needs of the sector.

68. Over the course of AY2025-26 CDN will support the SFC-led development of a tertiary

approach to concerns for implementation in AY.

sparqs (Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland)

69. sparqs is the SFC-funded agency that supports college and university students to engage as partners in the quality assurance arrangements of their institutions.

70. sparqs ongoing role in the TQEF will be to continue to maintain and develop guidance, resources and support for institutions and student associations to support student partnership. This will include their use of the Student Learning experience model (SLE) and promote the use of Scotland's Ambition for Student Partnership (SASP), and continue to enhance and facilitate institutions' and students' capacity to engage in, and be partners in, the delivery of the Framework – including targeted support to those institutions preparing for TQER, particularly the lead student representatives.

71. sparqs will use intelligence from SEAPs – alongside other intelligence and consultation – to shape training and interventions to support institutional enhancement and the effective delivery of the TQEF. And they will support QAA and CDN to develop student partnership in sector/tertiary enhancement forums and networks to support sharing of learning and good practice

72. sparqs publish a range of guidance and resources to support institutions and student associations to engage with the TQEF, including:

    - SEAP Guidance for student associations and student officers.
    - Guidance on student engagement in TQER.
    - Guidance on student engagement in STEP.

73. These resources are available on the sparqs website. sparqs will also provide individual support to those institutions and their student associations currently preparing for external review in advance of publication of its TQER guidance.

74. Sparqs will support QAA and CDN to develop student partnership in sector/tertiary enhancement forums and networks to support sharing of learning and good practice

75. Over the course of AY2025-26 sparqs will support the SFC-led development of a tertiary approach to concerns for implementation in AY.

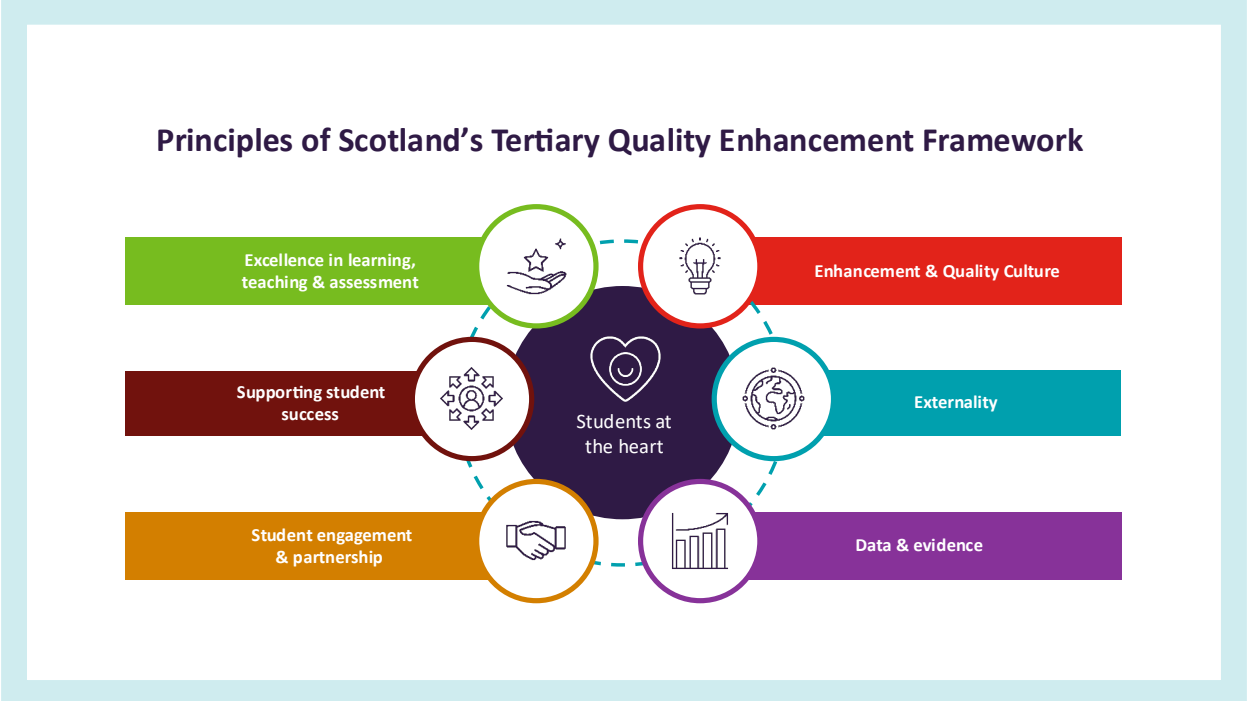
Students

76. The TQEF is designed to build on and develop Scotland's commitment to student partnership, putting students at the heart of its approach. As noted previously, sparqs will support institutions and students to continue to engage effectively in quality assurance and enhancement, but also to develop and mature student partnership in all aspects of quality assurance and enhancement. For students, this includes:

- Engaging effectively in student voice and student representation activities.
- Participating, engaging and working in partnership with institutions in quality assurance and enhancement activities.
- Participating as student reviewers in internal and TQER review processes, with sparqs supporting QAA in the training and development of a pool of student reviewers.
- Supporting the development of evidence to support internal and external quality review.
- Participating in evidence sessions as part of external quality review visits and meeting with review teams to discuss/update on work.
- Reviewing and reflecting on review reports and contributing to the development of recommendations and areas of positive practice.
- Working effectively in partnership with institutions to develop action planning for enhancement.

Section 3: Principles of the TQEF

77. The TQEF is founded on a set of shared Principles that are designed to put students at the heart of our Framework. Co-created with our partners, these Principles build on those characteristics and strengths for which Scottish tertiary education is renowned. The Principles have been used to shape the development of the TQEF and will be used to inform its implementation and as a frame of reference for its ongoing effectiveness. A more detailed outline of the TQEF Principles can be found at **Annex C**.



- **Excellence in learning, teaching and assessment:** the TQEF will ensure that institutions are equipped to deliver the highest possible standards of learning, teaching and student support, empowering students for success.
- **Supporting student success:** high-quality learning is best defined by how effectively it delivers student success in all its diverse forms.
- **Student engagement and partnership:** because we believe that students should be partners in their learning, and that a strong and engaged student voice is critical to improved student outcomes.
- **Enhancement and quality culture:** we believe that everyone working in our colleges and universities are part of the quality culture, driving forward improvement and sharing ideas and innovations to deliver better outcomes for their students.

- **Externality:** external review, reference points and benchmarks together help ensure that an institutions delivery of high-quality provision and the student experience is understood across a broader range of inputs than can be found in any given institution.
- **Data and evidence:** because we need data and evidence to better understand how effectively our colleges and universities are delivering high-quality learning, and to support improvement and enhancement.

Section 4: TQEF delivery mechanisms

78. There are five interconnected delivery mechanisms within the TQEF that, taken together, will provide assurance on quality and support institutional and sector-wide enhancement. The diagram at **Annex D** provides a high-level illustration of the timing of the mechanisms across the academic year and highlights the link to the Outcome Framework (OF) and Assurance Model (AM) to which the TQEF will contribute.

A: Tertiary Quality Enhancement Review

79. The TQER is the external peer-led and enhancement focused review method for Scotland's tertiary sector. The TQER is a single method for colleges and universities, replacing both the How Good is our College (HGIOC) progress and/or annual engagement visits for colleges, and Enhancement Led-Institutional Review (ELIR) for universities. QAA have been commissioned by SFC to lead the development, implementation, and ongoing management of TQER. It has been designed in partnership with staff and students from across our colleges and universities with support from ES, CDN, SCQF, Jisc, and SQA.

80. Our ambition is that all our students have a high-quality learning experience. TQER therefore covers all credit bearing provision delivered by Scottish colleges and universities, fundable or otherwise, and irrespective of means of delivery.

81. Although TQER is a single method, it has the necessary flexibilities to take different institutional contexts into account, for example across size of student and staff population, volume of provision, portfolio, geographies, and missions.

82. The current TQER cycle (AY 2024-25-AY2030-31) will provide continued assurance to SFC, supporting the delivery of its statutory duty for quality under the 2005 Act. **A schedule of TQERs that will take place in each academic year of the cycle is available on the QAA website**. Each institution will be given at least eight months' notice of the specific date of their TQEF visit.

83. The initial TQER cycle will be seven years, completing in AY 2030-31. A seven-year cycle has been agreed by SFC to enable the approach to embed. The cycle will include an implementation year, and a year of reflection and evaluation at the end of the cycle. This year of reflection and evaluation will allow learning from the experience of institutions, and for the identification of areas for refinement, enabling QAA – in discussion with SFC and institutions – to set the duration for subsequent review cycles and make improvements to the TQER as appropriate. The outcomes of the evaluation of the TQER will also feed into the wider evaluation of the TQEF.

84. The outcomes of TQER will include published reporting on each institution's ongoing approach to quality assurance, improvement, and enhancement. All institutions will have a named QAA Liaison Officer to support them.

85. Key features of TQER include:

- Self-evaluation by each institution, informed by ongoing institution-led enhancement activity and institution-led annual and periodic review.
- Engagement informed by sector reference points.
- Involvement of peer and student reviewers, including a site visit(s).
- A focus on student voice.

86. TQER has been developed on an assumption that institutions have the right systems, processes and planning in place to support the best experience and outcomes possible for students and staff. TQER will, of course, identify where this is not the case and will support appropriate responses and improvement. However, TQER recognises that simply reporting challenges is not sufficient in addressing them. It will recognise that institutions tend to be aware of challenges already, but would welcome peer support, external reflection, expertise, and practice sharing to help shape their own response to those challenges. TQER will do this by shaping the Review Team to the context of the institution.

87. SFC will develop a contextualised analysis of an institution's data that they will ask QAA to share with TQER review teams at least eight weeks prior to the initial visit. This information will also be shared with the institution by QAA as part of review preparations. Further details on this are outlined the SFC Data Analysis for Tertiary Quality Enhancement Review memo published on the TQEF website.

A peer-led review model

88. TQER is a peer-led model of review. This represents a significant collective investment in developing staff, institutional, and sector capacity to support the improvement and enhancement of the quality of experience and provision we deliver for our students.

89. A peer-led model of external review means the assessment, evaluation, and outcome judgement of an institutional review is reached, evidenced, and owned by the peer review team. The role of the QAA officer in the process (the Review Manager) is to support the team and moderate the review process to support consistent judgement across institutions.

90. This approach to review quality assurance and enhancement recognises the insight, experience, and skill of staff across our system in understanding and evaluating institutional practice in an external review context. It also recognises the shared professionalism and trust this will build across our sector which will enable constructive support for enhancement.

91. A peer-led model will benefit institutions undergoing review but will also benefit institutions whose staff undertake reviewer training and who go on to become

reviewers. Institutions who have experienced reviewers within their staff and student body benefit in terms of preparation for their own review and from sharing good practice. Those who undertake reviewer training and are recruited to reviews are better placed to contribute to an institution's own strategic approach to quality assurance and enhancement which in turn benefits the sector through cross-institutional relationships.

92. Delivering a peer-led approach to review and ensuring every institution benefits from development requires commitment from the sector and from institutions. **SFC recommend that each institution nominates at least two reviewers (including one student reviewer) to participate in reviews over the review cycle, scaling their contribution as appropriate.**

93. Individual reviewers may be involved in more than one review per quality cycle, depending on specialisms, experience, and context but this would be negotiated in advance with individuals and institutions.

94. QAA has published a TQER Guide for Institutions setting out how institutions will be reviewed. The guidance details the key roles and stages in the TQER process, its evidential requirements, reporting and outcome protocols, its follow-up activities and the responsibilities of review teams.

B: Annual Quality Engagement (AQE)

95. There will be two aspects to Annual Quality Engagement (AQE) to support the delivery of high-quality learning in institutions. Institution Liaison Meetings (ILMs) will be led by QAA as part of the TQER process, while SFC Outcome Managers will continue to lead discussion around high-quality learning and the outcomes of the SEAP in their approach to the OF and AM.

QAA Institution Liaison Meetings (ILMs)

96. The QAA will undertake a programme of Institutional Liaison Meetings (ILMs) with each of Scotland's colleges and universities. These will take place annually (except in those years where an institution is undergoing external review) to consider developments in and the impact of institutions' enhancement approach and progress since the last external review. These meetings – along with the regular contact the QAA is likely to have through the ad hoc provision of advice and guidance and the enhancement activity – will support an approach that enables trust, confidence, and openness with institutions.

97. ILMs will be managed within the context of the TQEF and the external peer review method, and will support ongoing follow up from the review visits and provide an opportunity for institutions to seek, and for QAA to provide independent advice on matters relating to Quality. ILMs will be supported by existing evidence, including the SEAP, and institutions will **not** be required to prepare any additional or bespoke documentation. Further information on the liaison meetings will be outlined in the TQER

Guide and operational guidance.

SFC annual engagement on quality

98. SFC Outcome Managers (OM) will continue to lead discussion around how effectively institutions are securing the 'High-quality learning and teaching' Outcome of SFC Outcomes Framework and Assurance Model (OF and AM). OMs – supported by colleagues from the SFC's Learning and Quality team – will engage with their respective college and university contacts to monitor and gain assurance on their delivery against this Outcome. While SFC staff will continue to meet with institutions regularly, at least one engagement during the year will include quality and the outcomes associated with funded provision. While the SEAP will provide the basis for this engagement, other evidence and data related to institutions' delivery of high-quality learning will also be considered. These meetings represent routine business for SFC and will not entail any additional preparation on the part of the institution. There is no expectation these meetings will be a mechanism for the provision of advice and guidance on quality (this is a matter for the QAA's ILMs).

99. This engagement will form one part of the wider OF and AM approach. If concerns are raised about the quality of provision by either the SFC or QAA there will be a discussion to consider next steps. Where it is deemed necessary, the potential to involve QAA or other TQEF delivery agencies (where appropriate) is one of the options described as a possible intervention in the AM. Further information on the OF and AM is outlined in the OF and AM Guidance.

C: Scotland's Tertiary Enhancement Programme (STEP)

100. SFC and its TQEF delivery agency partners are committed to an approach that recognises assurance and enhancement are two parts of the same endeavour and both drive excellent experience and outcomes for our students. Scotland's Tertiary Enhancement Programme (STEP) is the national programme of coordinated enhancement activity that enables Scotland's colleges and universities to work together to deliver innovation, improvement and enhancement of learning, teaching student experience and staff development across tertiary provision. STEP identifies where we can best address challenges collectively rather than individually. Further information on the programme is available from the dedicated STEP website.

101. STEP is sector-owned and SFC supported. This means topics and collaborative projects will be decided by our tertiary sector, taking experience, insight, evidence, and national priorities and ambitions into account. SFC will ensure that there is no duplication between STEP topics and thematic reviews by SFC under the OF and AM. All institutions have a voice and are invested in shaping activity. Staff and students from Scotland's colleges and universities influence the topic, priorities and outcomes STEP will address. Co-ordination, project oversight, and support will be delivered by QAA working with CDN and supported by ES and sparqs as required.

102. The impact of enhancement activity can take time and STEP aims to get the right balance to enable that to happen while also recognising the different time periods student cohorts are in learning for. Therefore, STEP is a four-year programme, but has the flexibility to manage and deliver projects over different timescales within that.

103. At the heart of STEP are collaborative enhancement projects that will produce outcomes and outputs of value to the entire tertiary sector. The topic for the first cycle of STEP (2024-28), agreed through extensive engagement with colleges and universities, is 'Supporting diverse learner journeys'.

104. STEP does not replace college-specific or university-specific activity, which continue to be delivered by other TQEF delivery agencies as appropriate (for example CDN, sparqs, ES, or QAA support of HEIs through the membership offer).

105. Institutions are expected to engage in STEP activity, particularly where it aligns with their institutional priorities and where there is a sector need for the contribution of all institutions. The nature and extent of engagement will vary depending on institutional context and capacity.

D: Institution-led quality activity

106. Colleges and universities are autonomous institutions with responsibility and ownership of the quality of their provision. The primary mechanism for doing this is through institution-led quality assurance and enhancement activities. We expect all institutions to put in place such arrangements as is necessary for reviewing and evaluating their provision within the parameters set out below. **We expect institutions in the university sector to use the UK Quality Code for Higher Education as a basis for assessing the quality of their provision and recommend its use by colleges as a reference point for their own review activity.** Colleges will also be expected to continue such quality assurance and enhancement activities as required by the Awarding Bodies (as appropriate).

Annual monitoring and Institution-Led Quality Review (ILQR)

107. SFC expects colleges and universities to operate systems of annual monitoring across all their provision and periodic review (Institution-Led Quality Review (ILQR)) across all their provision and support services.

108. All SFC-funded provision (credit-bearing and non-credit bearing) falls within the scope of ILQR for universities and colleges, although there may be differences between institutions in terms of the extent to which non-credit bearing activity will feature in ILQR.

109. To meet ESG compliance, ILQR for colleges and universities should include all higher education provision regardless of whether it is funded by SFC -this ensures that the TQEF

is ESG compliant.

110. The mechanism for reporting the outcomes of ILQR to SFC is through the SEAP, which should focus on strengths and/or priority areas for development drawn from themes arising from the ILQR process. It is for institutions to decide how they report on ILQR internally.

111. ***Institution-led Annual Monitoring*** enables reflection on the operation of programmes and provides assurances regarding academic standards, curriculum currency and the enhancement of the student experience. It serves as a focus for analysing and responding to a range of inter-related quantitative and qualitative evidence, including outcomes data and student feedback, to inform continuous dialogue and action planning. SFC does not set out guidance for annual monitoring and it is for institutions to manage this process.

112. ***Institution-Led Quality Review*** is the periodic review of subjects, programmes and professional services contributing to the student experience, conducted by an institution-led review team.

113. In taking forward this activity they should:

- Consider the effectiveness of annual monitoring arrangements and the effectiveness of the follow-up actions arising from annual monitoring.
- Identify actions to address any issues and activity at unit/course/module, programme, subject or departmental level to promote areas of strength for consideration at institutional level.
- Support constructive reflection on the effectiveness of an institution's annual monitoring and reporting procedures.
- Produce robust, comprehensive, and credible evidence that the academic standards of awards are secure and that their provision is of high quality and being enhanced.
- Be designed to promote and support critical reflection on policy and practice and ensure that any shortcomings are addressed.
- Give a central role to quality enhancement by promoting dialogue on areas in which quality and the student experience could be improved and identify good practice for dissemination within the institution and beyond.
- Produce robust, comprehensive, and credible evidence that support services are effective and responsive to students' needs.

114. SFC expects that all subject areas, programmes, and professional services are systematically and rigorously reviewed on a periodic cycle of not more than six years. It is for institutions to determine the size and composition of the 'grouping' of subject

areas, programmes and professional services.

115. Guidance on ILQR can be found at **Annex A**. The key outcomes and actions arising from ILQR will be reported through the Self-Evaluation and Action Plan (SEAP).

Colleges and ILQR

116. The parameters set out in this guidance for ILQR are broad, giving colleges the scope to map existing practice and/or develop arrangements that are appropriate to their own context and missions, and proportionate to the size of the institution. We do not expect colleges to address all aspects of our ILQR guidance in the early part of the review cycle. We will give them the necessary time to adapt their current quality arrangement to the approach, recognising that each college will have its own journey to make. **We have asked CDN, QAA, and sparqs to work together to engage with institutions to identify their needs and develop resources and support to allow them to enhance capacity to undertake effective ILQR.**

117. Colleges have existing arrangements in place for annual monitoring, which will feed into the annual self-evaluation and action plan. These existing arrangements will also form the basis for periodic ILQR.

118. Periodic ILQR is an opportunity to undertake a deeper review and evaluation of a subject grouping or support service(s) area over a longer time frame, building on the outcomes of annual monitoring, during that period. As noted in the guidance at **Annex A**, the exact aggregation of courses/programmes or support services areas to be reviewed and the order they are conducted in, is determined by the individual institution to fit the organisational structure, mode of delivery and enhancement-led approach.

119. SFC has asked its TQEF delivery agency partners to work together to put in place a range of structured support for colleges over the early years of the review cycle to enhance their capacity and develop their existing quality process to ensure that they are in line with the expectations for ILQR. The detail of that support will be for the TQEF delivery agencies to develop in consultation with the sector, but will include CPD, workshops, facilitated Networks, and bespoke support.

E: Institutional reporting on quality

Self-Evaluation and Action Plan (SEAP) and Strategic Impact Analysis (SIA)

120. The Self-Evaluation and Action Plan (SEAP) will, from AY 2024-25, be the only annual reporting on quality submitted by institutions to the SFC. The SEAP replaces both the annual report and statement of assurance on Institution-Led Review for universities, and the Evaluative Report and Enhancement Plan (EREP) which formed part of the *How Good is our College* framework for colleges. The SEAP also replaces the learning and quality aspects of SFC's Outcome Agreement process for both colleges and universities.

121. It is recognised that all provision within an institution will be subject to the same/similar quality assurance and enhancement processes. When describing good practice or areas for development or enhancement the SEAP should focus on the areas of priority identified by the institution. The SEAP is designed to be used for a range of purposes including as part of the monitoring and assurance associated with the SFC Outcomes Framework. To that end, the focus of the annual quality engagement meetings with SFC will be on SFC-funded activity (credit-bearing and non-credit bearing) for universities and colleges, however we recognise that there will be differences between institutions in terms of the extent to which non-credit bearing activity will feature in the SEAP.

122. Institutions will not be required to submit a SEAP in those years of the review cycle where they undergo a TQER. In those years colleges and universities will instead submit a Strategic Impact Analysis (SIA) to the QAA focusing on self-evaluation against the principles of the TQEF. This is part of the TQER review method and the SIA will support the development of an evidence base for TQER.

123. For those institutions undergoing a TQER and so submitting a SIA to the QAA, SFC will gain assurance on quality for that year from the external review itself and from SFC's ongoing review of annual student data submissions and other routine monitoring information (e.g., student satisfaction surveys).

124. The SEAP Guidance has been refreshed to address feedback from the first year of the process and can be found at **Annex B**. Guidance on the drafting of the SIA can be found in the TQER Guide for Institutions produced by QAA.

Public information about quality and the student experience

125. While they are autonomous institutions, colleges and universities receive significant public investment to deliver high quality learning provision. It is therefore essential that colleges and universities provide accessible and robust information that gives assurance on that investment. The established guiding principles for public information about the quality of educational provision and the student experience are to provide:

- Assurances about the quality and standards of provision.
- Information to inform student choice, and to assist employers and other stakeholders to clearly understand the nature of the Scottish university and college sector.
- Information which helps current students to understand, engage with and make best use of institutional systems for quality improvement.
- Information about the institution's educational processes which stimulates reflection on academic practice and the sharing of good practice within the institution and more widely.

126. Information should be:

- Accurate and honest.
- Accessible and tailored to the needs of the intended user.
- Updateable on appropriate timescales.
- Re-usable so that, ideally, information can be entered once and used in a range of contexts.

127. SFC expects institutions to continue to produce information that meets the needs of a range of stakeholders including:

- Prospective students and their families.
- Current students.
- Employers and employer organisations.
- Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies.
- QAA, the National Union of Students (NUS), and other interested bodies or agencies, as proxies for Ministers, taxpayers, and the general public.
- Competition and Markets Authority.

128. The UK university funders and regulators continue to collect data at course-level and to publish this on Discover Uni, the official source of information for students in the UK using official statistics about higher education courses taken from national surveys and data collected from universities and colleges about their students. SFC will continue to publish overview reports and analysis of key performance indicators.

129. Universities are expected to continue to participate in the National Student Survey (NSS) as a condition of funding. Colleges should continue to support the delivery of SFC's Student Satisfaction and Engagement Survey (SSES). SFC will work with the college sector to explore how the delivery and use of this survey can be further enhanced.

Section 5: Data and evidence in the TQEF

130. Data and Evidence has been identified as one of the key principles within the TQEF, it is also a theme that is expected to run through all aspects of quality assurance and enhancement as identified within the framework. Broadly, data and evidence will be used in following key ways within TQEF:

- By **institutions** to gather, collate, analyse, and reflect on their own data and evidence in all aspects of **internal review**.
- By the **QAA** as part of the **external review** method and if asked to undertake any additional review work where potential issues have been identified.
- By **SFC** as part of its **assurance over the quality and standards** delivered at institutions and to provide **independent corroboration** of what institutions and QAA are telling us about quality assurance and enhancement through the SEAP and external review.
- By **students** to support partnership and engagement in institutions' quality arrangements and support informed student choices on their education journey.

Institutions' use of data and evidence

131. Institutions will, as is currently the case, be expected to gather, collate, analyse, and reflect on their own data and evidence in all aspects of internal review. It is expected that institutions have well developed internal processes for monitoring and review that inform quality assurance and enhancement at operational level and feed into strategic enhancements too. These activities should take into account staff, student and external stakeholder evidence; e.g., External Verifier and External Examiner reports and employer/ industry feedback, which are used to develop and enhance delivery, the student experience and outcomes.

132. Building on internal arrangements for quality assurance and enhancement, institutions will be expected to use the outputs of these processes to inform the development and completion of the annual Self-Evaluation and Action Plan (SEAP). This document should be a reflection on themes arising from internal processes and any external scrutiny, which inform the strategic direction of the institution. The specific data and evidence that an institution chooses to draw on in developing and writing its SEAP will vary depending on the key messages that the institution wishes to draw out and demonstrate. Regardless of what is presented within the SEAP, which may be a sub-set of the total data and evidence considered in its internal evaluation and enhancement work, the institution will want to keep a copy of its full data and evidence set as this will form part of the Advanced Information Set required by QAA in advance of TQER.

133. The timing of the submission of the SEAP is likely to necessitate that institutions use their own data in the first instance when compiling the SEAP. However, the data should ultimately broadly match the officially published data. Within SFC, the SEAP will be an important source of qualitative evidence to support the assurance of high-quality provision and will be used to evaluate how effectively the institution is reflecting on their own data and evidence to inform strategic enhancements.

134. Institutions will also be expected to meet their statutory obligations, including in terms of the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) Act (2002) and The Equality Act 2010 (Specific Duties) (Scotland) Regulations 2012. Institutions must comply with the requirement for the publication of reports and themes arising and associated learning from these reports should be considered as part of the annual compilation of the SEAP. These considerations within the SEAP will help institutions to provide assurance to the SFC over their delivery of the Student interests, access and success' and 'Equality, diversity and inclusion' outcomes of the Outcomes Framework.

QAA's use of data and evidence

135. The annual SEAP will be shared with the QAA to, (a) provide an update on progress with good practice and recommendations arising from external peer review; and (b) inform annual engagement. The SEAP (and supporting evidence used to compile the SEAP) will form part of the evidence base for external peer review.

SFC's use of data and evidence

136. It is SFC's continued intention to develop and enhance the use of data and evidence in how we account for public investment in Scotland to deliver high quality learning. SFC holds the responsibility for the published institutional data and will use this to inform:

- The Assurance Model, including using these data to test and provide independent corroboration of what institutions and external quality agencies are telling us about quality assessment and enhancement through the SEAP and external review.
- Regular engagement with institutions.
- The external peer review process, through SFC sharing analysis of the data with the TQER review teams.

137. In the college sector, SFC collects and quality assures data on students and the student experience directly from colleges as part of the Further Education Statistical (FES) return. SFC also conducts an annual College Leaver Destination survey on the destinations of successful full-time college leavers, and the Student Satisfaction and Engagement Survey (SSES).

138. SFC is a statutory customer of the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) giving it access to all its data collections submitted by institutions in the university sector. SFC

also has access to data from the Graduate Outcomes (GO), Longitudinal Educational Outcomes (LEO) surveys, as well as data from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), and jointly owns the National Student Survey (NSS).

139. SFC uses data and evidence to corroborate information about quality and standards from institutions and the QAA. SFC will share the outcomes of analysis of this data with the TQER review team to inform their lines of enquiry.

140. This may include the products of analysis of the following data:

- Data on student outcomes (quantitative) and how institutions are taking action to improve outcomes (qualitative) for students of all backgrounds, with a particular interest in measures and actions about:
    - Retention.
    - Progression.
    - Success.
    - Employability.
- Student survey results (e.g., NSS in universities and SSES in colleges) and how institutions are addressing feedback from such surveys.
- Course closures and the management of students in flight on those courses.
- Qualitative information from key stakeholders, such as sparqs, NUS and Student Associations.
- Staff, student or other complaints about quality and standards.
- Industry and employer feedback on the preparedness of graduates / leavers.

141. Some of these data and evidence will be collected or be available systematically (e.g., student outcomes data, student survey results, complaints). Other data and evidence will be utilised in a more ad hoc way as and when it is available or is drawn to our attention (e.g., feedback from industry, employers, and Student Associations and information about course closures). It is important to note that this data and evidence will be used alongside information from the annual SEAPs and periodic external review reports.

142. Institutions are expected to comply with the established guiding principles for Public Information about the quality of educational provision and the student experience. All information should be accurate, honest, accessible, tailored to the intended user, updateable (on appropriate timescales) and re-usable.

Students and the use of data

143. One of the features of the student partnership ambition is that ‘partnership is solution

focused. Together, students and staff collect, review, and interpret evidence; identify priorities and design solutions that address diverse student needs; and meet institutional challenges'. We recognise that partnership will be a developing theme within the TQEF and would encourage institutions to consider how they can support students to engage effectively with relevant data and evidence.

Section 6: Complaints and concerns

Complaints

144. Scottish Public Sector Ombudsman (SPSO) has developed Model Complaints Handling Procedures (MCHP) for the college and university sectors. These provide a standardised approach to dealing with complaints in each sector. It is a requirement of the MCHPs that all complaints are recorded to ensure accountability and provide information for improvement.

145. The first stage in making a complaint, in both colleges and universities, is through institutional procedures. These should adhere to the SPSO MCHP. If this does not provide an acceptable response or outcome, complainants can proceed to ask the SPSO to review the case. In the university sector, if the issue is systemic or a risk to academic standards or quality, then complainants also have recourse to the Scottish Quality Concerns Scheme (SQCS) through QAA.

146. The MCHPs set out clear expectations around the governance, handling and reporting of complaints, including the responsibility of the leadership of institutions to maintain an active role in ensuring a consistent approach in the way complaints are handled at all levels.

147. One of the aims of the MCHP is to identify opportunities to improve provision of service across institutions. All institutions are expected to have structured systems for recording complaints and are expected to use this data to identify and address causes for complaints. There is also an expectation for institutions to publish, on a quarterly basis, information on complaints outcomes and actions taken to improve services, and an annual complaints performance report which should include:

- Performance statistics, (in line with the complaints performance indicators published by the SPSO).
- Complaint trends and the actions that have been or will be taken to improve services as a result.

148. A high-level review by SFC has highlighted a varied and inconsistent response to the SPSO expectations set out in the MCHPs. From AY 2024-25 SFC has sought greater openness, consistency, and accountability from institutions in recording and handling complaints by considering the inclusion of any key outcomes of the evaluation of complaints as part of the annual SEAP submission. It is also expected that all colleges and universities:

- Have readily available information and KPIs on complaint and complaint handling consistent with SPSO's minimum requirements.

- Regularly publish information and KPIs on complaints and complaint handling consistent with SPSO's minimum requirements.

Concerns

149. The Scottish Quality Concerns Scheme (SQCS) provides an opportunity for students, staff and other parties to raise concerns about academic standards and quality in higher education institutions to the QAA.

150. The aim of the Scheme is to promote confidence in the Scottish university sector by offering a responsive means for exploring issues brought to QAA's attention outside regular review arrangements. The process is designed to be proportionate and to allow for issues to be resolved as early as possible. Only concerns which indicate serious systemic weaknesses in an institution's approach to the management of quality and standards are investigated under the SQCS. The Scheme cannot be used to resolve individual complaints that do not indicate systemic issues in the management of academic standards and/or quality.

151. There is no equivalent to the SQSC in the college sector. During the coming year SFC will engage with institutions, SPSO, and other key stakeholders to better understand how systemic issues are currently identified, managed and resolved in the college sector. Once we have clear evidence base, SFC will discuss options with the sector to develop proposals for a tertiary approach for implementation in AY2026-27.

152. For AY2025-26 SFC will review data, the outputs of review activity, and other intelligence from the OF and AM process and, where necessary, we may ask an external agency, e.g. OSCR, ES, QAA, etc., to investigate areas of concern.

Further Information

153. Any queries/requests for further information should be directed to SFC Learning and Quality Team, email: quality@sfc.ac.uk



Dr. Jacqui Brasted
Director, Access, Learning & Outcomes

Annex A: Guidance on Institution Led Quality Review (ILQR)

1. SFC expects colleges and universities to operate systems of periodic review or Institution-Led Quality Review (ILQR) across all their provision and support services. The guidance below set out the parameters for periodic review. Universities will already have in place systems to review their provision and support services and should continue to implement these. Colleges will also have existing systems in place and should consider how these can be mapped and/or adapted to the general requirement set out below, thereby developing arrangements that are appropriate to their own context and mission, and proportionate to the size of the institution.

Scope and frequency of periodic review

2. All SFC-funded provision (credit-bearing and non-credit bearing) falls within the scope of ILQR for universities and colleges, although there may be differences between institutions in terms of the extent to which non-credit bearing activity will feature in ILQR.

3. To meet ESG compliance, ILQR for colleges and universities should include all higher education provision regardless of whether it is funded by SFC- this ensures that the TQEF is ESG compliant.

4. The mechanism for reporting the outcomes of ILQR to SFC is through the SEAP, which should focus on strengths and/or priority areas for development drawn from themes arising from the ILQR process. It is for institutions to decide how they report on ILQR internally.

5. All provision should be reviewed on a cycle of **not more than six years**, including all provision delivered in collaboration with others, work-based provision – including apprenticeships – and placements, online and distance learning, taught postgraduate awards, supervision of research students and transnational education.

6. Each institution is expected to produce a schedule for reviewing their provision, with some form of review activity taking place within each academic session. The review schedule does not have to be submitted to SFC but should be kept up-to-date and available for discussion on request by SFC or the QAA.

7. It is for institutions to determine the precise order and aggregation of programmes and subjects in ways which provide coherence and fit the organisational structure, mode of delivery and enhancement-led approach. The aggregation of programmes and subjects in the review process should have sufficient granularity to allow adequate scrutiny of programmes and disciplines including ensuring there is adequate external scrutiny at the discipline level by the external panel member(s). Excessive aggregation should be avoided if it means the process cannot examine the 'fine structure' of provision and

does not facilitate the identification of specific issues affecting programmes.

Institution-led quality review: subject areas

8. The ILQR method should be designed to allow constructive reflection on the effectiveness of an institution's annual monitoring and reporting procedures and the effectiveness of the follow-up actions arising from annual monitoring. Reporting at the course/module, programme, subject, or departmental level should identify actions to address any issues and activity to promote areas of strength for consideration at institutional level. ILQR should evidence the use of public information by institutions and how they seek to engage their students in quality and in their learning.

9. ILQRs should produce robust, comprehensive, and credible evidence that the academic standards of awards are secure, that learning, teaching and assessment is of the highest standard, that the curriculum is current, that student support is comprehensive enabling student success and that provision in Scottish institutions is of high quality and being enhanced.

10. ILQR should be designed to promote and support critical reflection on policy and practice. The method used should be central to quality enhancement by promoting dialogue on areas in which quality could be improved, ensure that any shortcomings are addressed, and identify good practice for dissemination within the institution and beyond.

Institution-led quality review: professional services

11. All services contributing to the student experience should be included in the ILQR schedule. Professional services are of crucial importance in determining the overall quality of the student learning experience and can impact significantly on student achievement and well-being. It is a matter for each institution to determine how this should be done and there may be variances in approaches or methodologies from the subject ILQR and may be thematic. Nevertheless, SFC expects that institutions' approaches to the review of professional services should be systematic, planned, and timely, covering all non-academic services or departments that contribute to the overall student learning experience and considering their effectiveness and interactions with subject areas and programmes within the six-year review cycle.

12. The arrangements for reviewing professional services should have sufficient granularity to allow for adequate scrutiny of each aspect of the services provision and include sufficient scrutiny by external panel members. Whatever the approach taken, the evidence should allow the institution to reflect on the contribution of professional services to the 'quality culture' within the institution, the ways in which the services engage with students to monitor and improve the quality of services, and the ways in which the services promote high quality learning and continuous quality enhancement. It is expected that students will be engaged throughout the review of professional

services.

Team size and composition

13. Review activity should provide an objective review of provision based on an understanding of national and international good practice and appropriate external reference points, including for example, subject benchmarks statements, professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) requirements. Each review team should include a student and at least one member external to the institution with a relevant background. Such members may come from across the UK, from industry, professional practice or may have wider international experience and should be appropriately appraised of the institution's quality review processes. 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'.

14. ILQR activity should be designed to include an element of reflection on national, and where appropriate international good practice, such as a reflective statement from the institution on how its provision compares with similar practice outside the UK. Institutions are encouraged to consider how they can support such informal 'benchmarking'. SFC does not expect internal review teams to routinely include members from outside the UK although institutions are encouraged to actively consider the scope for this option.

Student engagement in ILQR

15. Institutions are expected to continue extending effective student engagement and partnership in quality in line with the Student Partnership ambition statement and features and by using the Student Learning Experience Model to support targeted discussions with students to identify priorities to enhance the quality of their learning experience. It is expected that students will be partners in all stages of the internal review process including the development of the self-evaluation, as full members of review teams, and in follow-up activity.

16. ILQR should gather additional specific information from students as part of the evidence base for reviews. Institutions have flexibility in deciding how to achieve this, taking account of the specific demographics of their student population and the characteristics of their provision. Institutions are encouraged to use the buildings blocks of the Student Learning Experience model to support discussions with students. In line with previous guidance, it is good practice for ILQR to:

    - Generate holistic evidence about student views of provision and of their learning experience.

- Differentiate between the views of different categories of students where these are likely to be significant (for example part-time and full-time, students from different levels of programme, entrants from school and entrants from further education etc).
- Allow identification of distinctive characteristics of provision.
- Take account of the views of recent graduates/leavers on the relevance of provision for their next step to a positive destination.

Use of external reference points

17. ILR should demonstrate that programme design and learning outcomes are consistent with appropriate external reference points. ILQR should include consideration of an institutions approach to credit rating and monitoring and demonstrate assurance of meeting the requirements outlined in the SCQF guidance. This aspect should be clearly documented in any ILR report outcome.

18. For universities, ILQR should explore the use of specific aspects of the UK Quality Code, and especially how Subject Benchmark Statements, Characteristics Statements and Credit and Qualifications Frameworks – as represented by the SCQF – are used in setting and maintaining academic standards. ILQR should demonstrate that programme design and learning outcomes are consistent with them.

19. ILQRs should support effective learner pathways through tertiary education, including embedding and developing the use of the SCQF. ILQR should be designed to promote scrutiny and discussion of the institution's approach to the SCQF. This should include consideration of strategies for articulation and advanced standing, for the recognition of prior learning and through flexible pathways to awards, including CPD and work-based learning.

20. For colleges, it is recognised that for much of their provision, and programme structures may be determined by the Awarding Bodies, or programmes of their own devising, often incorporating shorter duration national awards within their full course design. ILQR should be viewed as an opportunity to undertake a deeper evaluation of the delivery of teaching, learning and assessment, student outcomes and the associated support in place for students. Where colleges are delivering national awards it is likely that there will be opportunities for shared learning as a result of the outcomes of ILQR and where the opportunity arises to feed into Awarding Body review of programmes. We would also encourage colleges to begin to explore the use of the Quality Code in developing ILQR.

Use of data and evidence

21. Both annual monitoring and ILQR should consider:

- Themes arising from and responses to External Verifier and External Examiner reports.
- Internal and external student survey data.
- Performance data on recruitment, retention, progression and achievement; and data trends, particularly those data within the monitoring returns identified in SFC's OF and AM Guidance.

22. Data is likely to be benchmarked against other areas of the institution's activities as well as equivalent provision in other institutions.

Relationship with PSRB accreditation

23. A significant volume of provision in Scottish colleges and universities is accredited by PSRBs. SFC expects ILQR to reflect on the outcomes of relevant PSRB accreditations. Where possible, institutions are encouraged to engage with PSRBs to explore appropriate ways of aligning PSRB activity with ILQR. This might include the use of common documentation or joint processes which meet the needs of both ILQR and external accreditation.

Inter-relationship with ILQR and other elements of quality and enhancement arrangements

24. An enhancement-led approach is a fundamental characteristic of our approach to quality assurance, improvement, and enhancement in Scotland, and we encourage institutions to continue to develop ILQR processes which also:

- Promote dialogue on areas in which quality might be improved and consider how developing the use of evidence can contribute to enhancing the student experience.
- Identify good practice for dissemination within the institution and beyond including engagement in current and past national enhancement topics.
- Encourage and support critical reflection.

25. ILQR processes are subject to scrutiny through TQER. ILQR should evidence the use of public information by institutions and evidence from external verification activities undertaken by awarding bodies, and how they seek to engage their students in quality and in their learning. The outcomes of ILQR should be incorporated within the SEAP.

Annex B: Self-Evaluation and Action Plan (SEAP) guidance: refresh

What is the purpose of the SEAP and how will it be used?

1. The SEAP is designed for use by institutions (including Governance committees, staff and students), the SFC and the QAA. Primarily, the SEAP should be prepared for internal institutional use and should be an honest and open reflection on the activities undertaken in the previous session, identifying progress with previous actions and any emerging strengths or areas for development.

Institutions

2. The SEAP will:

    - Support institutions to reflect on annual institutional quality assurance and enhancement activities and outcomes, including on progress made since their last external review, and to identify and plan for key strategic enhancements, which will be articulated through the action plan.

    - Provide institutional oversight to:
        - Ensure that the Accountable Officer is sighted on, and has ownership of, the quality of the student experience, academic standards and academic integrity. Only once the Accountable Officer is satisfied with the thoroughness and effectiveness of the evaluation and action-plan should it be submitted to SFC.
        - Enable the institution's governing body to be sighted on the key priorities for the provision and enhancement of learning and teaching.
    - Demonstrate to staff and students how their contribution to the activities that impact the quality assurance and enhancement of learning, teaching and the student experience are collated and used to document and drive strategic enhancement within the institution.

Scottish Funding Council

3. The SEAP will:

- Form the evidence base for individual institutions in relation to the high-quality learning and teaching outcome of the Outcomes Framework and Assurance Model (OFAM) and will also contribute to other outcomes of the framework, e.g., 'Student interests, access and success' and 'Skills and work-based learning' outcomes.
- Support annual institutional engagement with SFC and, along with the wider aspects of the TQEF, provide SFC with assurance on the effective use and impact of public investment to deliver high-quality learning provision.
- Contribute to the identification of key themes arising from quality assurance and enhancement activities for consideration by and dissemination to key stakeholders across the sector.

Quality Assurance Agency

4. The SEAP will:

- Be used as part of the evidence base for the TQER.
- Be used to inform the QAA of annual institutional progress with the outcomes of the TQER and engagement with enhancement activities, including the STEP.
- Support the Institutional Liaison Meetings with the QAA.

Self-Evaluation and Action Plan Guidance

Scope

5. It is recognised that all provision within an institution will be subject to the same/similar quality assurance and enhancement processes. When describing good practice or areas for development or enhancement the SEAP should focus on the areas of priority identified by the institution. As outlined in paragraphs 3 and 4 the SEAP is designed to be used for a range of purposes including as part of the monitoring and assurance associated with the SFC Outcomes Framework. To that end, the focus of the annual quality engagement meetings with SFC will be on SFC-funded activity (credit-bearing and non-credit bearing) for universities and colleges, however we recognise that there will be differences between institutions in terms of the extent to which non-credit bearing activity will feature in the SEAP.

General

6. **Overview**: It is recognised that quality processes are both assurance and self-evaluative exercises and the SEAP is designed to complement and support the self-evaluation approach rather than be a separate exercise. The SEAP reports on an institution's

existing self-evaluation activities (for example, annual monitoring and subject and support services ILQR), reflecting on the **outcomes** of institutional quality arrangements, supporting data and evidence and the resulting priority areas of focus and impact. This culminates in a concise, high-level summary of themes and an associated action plan. Institutions should treat the self-evaluation and in particular the action plan as live documents that can be revisited and updated throughout the year.

7. **Link to TQER**: The SEAP and the supporting data and evidence used to prepare it, will form part of the Advanced Information Set that will contribute to TQER. Institutions are therefore advised to clearly reference any evidence that is used as the basis for the SEAP and to ensure these evidence sources are kept readily available to support preparation, and/or submission, for their TQER. The supporting documentation **should not** be submitted with the SEAP.

8. **Institutions undergoing external peer review**: there is no requirement for institutions undergoing review to submit a SEAP in the same academic year (e.g. if an institution is being reviewed in AY2025-26, then they will not be required to submit a SEAP describing the outcomes of AY 2024-25 on the 30th November 2025). This will enable institutions to focus on preparing for the review and developing their Strategic Impact Analysis. SFC will draw assurance on the quality of learning and teaching from the outcome of the external review.

9. **Length and focus**: The SEAP should be a concise distillation of key high-level themes from the previous academic year. It should **not** include descriptions of processes or extracts of policy or other documents held by the institution. Institutions should use a layout and format that suits their context, however, the indicative word count for the self-evaluation element should be in the region of 5,000 words (excluding the action plan). It is recognised that some flexibility in the word count is helpful and shorter reports are accepted where they accurately reflect institutional priorities, similarly we recognise that some institutions may require a longer report. Where institutions feel a longer report is necessary, it should be discussed with the institutional Outcome Manager in advance of submission. The action plan should be of a length that suits the needs of the institution and incorporate any actions arising from the last external review.

10. **Students as Partners**: Institutions should engage students as partners in the preparation of the annual SEAP and in the monitoring of the implementation of the actions. Student partnership is a key aspect of the TQEF, which is expected to develop and mature over time. Institutions should consult the sparqs resource "Scotland's Ambition for Student Partnership" and accompanying resources to support this approach.

11. **Submission**: The final document should be submitted to SFC by the 30 November (or the first working day in December, when the 30 November falls on a weekend or bank holiday). It should be a reflection on the previous academic year, with scope to add any recent significant information.

12. **Statement of Assurance**: The final document must be reviewed and signed off by the Accountable Officer in advance of submission. It is not a requirement that the SEAP be reviewed and approved by the Governing Body prior to submission, however the SEAP should be shared with the Governing Body to support their oversight of quality assurance and enhancement. It is for the institution to determine when to do so based on their own governance schedules. The SEAP should include the formal annual statement of assurance to SFC, included below. The Accountable Officer must sign the statement of assurance and indicate when it was endorsed.

Statement of Assurance: *As the Accountable Officer for [name of institution], I confirm that I have considered the institution's arrangements for the management of academic standards and the quality of the learning experience for AY [year just elapsed], including the scope and impact of these. I further confirm that I am satisfied that the institution has adequate and effective arrangements to maintain standards and to assure and enhance the quality of its provision. I can therefore provide assurance to the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) that the academic standards and the quality of the learning provision at this institution continue to meet the requirements set by SFC.*

Signature:

Accountable Officer (Name): *Date:*

Self-Evaluation Narrative

Introduction

13. The self-evaluation component of the report focuses on the Principles of the TQEF that have been co-created and are jointly owned with the sector.

14. For each Principle, the institution is expected to provide their evaluation of the **outcomes** of the quality assurance and enhancement processes that underpin that principle, focusing on what has gone well (since the last SEAP or other evaluation), progress against and impact of previously identified actions and areas for further enhancement based on the data and evidence gathered **during the academic year**.

15. The self-evaluation should focus on in-year progress and be a **summary** that highlights the areas of focus at an institutional level and contextualises the actions that the institution intends to take to address weaknesses or achieve further enhancements. Alongside students, the summary should also (where relevant) include reference to the role of externals, for example: employers, schools, academic partners, etc., in evaluation.

16. All aspects of an institution's provision (i.e., all SCQF levels and modes of delivery) should be self-evaluated, but the content of the SEAP should focus on the outcomes of quality assurance processes, themes arising and strengths or areas for enhancement at an institutional level. Discussions with SFC based on the SEAP submission will focus on the outcomes associated with funded provision.

17. The report **must not** include descriptions of routine quality assurance processes. The institution should outline significant changes that have occurred during the past year and/or areas that are being enhanced or developed (or where appropriate) are a continuation of an initiative that was started previously and continues to be a focus in the coming year.

Evaluation of the Principles

18. Within the guidance for each Principle there are prompts that institutions may find helpful in undertaking their evaluation and identifying areas of good practice and areas for enhancement or development.

19. The Principles diagram, includes key activities and sources of data/evidence that have been identified by the sector and mapped to each principle. Extracts of each principle have been included in this guidance and should be used for reference. **It is not expected that institutions evaluate every point**. Institutions should consider what data and evidence is appropriate to their own context and best highlights key areas of focus for enhancement or development in the current year.

20. Although there are separate 'Data and evidence' and 'Externality' Principles, these **do not** require separate sections within the evaluation as they underpin the four headline principles. The relevant data and evidence should be set out by institutions in relation to each Principle as per the guidance provided and the outcomes of external activities and feedback, should inform the evaluation of the relevant Principles.

Headline Principles

Excellence in learning, teaching & assessment

- **Academic standards and awarding.**
- **Strategic leadership of learning and teaching.**
- **Curriculum planning, design and delivery.**
- **Learning environment, resources and technologies.**
- **Professional development.**
- **Currency of learning and teaching.**
- **Peer review and evaluation of learning, teaching and assessment.**
- **Innovation in learning, teaching & assessment.**

21. In evaluating 'Excellence in learning, teaching and assessment', consideration should be given to the **outcomes** of institutional quality assurance processes associated with learning, teaching and assessment (e.g., external feedback, annual monitoring and periodic review of all provision including Transnational Education [TNE] and work-based learning, student outcomes, appeals and student conduct/ academic integrity etc.) and the evidence they provide to address the following questions at an institutional level:

- What strengths and areas for enhancement or development have been identified as a result of the analysis of student outcomes and evaluation data? This could include key outcomes and overall trends in:
    - Recruitment, admissions, retention, achievement and progression data.
    - Numbers of students on placements or work-based programmes.
    - **For degree level provision, this should include**: undergraduate, taught postgraduate and research degree outcomes.
- What strengths and areas for enhancement or development have been identified as a result of external independent advice and feedback from, for example: PSRB activity, External Examiners, External Verification activity and External Stakeholders?
- In considering the wider evidence (relating to items noted in the principles diagram), has the institution identified any additional specific strengths that have been achieved, or areas for enhancement or development in relation to learning, teaching and assessment.
- Does the institution have any plans to make any changes to the curriculum (i.e., new course provision or course closures) and what measures are in place to manage these changes.

23. Institutions should encourage staff to utilise the sparqs Student Learning Experience Model in the underpinning activities that contribute to this principle and in particular outcomes from discussions with students based on the reflective questions associated with the following four building blocks i.e. Curriculum; Resources, Environment and Technology; Learning and Teaching Delivery and Assessment and Feedback.

Supporting student success

- **Enabling student success – wellbeing, inclusion, equality, student support.**
- **Context and community - meeting the needs of students.**
- **Effective and successful transitions.**
- **Support for employability, skills development and lifelong learning.**
- **Achieving positive outcomes for every learner.**
- **Responsiveness to concerns.**

24. In evaluating 'Supporting student success' consideration should be given to the **outcomes** of institutional quality assurance processes associated with supporting students to succeed and the themes arising from the range of internal quality assurance processes including professional services review along with any external feedback that may be relevant. Consideration should be given to the following key questions:

- What strengths and areas for enhancement or development, relevant to student support have been identified because of the analysis of student outcomes and evaluation data? This could include key outcomes and overall trends in:

Colleges

- Number and proportion of students from the most deprived 10% postcode areas (SIMD10) and number/ proportion successfully achieving (FT & PT).
- Number and proportion of care-experienced students enrolled and number/ proportion successfully achieving (FT & PT).
- Number and proportion of students aged 16-19 on full-time FE courses successfully achieving.

Universities

- The number and proportion of Scotland-domiciled full-time first-degree entrants from the 20% most deprived postcodes and number/proportion returning in year 2.

- The number and proportion of Scotland-domiciled undergraduate entrants from the 20% and 40% most deprived postcodes and number/proportion returning in year 2.
- The number and proportion of Scotland-domiciled undergraduate entrants that are care-experienced and number/proportion returning in year 2.

- In considering the wider evidence (relating to items noted in the principles diagram), has the institution identified any additional specific strengths that have been achieved, or areas for enhancement or development in relation to supporting student success?
- We recognise that institutions will have completed their Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) reports in April 2025, which SFC and Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) will review and therefore institutions do not need to provide that information again within their SEAPs and should instead focus on any priority areas that particularly impact learning, teaching and the student experience that have not already been addressed in the PSED.
- What (if any) specific strengths or areas for development have been identified (during this year) as a result of the analysis and evaluation of:
  - Graduate outcomes/ Student destinations.
  - Complaints.

25. Institutions should encourage staff involved in providing services to support students to utilise the Student Learning Experience Model when evaluating their provision and in particular the outcomes of discussions with students based on the reflective questions that relate to "Progression and Achievement", Community and Belonging", "Support and Guidance" and "Organisation and Management" building blocks.

Enhancement & Quality Culture

- **Institution wide culture of assurance, improvement and enhancement.**
- **Institution-led review/activity and action planning.**
- **External institutional peer review.**
- **Sector enhancement activity.**
- **Impact of collaboration.**
- **External outlook – globally responsive.**

26. This section should include a focus on external peer-led review, progress with follow-up activity and engagement with sectoral enhancement activity. The key messages from external review should be distilled to inform this self-evaluation and actions arising from

external review should be incorporated into the action plan. In subsequent years, this section should also include an update on in-year progress with the outcomes of external review.

27. In evaluating 'Enhancement and quality culture', the institution should ask itself:

    - How has the institution addressed areas for development/ recommendations arising from the last external (peer) review?
    - What (if any) changes the institution has made as result of external benchmarking (e.g. to the UK Quality Code or other sector reference points) or as a result of other external feedback (e.g. Awarding Body or PSRB outcomes), that have helped the institution manage the quality of its provision?
    - How effectively has the institution engaged in sectoral enhancement activity and what impact has this had?
    - What (if any) enhancements have been achieved through collaborative (local, regional, national or international) activity?

Student engagement & partnership

- **Students as partners in their learning experience.**
- **Students at core of review and enhancement activity.**
- **Student voice – every student, every place, every level.**
- **Effective and robust student representation.**
- **Responsiveness to student feedback.**

28. In completing this section, institutions should identify key areas of strength or areas for enhancement or development that focus on developing student partnership (at local and strategic levels) and promoting student engagement, including student representation and responding to the student voice.

29. In evaluating 'Student engagement and partnership', institutions should utilise Scotland's Ambition for Student Partnership and the Student Learning Experience (in particular the outcomes of discussions with students based on the reflective questions that relate to 'Student Partnership' building block) to inform their reflections.

30. Where the outcomes of student engagement (e.g., themes arising from student voice mechanisms, including internal and external surveys) have informed changes to other principles (e.g., learning, teaching and assessment or supporting student success), this should be covered under those principles to avoid duplication.

31. Institutions should include a high-level narrative, evaluating any key changes (or ongoing

trends that need to be addressed) in their internal and/or external student surveys e.g., National Student Survey (NSS) and/or Student Support and Engagement Survey (SSES) outcomes, compared to the previous year. Where institutions participate in the Post-Graduate Taught Experience (PTES) and Post-Graduate Research Experience Survey (PRES), these should be included too. Key outcomes and overall trends, could include:

Colleges

- Percentage response rates to the SSES across FE and HE, FT and PT
- The percentage of respondents to the SSES overall satisfied with their college experience

Universities

- Percentage response rate to the NSS
- The percentage of respondents to the National Student Survey satisfied with the overall quality of their course

32. Examples of activities that showcase student partnership and progress towards the Scotland's Ambition for Student Partnership, would be beneficial in this section, but should not duplicate content that has already been included elsewhere.

Underpinning Principles

Externality

- **External institutional peer review.**
- **Sector reference points/requirements.**
- **External specialists/experts.**
- **Public information and assurance.**

33. Evaluation of External institutional peer review and sector reference points/requirements should be embedded on the "Enhancement and quality culture" principle and feedback from external specialists/experts, should be included according to the principles that it is most relevant to.

Data and evidence

- **Student outcomes.**
- **Common dataset for reporting.**
- **Institutional PIs/Qis.**
- **Institution-led self-evaluation and action planning.**
- **Use of student and staff feedback.**
- **Outcomes of review activity.**

34. When addressing each Principle, the institution should reflect on what key data and evidence they have drawn upon to evaluate themselves. This can include data that forms part of the annual returns to SFC/HESA etc. but may also include their own internal data and evidence.

35. Institutions are encouraged to use their own data (for the year under review) when considering the specific data measures for the SEAP, as the timing of the submission will not align with the official publication of data (for that year). It is recognised that this may result in some variations, but these can be discussed as part of the ongoing engagement with SFC. The SEAP should demonstrate an institution's ability to evaluate its own data and identify strengths and areas for enhancement and development. In doing this evaluation the institutions should consider their own internal benchmarks and may find it useful to compare them with sector benchmarks where these are available.

36. The key data outcomes that are aligned to each principle have been included in the SEAP guidance; however, institutions are **not** expected to include reference to all the outcomes listed. It is for individual institutions to determine which outcomes they should include based on their evaluation and the resulting strengths or areas for enhancement or development, identified as a result.

37. During annual quality engagement meetings, institutions should however be prepared to discuss all the outcomes included in the guidance, particularly if the institution has key strengths or has a declining trend in any of the outcomes listed. These outcomes are allied to the High Quality Learning and Teaching, Student Interests, Access and Success and Skills and Work-based Learning outcomes of the OFAM.

38. Where an institution opts to include narrative about key data outcomes under a principle, it should quote the key institution level outcome for the academic year and a brief commentary on the **three-year** trend (where this is available) associated with the outcome, to demonstrate the underpinning evidence that has led to the identification of the strength or area for enhancement or development.

39. The underlying data and evidence contributing to the overarching outcomes, does **not** need to be provided with the SEAP submission, but will be expected to be made

available to SFC on request or to the QAA as part of the external review process. As noted in the introduction it is recommended that the institution cross reference to the underpinning source of evidence and ensure these sources are readily accessible to support discussions with SFC and/or preparations for external review.

Action Plan

40. The action plan should be a consolidation of the planned institution level enhancement activities arising from the self-evaluation. It is recognised that institutions may already have their own action plans in place, and it may be appropriate for that action plan to be submitted with the self-evaluation. However, a template is included with this guidance to support institutions.

41. The template aligns with the action plan that will be used by the QAA as part of the TQER and associated follow-up stages. The intention being that institutions can incorporate the plan created following future TQERs into the SEAP and ongoing progress can be monitored through the SEAP submission and ILMs, thereby avoiding unnecessary duplication.

42. When using the template provided, the actions should include the following detail:

- The principle and planned area for enhancement, recognising that there may be more than one area for enhancement under a specific principle and an area of enhancement may support more than one principle.
- The action to be undertaken and the planned impact or outcomes of this action. The actions should be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time bound.
- The milestones and associated target dates for implementation, and
- Who is the responsible or lead person for the action (this should be set out as post titles rather than individuals' names).

Action Plan Template

Action Plan 20XX – 20XX

The plan should link directly to the institutional evaluation of the Principles and should prioritise strategic actions arising from the narrative. In addition, the actions arising from commendations or recommendations identified through external review, should also be embedded into this action plan to ensure alignment with overall institutional priorities and to streamline reporting processes. This action plan should be a live document utilised by the institution to focus on strategic quality assurance and enhancement activities on an ongoing basis. The timeline for the completion of actions should be suited to the nature of the activity and the context of the institution, noting that there may be short (e.g. within one year), medium (up to three years) or long (up to 5 years or more) term actions included. *The guidance, included in blue font in the table below should be deleted prior to submission.*

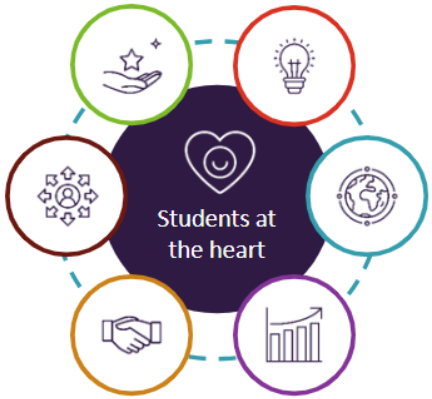
Principle and Area for enhancement or development.	Action(s) and planned impact/ outcomes	Milestone (s/ target date(s), continuing/ carried forward (c/f)	Responsible/ Lead
Each Principle may have more than one area for enhancement or development.	*The actions should reflect the milestones or individual process steps that need to be taken to achieve the planned outcome The actions should be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely.*	*It is not expected that all actions will be completed in one year. If an action is continuing or carried forward from a previous year, this should be noted here.*	*Use post titles here rather than individual names*
Example: *Supporting student success*	***Example:*** *School managers develop plans for a systematic approach to providing accurate and timely data to programme managers, and ensure all staff are supported in using this data effectively.*	***Example:*** *introduction of new dashboard and induction programme with in-year data on student*	***Example:*** *Academic*

Principle and Area for enhancement or development.	Action(s) and planned impact/ outcomes	Milestone (s/ target date(s), continuing/ carried forward (c/f)	Responsible/ Lead
	Outcome: Provide quick insights to better inform programme managers on areas for enhancement	*progression, withdrawals, and attainment by December 2024*	*Development Committee*
	Add rows as required		

Note: it may be useful to include a key to expand any acronyms used in the action plan

Annex C: TQEF Principles

Principles of Scotland's Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework



Excellence in learning, teaching & assessment

- Academic standards and awarding
- Strategic leadership of learning and teaching
- Curriculum planning, design and delivery
- Learning environment, resources and technologies
- Professional development
- Currency of learning and teaching
- Peer review and evaluation of learning, teaching and assessment
- Innovation in learning, teaching & assessment

Supporting student success

- Enabling student success – wellbeing, inclusion, equality, student support
- Context and community - meeting the needs of students
- Effective and successful transitions
- Support for employability, skills development and lifelong learning
- Achieving positive outcomes for every learner
- Responsiveness to concerns

Student engagement & partnership

- Students as partners in their learning experience
- Students at core of review and enhancement activity
- Student Voice - Every student, every place, every level
- Effective and robust student representation
- Responsiveness to student feedback

Enhancement & Quality Culture

- Institution wide culture of assurance, improvement and enhancement
- Institution-led review/activity and action planning
- External institutional peer review
- Sector enhancement activity
- Impact of collaboration
- External outlook – globally responsive

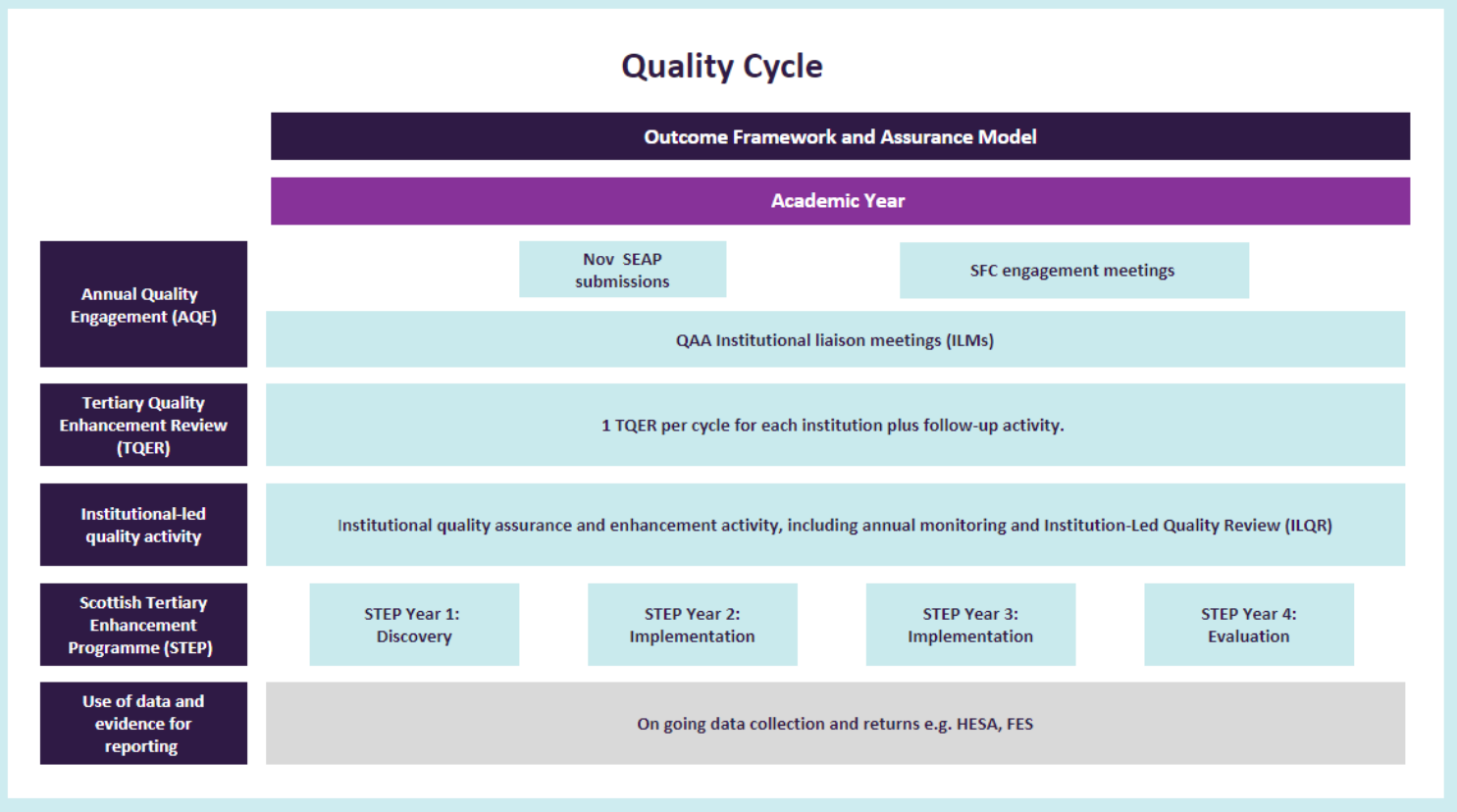
Externality

- External institutional peer review
- Sector reference points/requirements
- External specialists/experts
- Public information and assurance

Data & evidence

- Student outcomes
- Common dataset for reporting
- Institutional PIs/QIs
- Institution-led self-evaluation and action planning
- Use of student and staff feedback
- Outcomes of review activity

Annex D: TQEF delivery mechanisms timing



Annex E: A guide to TQEF acronyms

AQE (Annual Quality Engagements)

There will be two aspects to annual quality engagement i.e. the SFC will include discussion of learning and quality and the outcomes of the SEAP in their engagement through the Outcomes Framework and Assurance Model, while QAA will undertake a programme of liaison meetings with institutions, within the context of the TQEF and the external peer review method (see TQER), which will support the provision of advice and guidance and the TQER process.

CDN (College Development Network)

CDN is the national enhancement and improvement agency for Scotland's colleges, working with the college sector to develop their people and deliver better outcomes for students. CDN will co-manage STEP (jointly with QAA) and support the staff and leadership of the college sector to build their capacity and ensure that they can fully participate in all aspects of the TQEF.

ESG (Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area)

ESG provide the framework for internal and external quality assurance across the countries of the European Higher Education Area. The TQEF has been developed to ensure continued alignment with ESG. The current version of the ESG were developed in 2015 and will be reviewed in 2025.

ELIR (Enhancement Led-Institutional Review)

ELIR is the process of cyclical external quality assurance review for the university sector delivered by the QAA. ELIR ran for four cycles from 2003-04 to 2021-22. From AY 2024-25 it will be replaced by TQER.

ENQA (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education)

Established in 2000, ENQA promotes European cooperation in the field of quality assurance in higher education. It aims to contribute to the maintenance and enhancement of the quality of European higher education, and to act as a major driving force for the development of quality assurance across all the Bologna Process signatory countries, including the UK and Scottish Governments.

ES (Education Scotland)

ES is an executive agency of the Scottish Government charged with supporting quality and improvement in Scotland's schools. SFC has contracted with ES over many years to deliver SFC's statutory duty to assure and enhance the quality of SFC-fundable provision in

Scotland's colleges. In June 2025 SFC announced its decision to no longer commission ES to support the delivery of the TQEF from AY2025-26 SFC may, in future, draw on the expertise of HM Inspectors to support specific sector needs, with their agreement.

HGIOC (How Good is our College)

HGIOC is the quality assurance framework for the college sector that integrated the assurances sought through ES's evaluative activities and SFC's Outcome Agreement process. HGIOC will be replaced by TQEF from AY 2024-25.

ILQR (Institution-led Quality Review)

Describes the systematic process for how institutions evaluate and review their own provision. It is for institutions to determine their own quality arrangements within the parameters and guidelines set out in SFC Guidance for ILQR.

ILR (Institution-led Review)

The systematic process for how universities reviewed their own provision under the QEF. Now superseded by ILQR within the TQEF.

MCHP (Model Complaints Handling Procedure)

The SPSO has developed MCHPs with the college and university sectors respectively. The MCHPs provide a standardised approach to dealing with complaints in each sector. It is a requirement of the MCHP that all complaints are recorded to ensure accountability and provide information for improvement.

NUS (National Union of Students) Scotland

NUS Scotland is the national union representing university and college student interests across Scotland.

OF (Outcomes Framework) and AM (Assurance Model)

The Outcomes Framework and Assurance Model is the SFC's approach to assurance and accountability from AY 2024-25. The Outcomes Framework sets out what outcomes the SFC expect institutions to deliver in return for the funding they receive. The outcomes are broad, forward looking and not bespoke to a particular institution. The Assurance Model tells the SFC what and how institutions have delivered against these outcomes through monitoring and engagement.

PSRB (Professional, statutory, and regulatory body)

PSRBs accredit a significant volume of provision in colleges and universities. SFC expects institutions to reflect on the outcomes of relevant PSRB accreditations as part of the internal and external review activity. Institutions are also encouraged to explore ways of aligning PSRB activity with ILQR to reduce duplication and burden.

QAA (Quality Assurance Agency)

UK's independent higher education quality assurance works in partnership with SFC and the sector to assure and enhance the quality of higher education in Scotland. QAA delivers key

aspects of the TQEF including TQER and STEP (jointly with CDN). Its independence from government ensures continued compliance with the ESG.

QA-TNE (Quality Evaluation and Enhancement of UK model for trans-national education)

QA-TNE is a method for the quality evaluation and enhancement of UK trans-national education delivered by QAA. Participation in QA-TNE is a requirement for all Scottish degree awarding bodies engaging in TNE from AY 2024-25.

QEF (Quality Enhancement Framework)

The QEF was the enhancement-led approach to quality assurance for the Scottish university sector. QEF will be replaced by TQEF from AY 2024-25.

SCQFP (Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework Partnership)

The SCQFP is the independent body set up to maintain and develop Scotland's National Qualifications Framework. SCQFP works with awarding bodies, professional bodies and other programme owners to ensure that a wide variety of learning is recognised on the Framework.

SEAP (Self-Evaluation and Action Plan)

The SEAP is an annual self-evaluative report, framed against the principles of the TQEF, that institutions will be required to submit to the SFC. The report should be a high-level summary of the outcomes of institution led quality assurance and enhancement activities and should identify areas of strength and areas for development or enhancement at a strategic level. It should include an action plan detailing how institutions will address areas for enhancement or development and any actions arising from the commendations and/or recommendations arising from external review.

SFC (Scottish Funding Council)

SFC is Scotland's tertiary education and research authority. The SFC is a non-departmental public body that is directly accountable to Scottish Ministers of c£1.9 billion of public investment annually to support high-quality learning provision and research in Scotland's colleges and universities. SFC has a statutory duty to secure provision for quality assurance and enhancement of SFC-fundable provision delivered by fundable bodies (colleges and universities) in Scotland. It does this through the TQEF.

SIA (Strategic Impact Analysis)

SIA is an overarching periodic commentary on an institution's journey in the period between TQER reviews, outlining institutions' current context, trends over this timeframe, challenges, opportunities and successes to support the upcoming review. Alongside the annual SEAPs, the SIA will be used as part of the evidence base in advance of TQER review visits.

SPSO (Scottish Public Service Ombudsman)

The SPSO is the final stage for complaints about public services in Scotland. Its remit covers colleges and universities and government agencies such as SFC. SPSO has developed model

complaints handling procedures for the college and university sectors respectively that provide a standardised approach to dealing, recording and reporting on complaints.

sparqs (Student Partnership in Quality Scotland)

sparqs is the SFC-funded agency that supports college and university students engage as partners in the decisions made about the quality of the learning experience. sparqs has led the development of a Student Learning Experience Model and Student Partnership Ambition Statement. These feature as key sector reference points for effective student engagement and partnership in the TQEF. Sparqs' ongoing work directly supports students and Student Associations to enhance their capacity to take part in internal and external quality review and in enhancement activity.

SQA (Scottish Qualifications Authority)

SQA is the Scottish Government executive agency responsible for accrediting educational awards in Scotland.

SQCS (Scottish Quality Concerns Scheme)

The QAA-managed scheme provides an opportunity for students and staff from the university sector in Scotland to raise concerns about academic standards and quality in higher education institutions to the QAA. Only concerns which indicate serious systemic weaknesses in an institution's approach to the management of quality and standards are investigated under the SQCS.

STEP (Scotland's Tertiary Enhancement Programme)

The sector-owned national programme of co-ordinated thematic activity across a cycle of four years. STEP will enable Scotland's colleges and universities to work together to deliver innovation, improvement and enhancement of learning, teaching student experience and staff development across tertiary provision. STEP is jointly managed by QAA and CDN on behalf of colleges and universities

TQEF (Scotland's Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework)

From AY 2024-25 the quality assurance and enhancement framework for Scotland's colleges and universities. It comprises a shared set of principles, delivery mechanisms, and outputs that can be applied to the different contexts of our colleges and universities to give assurance on and enhancement of academic standards and the quality of the student experience, and ensure accountability for public investment in learning and teaching.

TQER (Tertiary Quality Enhancement Review)

The peer-led and enhancement focused external review methodology for colleges and universities. Managed by QAA, it is one of the key delivery mechanisms of the TQEF and ensures there is independent, robust assurance about quality and about enhancement of quality in Scotland's colleges and universities.

TQSG (Tertiary Quality Steering Group)

The TQSG provides advice and guidance to the SFC on the co-creation of a tertiary approach to quality assurance and enhancement in Scotland. The TQSG is made up of leaders and practitioners from Scotland's colleges and universities alongside SFC's TQEF delivery agency partners.