A Tertiary Quality Framework: working parameters

Purpose

1. This paper sets out some of the key parameters for SFC’s Review recommendation around quality arrangements and the proposed development of a Tertiary Quality Framework for Scotland. It outlines a strategic commitment to key areas and strengths of our current arrangements in Scotland that we wish to maintain and incorporate into the new approach. It also broadly outlines the parameters we wish to strengthen or build into the new approach.

Overview

2. To secure enhancement of outcomes for learners, increase the responsiveness of the system, to better recognise and support the importance of seamless pathways from school to college and universities, and to better recognise and develop the work based learning system, SFC propose developing a single framework for quality for colleges and universities. The Framework will work to uphold academic standards and secure enhancement of the learning experience of students in all parts of the tertiary education system. This will support the sectors in maintaining and improving the quality of tertiary provision in the interests of students. This will also support Scotland in maintaining the reputation of its tertiary education sector and so attracting high-calibre students to study in Scotland. This in turn encourages graduates to stay in Scotland and contribute to the economy, society and culture of Scotland.

3. SFC is seeking to enhance its use of data and evidence for supporting improvement and accountability across the tertiary education and research system. Strong data and evidence will ensure public confidence in the sectors. It will enable SFC to better support Scottish Government with evidence-based guidance and expertise, enhancing our collective ability to influence.

4. A key ministerial priority is the development of a National Impact Framework (NIF). It will be strategically important that the approach to quality is a foundational element of the NIF and for this reason SFC propose a Quality Framework as one of four pillars to the NIF. The intention is to enable us to:

   • Articulate the impact of investment in tertiary education and research to better demonstrate accountability for public expenditure as well as the role institutions play in economic, social growth and inward investment.

   • Set out the outcomes we expect colleges and HEIs to deliver, for students and Scotland, aligned with the National Performance Framework.
• Demonstrate alignment of learning and teaching with the objectives of National Strategy for Economic Transformation (NSET) to enable colleges and universities to be major drivers of strategic economic transformation.

• Enhance the focus on the role colleges and universities play in tackling social inequality, supporting employers and driving economic innovation, providing the underpinning research and knowledge base to take forward our ambitions for a new green economy and acting as a beacon to enhance our international reputation.

Parameters for a tertiary approach to quality assurance and enhancement

5. We recognise the elements of the current approaches that are strengths and absolutely want to retain these, while also looking at opportunities for aligning strengths across a tertiary landscape. We are undertaking a mapping exercise to understand the similarities and differences to inform this work.

6. Student partnership will continue to be fundamental to our approach.

7. An enhancement-led approach. Currently this is defined as ‘taking deliberate steps to bring about improvement in the effectiveness of the learning experiences of students’. Enhancement is effected at all levels within institutions. One of the purposes of this quality framework will be to support a strategic approach to enhancement within institutions and at sector level that builds on the work happening within institutions

8. Supporting standards and awarding processes. We are not considering amending standards (HEIs), which continue to be a matter for autonomous institutions. Our intention is to continue to support academic standards and to use current approaches and mechanisms for doing this.

9. Colleges manage multiple awarding body relationships with skill and professionalism. We will seek discussion with the SQA as a principal awarding body for college qualifications to identify where we believe the structures and processes within colleges can support closer alignment and can provide a mature basis for supporting awarding decisions. We are keen to identify what opportunities exist with colleges. We are not, at this stage, seeking similar discussion with other awarding bodies active in the college sector.

10. Diversity. We recognise that higher and further education is delivered in both universities and colleges and the new Framework will therefore reflect this diversity with elements that may apply to one type of provision only, wherever that is taught. There is already diversity of mission and institution type across the HEI sector served by a single approach and across the college sector served by a single approach. A single Framework does not mean we think that one size fits all.
11. **Reference points.** We are committed to ensure the new Framework meets European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) criteria, as this is vital to ensure Scotland’s reputation for high quality higher education is maintained and enhanced.

12. We recognise the strengths of the UK Quality Code. We may need to fine-tune the Code, to ensure it can encompass all aspects of the tertiary sector. This will be done in discussion with the other devolved nations to ensure that we maintain comparability through a common set of guidelines.

13. **Subject Benchmarks** – these describe the academic standard expected for specific subject areas. They are written by subject specialists and institutions are expected to use them as reference points in designing, delivering and reviewing provision. They do not prescribe set approaches or curriculum, but they do set out what learners are reasonably expected to have achieved or understand by the end of their programme.

14. **Peer review** (external staff from other institutions to join review teams). This will continue to be a central feature of our approach to quality.

15. **Cyclical review.** We will have a quality cycle which will include cyclical and periodic review points. Our intention is to look at clarifying and streamlining how we develop assurance of quality and quality enhancement across that cycle, clarifying the relationship between annual and longer term elements.

16. **Qualification Frameworks.** We intend the new Framework to continue to support and work with the SCQF and the Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland (FQHEIS) (which is also mapped to the SCQF). The new Framework will need to continue to support public confidence in standards through an accessible understanding of what qualifications represent in terms of achievement. Qualification frameworks will need to continue to provide institutions and external assessors and examiners with the reference points for setting standards and outcomes.

17. **Engagement style.** The style or approach to review will be appropriate to a professional learning, teaching and quality tertiary environment. It will support, and challenge, institutions based on their own institution-led, critical self-evaluation processes and outputs.

18. **Developments across the UK.** We are not intending to follow the OfS’s approach to quality and standards. We are working with partners across the UK to look at how we can align and work together as our respective work develops. We also want to look at how existing high quality data can enhance and demonstrate impact alongside periodic reviews against the UK Quality Code.
19. **Quality partners.** We intend to work with partner quality Agencies, QAA and Education Scotland, to develop the new method and are currently working with them to develop the method for the interim period.