



SELF-EVALUATION IN THE TERTIARY SECTOR

CO-CREATING A NEW APPROACH

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FOREWORD

The Scottish Funding Council's *Coherence and Sustainability: A Review of Tertiary Education and Research*, and the Scottish Government's response, highlight the potential of an integrated quality assurance and enhancement framework for learners and for the tertiary system in Scotland. They also recognise the need to acknowledge the *'distinct contribution as well as the interconnectedness of each part of the tertiary education system'* and to consult with stakeholders in seeking to develop this potential.

This report is the outcome of the first stage of work on developing an integrated framework and focuses on one of the processes at the core of any effective quality enhancement framework: institution-led self-evaluation. At individual, departmental, institutional, and sectoral level embedding regular, honest, open, and constructive self-evaluation enables us to ensure responsiveness to students, enhance practice, and support assurance of provision and investment. It enables our focus on more successful outcomes for learners. For this reason, our consideration of an integrated framework has started with an exploration of the processes, outputs and outcomes of current self-evaluation practice and

proposes how we can build on good practice as we move into a more integrated tertiary approach.

We have taken a co-creative approach to the work supporting this report – with colleges and universities and with our sector partner agencies. Reviewers from Education Scotland, QAA Scotland, sparqs and SFC reviewed self-evaluation documentation from a range of higher education institutions and colleges to arrive at a detailed understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the current reporting systems and of what good practice in self-evaluation looks like. These partners were joined by colleagues from HEI and college quality teams in a series of service design workshops. Our colleagues from the CDN Research and Enhancement Centre have then drawn these strands together into a set of key themes in self-evaluation together with recommendations and observations for us to consider with our partners in the coming months. From this it will be seen that this report represents a truly collaborative effort.

The recommendations and observations have at their heart a common thread of continuing to involve the community of practitioners across higher education institutions, colleges, and sector agencies in sharing, reflecting on and further enhancing their practice in order to improve student outcomes. We believe that this report provides a strong foundation for that work.

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BACKGROUND

Robust critical self-analysis and reflection (self-evaluation) is a key underpinning principle of the approach to quality assurance and enhancement in Scottish colleges and higher education institutions (HEIs), providing part of the core evidence base for institutional review and other quality processes. Robust and rigorous self-evaluation not only allows for a more proportionate and risk-based approach to quality assurance but can, in itself, drive quality enhancement.

This partnership project between QAA Scotland, Education Scotland, sparqs and the CDN Research and Enhancement Centre on behalf of the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) sought to examine the impact on delivery to learners of the current self-evaluation approaches in colleges and HEIs. It focussed on **an examination of good practice, a detailed review of a range of institutional self-evaluation documents and a service design process with quality practitioners**. Based on these approaches the report considers what enhancements would serve

to improve student outcomes in a new quality framework for tertiary education in Scotland, and what processes would be required to support them.

The findings, recommendations and observations will support the ambition of the SFC Coherence and Sustainability Review for the development of a single quality framework for tertiary provision in Scotland. This project is the initial stage in the development process of this new quality framework and will be used to inform the next steps and evaluation of a new approach in 2022-23 and beyond.

Through the research a vision has been developed for a high-level approach to self-evaluation within the tertiary sector based on **an evidence review and service design process**. From the initial project specification, three key objectives have emerged as the work has progressed:

- To provide insight to enable tertiary institutions to **undertake effective self-evaluation and enhancement**.
- To enable tertiary institutions to **report effectively on their progress** to the Scottish Funding Council and other sector agencies in support of their outcome agreement targets and the wider quality framework.
- To enable the Scottish Funding Council to **assess and report on the effectiveness and impact** of the tertiary sector.

This report is based on three packages of work:

- A review of the **effectiveness of the current reporting processes** based on examination of self-evaluation documents.
- The identification of **good practice themes in self-evaluation**, also based on the examination of the self-evaluation documents.
- A **service design process** that engaged quality colleagues from colleges and HEIs in co-creating a model approach to self-evaluation.

APPROACH AND DEFINITIONS

Self-evaluation is the process of systematically observing, analysing, and improving one's own actions or results. Self-evaluation takes place at an individual level, but also at a department or organisational level. This is sometimes called 'reflective practice' and forms the core of a 'continuous enhancement' approach to the work of an individual or organisation. There is, perhaps, a degree to which it could be argued that if we are all reflective practitioners, effective self-evaluation practice will flow naturally.

The current institutional review processes in higher education institutions (HEIs) and colleges are rooted in the principle of self-evaluation. Processes including 'institution-led review' in HEIs and the 'How Good is Our College' process in colleges require institutions to evaluate their own performance against specific criteria. This report draws on the evidence review which considered how the sample institutions approached self-evaluation as a part of their institutional practice, including the outcome agreement process.

The principle of self-evaluation is well-established within tertiary education in Scotland. The research team reviewed the evidence from the desk-based analysis and highlighted a range of key trends and approaches that were then combined with the outputs from the service design process to provide a range of recommendations and observations that are outlined in this report as a starting point for the new tertiary quality framework to build on.

In interpreting the outcomes of this research the report addresses the need for an integrated approach to self-evaluation that will be **flexible** (to encompass a variety of institutions), based on **good practice** (as sourced from quality practitioners and review of evidence) and as far as possible **co-created** (making use of the energy and enthusiasm of practitioners).

It should be stressed that the proposals in this report are the outcome of a collaborative process and are not those of a single agency or institution.

In this report we have adopted the definition of 'enhancement' from the Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) Handbook: "The Scottish sector has defined **enhancement** as taking deliberate steps to bring about **improvement** in the effectiveness of the learning experiences of students." In general the processes carried out by institutions are referred to as 'enhancement' and the actions, targets and outcomes that form part of these processes are referred to as 'improvement' activities and measures.

The report uses the terms 'learner' and 'student'. Typically, colleagues in colleges tend to refer to 'learners' and colleagues in universities to 'students'. This report uses both terms at various points and no distinction should be inferred between the two, which should be interpreted simply as alternative terms to refer to an individual studying at a tertiary institution.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND OBSERVATIONS

This report describes an approach to self-evaluation derived from the evidence review and service design process and the key themes and principles emerging from them. The following recommendations were developed based on the input of all participants to reinforce the overall findings and enable SFC to fit the next stage of work around self-evaluation into the overall context of the tertiary quality framework development. It should be stressed that these recommendations have been developed from the detailed work carried out across the three different research activities detailed in this report and are not the recommendations of any specific agency or individual.

From the evidence review and service design process, it is clear that institutions are already well advanced in the use of their own improvement measures and that these are embedded in the various self-evaluation documents and reporting processes. For SFC to gain assurance that self-evaluation practice is leading to improvement, however, **a core set of agreed measures** that can be used in reporting across the tertiary sector would be helpful. Ideally, these measures would be used at all levels of the system, allowing a common set of indicators to be used for internal institutional performance management, institutional review, and sector level reporting.

In terms of establishing **a model approach to self-evaluation practice**, which lies at the core of this report, the development of a tertiary sector self-evaluation toolkit is proposed.

The starting point for the toolkit, as identified through the service design process, would be to establish a fundamental connection between an institution's day-to-day self-evaluation activity and its formal self-evaluation reporting to the sector agencies. By capturing self-evaluation activity as it occurs rather than retrospectively, reporting could be made more efficient from the institution's point of view as well as more consistent from a national point of view.

➤ RECOMMENDATION 1

Using a co-creation approach establish a core set of standard measures for identifying improvements in outcomes for learners across the tertiary sector.

➤ RECOMMENDATION 2

Using a co-creation approach with a community of practice (see Recommendation 3), develop a self-evaluation toolkit and reporting process that reflects best practice and ensures consistency between institutions as well as enabling national reporting and data sharing as part of the wider tertiary quality framework and external review.

The service design process generated enthusiasm among quality practitioners in tertiary institutions and sector agencies to continue to work together in a community of practice to **co-create the more integrated approach to self-evaluation** envisaged in the first two recommendations. It is clear that there is a strong consensus among the practitioners involved in the process when it comes to the key elements of effective self-evaluation and the need for a common set of performance measures and the development of a toolkit. There is considerable potential to harness this enthusiasm from the community of practitioners in the next stage of work.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Establish a community of practice to support a co-creation approach to institutional self-evaluation that includes quality teams from institutions, student representatives, sector agencies and SFC. Use the findings of the present report as the starting point for the community of practice to address recommendations 1 and 2.

The final recommendation comes from the service design process, where participants highlighted the potential value of **effective data sharing** within the sector that would be facilitated by an agreement on standard improvement measures (see Recommendation 1) that allows for institutional comparisons and the sharing of best practice.

RECOMMENDATION 4

As part of the wider tertiary quality framework development process, consideration should be given as a future ambition to the creation of a national data platform to collate and share outputs from the self-evaluation process with stakeholders including the community of practice as a resource to support continuous enhancement.

The following observations support consideration of the recommendations and the development of self-evaluation practice within the tertiary quality framework. As an overall theme, they identify that key aspects of the work carried out to produce the present report could be built on to support future collaboration, research, and delivery.

The first observation arises from the consideration of best practice through the evidence review and promotes the value of **sharing systems and platforms** that have been developed by individual institutions to avoid duplication of effort and assist with populating the toolkit (Recommendation 2).

OBSERVATION 1

Some institutions have created supporting processes for all or some of their self-evaluation practice, including tools, templates, and online systems as well as specific systems for student engagement. Consideration could be given to reviewing these to ensure that the best elements from them are utilised across the sector as the tertiary quality framework develops.



The second observation reflects on the evidence review itself, which looked at a large and varied group of reports and other self-evaluation documents from a disparate range of institutions. In the production of this report extensive use has been made of this evidence base but it is noted that there is still much to be gleaned from the comments of the experienced reviewers from a range of agencies and therefore it is suggested that **the evidence base should continue to be made available to SFC colleagues** as they develop the tertiary quality framework. It is also noted that the evidence base is subject to the permissions granted by the participating institutions and may not be shared more widely.

OBSERVATION 2

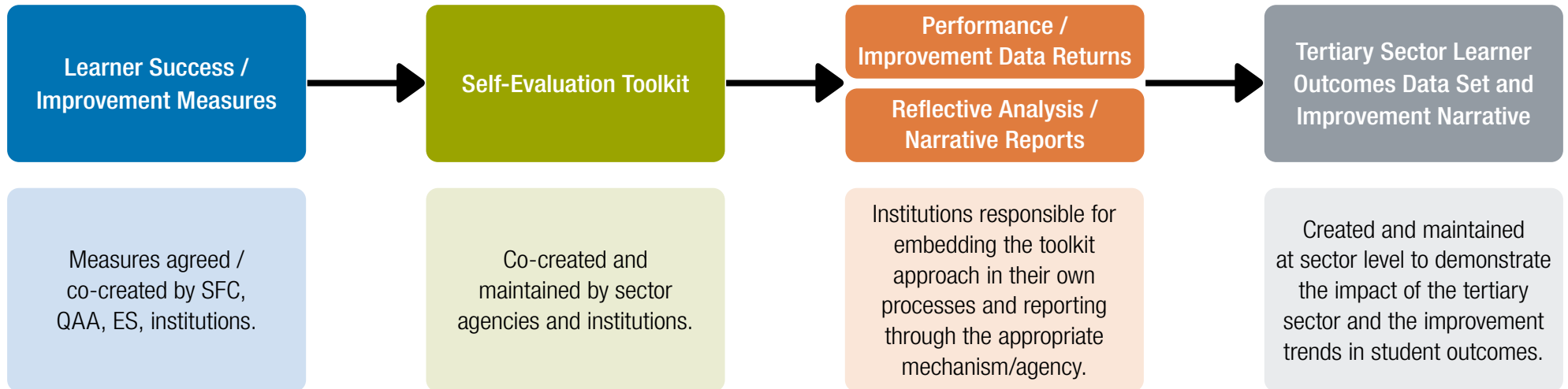
The evidence review carried out as part of the production of the report contains considerable detail that could be useful in developing guidance for institutional reporting as part of a tertiary quality framework. Consideration should be given to further analysis of the original reviewer comments to support this development.

Finally, it is observed that the stakeholder group involved in the service design process, while it contained colleagues with roles in quality and learning and teaching from a range of institutions and agencies, could be **further expanded** as the proposed community of practice is set up. This report demonstrates the potential of a co-design approach and if, as recommended, this is continued care should be taken to ensure that all key stakeholders are represented to support buy-in for the approach outlined in the toolkit.

OBSERVATION 3

We recognise the momentum and sectoral buy-in generated through this project on institution-led self-evaluation. We could build on this to look further at how we make best use of reporting on the outcomes of self-evaluation. At the same time, in setting up the community of practice, the stakeholder group could be widened to enhance engagement.

A MODEL TERTIARY SELF-EVALUATION PROCESS



The graphic above provides a representation of what the simple approach to self-evaluation and reporting might look like, based on the outcomes from the evidence review and service design process. In proposing this model it is acknowledged that there will be many complexities that have not been specifically addressed and which will need to be explored in the next phase of development.

The fundamental vision of a simple approach remains: that self-evaluation practice will be most effective when embedded in the organisational culture and linked to a simple reporting structure that enables regular review of progress.

The remainder of this report provides reflections on the underlying elements of this model process as they emerged from the service design process and the evidence review.

OUTPUTS FROM THE SERVICE DESIGN PROCESS AND EVIDENCE REVIEW

The evidence review considered self-evaluation documentation from a range of colleges and HEIs and looked at the effectiveness of the reporting and the evidence provided within the documents of good practice in self-evaluation.

The service design process, supported by the Service Design Academy at Dundee and Angus College, brought together quality practitioners from HEIs and colleges, as well as colleagues from Education Scotland, QAA Scotland, sparqs and the Scottish Funding Council. Through a series of workshops using service design approaches working groups were formed around the key best practice themes emerging from the evidence review, with the overall challenge of exploring how a self-evaluation process might be co-created within a new tertiary quality framework.

The outputs from these processes have been used to generate the recommendations and observations and the model tertiary self-evaluation process described above. This section and those

following describe some of the underlying outputs from the service design process and the evidence review that can be used in developing the different elements of the model process.

The key considerations emerging from the service design process were that the creation of a self-evaluation process within the new tertiary quality framework should include the following elements:

- A digital self-evaluation toolkit co-created by all stakeholders to **enable a fundamental connection between self-evaluation activity and reporting**.
- Increased stakeholder engagement by **co-creating reporting activities** to reduce burden and increase positive impact.
- A **continuous, cyclical process of self-evaluation** that links local enhancement processes directly to national reporting requirements.

- A **timely and meaningful self-evaluation approach that engages students** throughout.
- Information and data sharing, which is integral to the tertiary quality framework, to enable a move towards **open and transparent reporting**.
- **Community ownership** – empowering stakeholders and enabling autonomy on how processes are reviewed and developed via a community of practice.
- The creation of a **national data platform to share, showcase, and distribute best practice**.
- Formation of a single **tertiary community of practice** which would be actively encouraged to participate in service design and co-design future self-evaluation approaches.

The service design process broke down the consideration of these elements into four areas. These four areas mapped closely to the key best practice themes emerging from the evidence review. The combined outputs from both these elements of the research are presented here as a possible structure for the proposed self-evaluation toolkit.

Direction & Guidance (Formal self-evaluation approaches).

We have seen that institutions have created **formal approaches** to their self-evaluation practice, including toolkits, templates, and online systems, as well as specific guidance for student engagement. These should be reviewed in detail to ensure that the best elements from them are utilised in developing a sector-wide approach.

- Guidance should provide a common definition and explanation of key terms and concepts (such as 'learner at the centre').
- Self-evaluation and reflection should be embedded throughout the reporting cycle.
- The skills relating to self-evaluation practice should be a key part of continuing professional development at institutional level.

Process (Mechanisms to aid self-evaluation).

A range of mechanisms to support self-evaluation, from surveys and focus groups to course committee and curriculum groups have been identified. What makes these methods effective is the closing of the 'feedback loop' to ensure that the evidence collected is used to drive change and enhancement, and this **continuous cycle of change** has been clearly identified as a core element of an effective approach to self-evaluation.

- Self-evaluation should be a cyclical, continuous process, and the approach to supporting it should reflect this.
- Standard self-evaluation tools and templates should be available at institutional level and reflect sector-wide approaches.
- Self-evaluation processes should be owned by staff and students and feed directly into enhancement at all levels.

Impact (Analysis and reporting).

We have identified the challenges of combining qualitative and quantitative evidence in an effective report and the way in which high level messages are fed by an honest and open approach to self-evaluation at all levels. We have also identified the need to **establish a common set of improvement measures** (see below) and a **common system for collating and sharing the outputs** from institutional reporting.

- Self-evaluation reporting should go beyond being a summary of activity and comprise an analysis of impact against an agreed set of sector-wide success measures.
- The outputs from self-evaluation should feed explicitly into institutional forward planning and specific enhancement plans.
- Demonstrating evidence of impact should be the central focus and purpose of reporting.



- Criteria for reporting should contain the following elements to ensure that impact can be demonstrated:
 - What? – what actions were taken and what were the outcomes (include unexpected outcomes and what didn't work). Include narrative to explain and support claims.
 - Why? – reasons for undertaking these actions.
 - So what? – to what extent do the outcomes meet the performance measures?
 - How do you know? – what is the evidence base?
 - What next? – what is still to be done, how will this be achieved (what actions), what are the expected outcomes, what will the impact be, how will you know when this has been achieved, when will this be achieved, who is responsible for the actions?

Culture (Co-production and continuous enhancement).

A range of good practice approaches to co-production involving staff and students have been considered. Good practice has also been identified in **linking self-evaluation to enhancement actions** and a genuine **focus on student voice**, where that voice is heard rather than simply recorded. Overall, the theme of continuous enhancement as an institutional culture involving all staff and students has been a consistent message from both the evidence review and the service design process.

- The learner voice should be central to effective self-evaluation reporting.
- Self-evaluation should be embedded in the institution's culture as a continuous, cyclical process of reflection and review that feeds not only into regular quality reporting but also the day-to-day process of enhancement and institutional planning and performance management.



DEVELOPING THE TOOLKIT

In terms of establishing a model self-evaluation process, which lies at the core of this report, the development of a tertiary sector self-evaluation toolkit is proposed.

The starting point for the toolkit, as identified through the service design process, could be to establish **a fundamental connection between self-evaluation activity and self-evaluation reporting** and to **capture activity as it occurs** rather than retrospectively.

The toolkit could be organised along the lines of the four areas emerging from the research process:

Direction & Guidance; Process; Impact; Culture

The proposed toolkit could contain the following:

- A set of high-level principles for self-evaluation that can be incorporated into the toolkit and form the basis of a reporting structure.
- A generic set of tools and approaches to support a consistent approach to self-evaluation in tertiary institutions.

- A common format for recording the outputs of self-evaluation that supports the reporting requirements of sector agencies and SFC.
- A common process to support rapid-cycle review/change and longer-term reflection/planning as well as institutional reporting.

The toolkit should have the following characteristics:

- Be flexible, accessible, and easy to use for staff and students in all parts of an institution and in all types of institution.
- Make use of existing tools and guidance provided by the sector agencies and SFC.
- Draw on the best practice identified in the evidence review and service design process underpinning this report.
- Use a common language and vocabulary with clear explanation of key terms.
- Include formal guidance issued by SFC for institutional reporting (based in part on the key points identified in this report) and a method for linking that guidance to an embedded approach to self-evaluation within the institution.

➤ RECOMMENDATION 2

Using a co-creation approach with a community of practice (see Recommendation 3), develop a self-evaluation toolkit and reporting process that reflects best practice and ensures consistency between institutions as well as enabling national reporting and data sharing as part of the wider tertiary quality framework and external review.

STANDARD MEASURES AND REPORTING

In developing the high-level vision for a self-evaluation approach, we have reflected a key theme emerging from the research: that self-evaluation needs to be embedded in institutional and sectoral practice, and as such cannot be seen in isolation from day-to-day institutional planning, course development and review.

The evidence review and service design process carried out in creating this report suggest that there is scope to develop an integrated approach to self-evaluation that links individual practice within institutions with effective reporting at sector level. In the outcomes from the service design process we describe this as *a continuous, cyclical process of self-evaluation that links local enhancement processes directly to national reporting requirements*. This approach would be beneficial to students in terms of promoting a clear and ongoing focus on outcomes. These outcomes can be monitored in terms of short- and long-term impact, from immediate skill and knowledge building to career planning and, ultimately, positive destinations. While it will no doubt be the case that academic staff maintain an awareness of student progress throughout the course, an integrated approach to self-evaluation allows that progress to be evidenced on a continuous basis and adjustments to provision made accordingly. This also illustrates

how the integrated approach is beneficial to staff, by allowing them to manage their courses effectively, utilise the evidence gathered for continuing professional development, and demonstrate the impact of their work.

It should be noted that in highlighting the potential of an integrated approach to self-evaluation that runs from individual course level to national reporting, the diversity of institutions across the tertiary sector, encompassing both universities and colleges as well as small specialist higher education institutions and those that combine college and university provision in one institution, will need to be accommodated in **a flexible approach**. It is for this reason that the recommendations and observations in this report have a focus on co-creation as an approach to developing the self-evaluation approach and toolkit, as this will ensure that the diversity of institutions and institutional practice is recognised and incorporated, and that buy-in from the different types of institution is obtained.



In order to develop such an approach it will be essential to establish **clarity on the key performance indicators** that will establish what, at sector level, constitutes 'improvement' in terms of outcomes for learners and how this will be measured. This is outside the scope of the current research and should be considered as a first step in the trialling of any tertiary quality approach.

From the analysis carried out in creating the report it is clear that institutions are already well advanced in the use of their own improvement measures and that these are embedded in the various self-evaluation documents and reporting processes. What is needed is a **common agreement on a core set of measures** that can be used in reporting across the tertiary sector. Ideally, these measures could be used at all levels of the system, allowing a common set of indicators to be used for internal institutional performance management, institutional review, and sector level reporting. Such an approach was clearly envisaged by the service design group on impact when they proposed **the creation of a national data platform to share, showcase, and distribute best practice.**

While maintaining the focus on self-evaluation, then, the vision for the approach to this has been placed within the wider vision of a tertiary quality approach in terms of understanding what improvement looks like and, as far as possible, being able to share institutional data and practice for the benefit of the whole sector. From our consideration of these issues the first and fourth recommendations of this report were developed.

➤ RECOMMENDATION 1

Using a co-creation approach establish a core set of standard measures for identifying improvements in outcomes for learners across the tertiary sector.

➤ RECOMMENDATION 4

As part of the wider tertiary quality framework development process, consideration should be given as a future ambition to the creation of a national data platform to collate and share outputs from the self-evaluation process with stakeholders including the community of practice as a resource to support continuous enhancement.

CO-CREATION AS AN APPROACH

As noted above, the service design process generated enthusiasm among the participating quality practitioners from tertiary institutions and sector agencies to continue to work together in a community of practice to co-create elements of the new approach. The outputs from that process, as described above, align closely with the outputs from the evidence review. It is clear that there is a strong consensus among the practitioners involved in the process when it comes to the key elements of effective self-evaluation and the need for a common set of performance measures and the development of a toolkit to support the embedding of self-evaluation in organisational culture in a way that will feed naturally into sector-level reporting.

With this in mind it is proposed that SFC takes advantage of the enthusiasm and commitment of the quality professionals involved in the service design and of their peers in other institutions by supporting the creation of a community of practice that can support the delivery of the recommendations in this report and underpin a consistent approach to self-evaluation as the tertiary quality framework is developed. This approach has been built into the first two recommendations in this report and leads to the third and underpinning recommendation.

➤ RECOMMENDATION 3

Establish a community of practice to support a co-creation approach to institutional self-evaluation that includes quality teams from institutions, student representatives, sector agencies and SFC. Use the findings of the present report as the starting point for the community of practice to address recommendations 1 and 2.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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- Colleagues from SFC for inviting us to undertake this work and for their support, forbearance, and creative encouragement.
- Colleagues from Education Scotland, QAA Scotland, SFC and sparqs for their support with the preparation of the research brief, carrying out the evidence review and participating in the service design workshops.
- Colleagues from quality teams in HEIs and colleges who participated in the service design workshops.
- The institutions who allowed their documents to be used in the evidence review.
- The team at the Service Design Academy for facilitating and reporting on the service design workshops.
- Members of the CDN Research and Enhancement Centre's research network for their support with the evidence review analysis.





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