
Tertiary Quality Steering Group (TQSG): update bulletin

The tenth meeting of the TQSG was held on **21 May 2025**

SFC's developing use of data and analytics

We started our meeting with two presentations. The first from Naomi Jeffery, SFC's Head of Analytics, on the developing use of data in all aspects of SFC's work. SFC is a data-rich organisation and Naomi updated TQSG members of developments to ensure that SFC optimises the use of this valuable resource to make informed choices that secure better outcomes for learners. SFC was also exploring opportunities to improve reporting processes, and provide greater and more effective access to robust data and analysis for institutions and the wider public, including the enhanced use of data dashboards. SFC would engage institutions and key stakeholders to help shape this work.

Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework (TQEF) evaluation overview

For our second presentation we were joined by Ffion Heledd and Claire Mills from SFC's evaluation team. Ffion and Claire have been working with the SFC's Learning and Quality team using a *Theory of Change* approach to design the evaluation of the effectiveness and impact of the TQEF. The evaluation would cover the seven years of the TQEF cycle, capturing learning year-on-year, including the discrete evaluations of TQER and STEP carried out by our partner delivery agencies. SFC confirmed that a strong student voice had been central to evaluation thinking, and student outcomes mapping had been undertaken as part of early theory of change workshops. SFC would come back to TQSG in the Autumn for guidance in taking forward this work, including seeking their views on governance structures and the commissioning of external expertise.

SFC changing relationship with Education Scotland

TQSG members were updated on changes to SFC's engagement with Education Scotland. The SFC executive noted its gratitude to Education Scotland for its support in the first year of delivery of TQEF. In particular, SFC appreciates Education Scotland's support, through HM Inspectors of Education, in the development and early implementation of the TQEF. Education Scotland's review of the first set of Self-Evaluation and Action Plans (SEAPs)

ensured that actions from the previous methodology were captured and identified, and the exercise benefited greatly from Education Scotland's significant knowledge of the sector.

Commissioning QAA to undertake external review of colleges represents a fundamental change in the basis of SFC's engagement with Education Scotland and the requirements we have of the current organisation. It is for this reason that we will no longer be commissioning Education Scotland to support the delivery of the TQEF. This will apply from AY 2025-26 onwards. SFC may, in future, draw on the expertise of HM Inspectors to support specific sector needs, with their agreement.

SFC has made these changes in the context of a continuing, challenging financial environment and has considered a number of factors including: securing best value for public investment; the ongoing requirements of the TQEF; and the goal of developing a partnership focused approach to delivery amongst the agencies whilst eliminating duplication and reducing burden on institutions.

In making this change SFC is maintaining its commitment to and investment in the TQEF. Funding for the approach is being maintained whilst it is redirected to support the changing roles of the four partner agencies. This will ensure colleges continue to be supported throughout and beyond the transition. When the new independent inspectorate is established, we will seek to ensure that our respective activities are aligned.

TQSG members welcomed this clarification, and noted their thanks for the contribution, Education Scotland has made to the successful implementation of the Framework.

SFC Guidance on Quality

The substantive items on our agenda were three papers refreshing key aspects of SFC's Guidance on Quality for colleges and universities for the coming academic year. In preparing the Guidance SFC has focused on simplification and clarification rather than introducing any material changes in our approach, recognising the need for certainty and consistency as institutions align their own quality arrangements with TQEF. For this reason, we have only proposed a small number of necessary revisions to the main Guidance document, including an update to the roles and responsibilities of SFC's delivery partners, and an update on progress with the Scottish Governments post-16 education reform programme. We anticipate publishing the refreshed Guidance on Quality during June.

Refreshed guidance on Self Evaluation and Action Plans (SEAPs)

Colleges and universities submitted their first SEAPs for AY2024-25. SFC committed to reviewing the SEAP process after the first year. In doing this we have used a range of mechanisms – including feedback from focus groups, a survey, sector forums and institutional meetings – to better understand the experience of institutions and our delivery partners and identify improvements. TQSG members were asked to reflect on key emerging

themes from SFC's analysis of this feedback, and in our discussions the following areas for clarification were identified:

- A clearer explanation of the scope of provision to be covered in the SEAP to avoid ambiguity.
- Opting to retain the recommended 5,000-word limit, but with some flexibility around this to respond to the particular context and challenges of individual institutions.
- Retaining the current submission date to give institutions further opportunity to align their internal processes, while ensuring that there is sufficient time for analysis and feedback by SFC and its partners agencies.
- A simplification of the structure of the guidance for enhanced clarity and accessibility.
- A clearer explanation of what outcomes should be included in SEAPs, noting that institutions are only required to respond to the prompts where they correspond with their own particular strengths or challenges.
- Additional guidance in the action plan template, highlighting that actions can be short, medium or longer term, in addition to the existing guidance encouraging institutions to ensure that actions are specific, with clear targets and timelines, to better understand year-on-year progress.

Tertiary Quality Enhancement Review (TQER) data analysis report

In November SFC published a memo providing details of the SFC data analysis reports that QAA will share with review teams and institutions as part of the evidence base to inform Tertiary Quality Enhancement Reviews (TQER). The memo was updated and tabled for discussion at the TQSG's meeting in March following the completion of the first two reports for the initial TQERs. At that meeting, members called for further consultation with the sector to review the contents of the memo to identify areas for further clarification.

After further consultation, including engagements with university planners, an updated draft was considered at the meeting, with additional context and clarifications to support institutions better understand the role of the report in the TQER process. In their discussion TQSG members called for the inclusion of detailed data specification to ensure an understanding of the data that is consistent and comparable. SFC noted that the reports are designed to reflect the specific context of each institution, enabling TQER reviewing teams to develop a better understanding of the college or university under review. In this context, a technical specification would not be appropriate.

Discussions with the sector to finalise this aspect of the Guidance are ongoing. It is our intention to include the updated memo as an annex to SFC's refreshed Guidance on Quality.

Tertiary Quality Steering Group (TQSG) beyond implementation

TQSG was established in February 2023 to provide advice and guidance to SFC on the co-creation of a tertiary approach to quality assurance and enhancement, a process that culminated in the creation of Scotland's Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework (TQEF). TQSG members later agreed to extend the life of the group to support the implementation of TQEF during AY2025-26, the first year of the new cycle.

With the TQEF now established and as we enter year 2 of the review cycle, members were asked to consider proposals for a revised membership profile and the optimal level of engagement now required as we move into 'steady state'. The development of TQEF required a membership that supported sector confidence in the new Framework, however, the nature of the advice required by SFC will now require a greater operational and planning focus. Members were also asked to consider options for ensuring a strong student voice in the ongoing oversight of the TQEF. In their discussion members agreed that we should continue to ensure representation from members of key sector forums, and that this should include established student forums. We should also recognise those individuals whose role it is to represent and articulate the views of their colleagues, such as the chairs of quality forums.

Once we have established the intentions of current members, we will engage with the relevant sector forums on a refreshed membership profile, ensuring that the group reflects the diversity of the tertiary sector. We anticipate that TQSG will meet with a refreshed membership in the Autumn. The [TQSG remit](#) was last reviewed September 2024 and we agreed that it remains relevant and fit for purpose.

The next meeting of the TQSG will be held in **Autumn 2025**