

Quality assurance and enhancement update

Purpose

1. This paper updates the Committee on the work of QAA Scotland and Education Scotland (ES) to support institutions during the Covid-19 pandemic, and on steps they have taken to ensure continuity of their core functions during the crisis.

Background

2. SFC has a statutory responsibility to ensure the quality of further and higher education provision in Scottish colleges and universities.
3. In the college sector ES delivers the HGIOC (How Good is Our College?) quality framework¹, and a related set of College Quality Arrangements, jointly developed by SFC and ES.
4. In the university sector we do this through the Quality Enhancement Framework², (QEF) Scotland's distinct enhancement-led approach to quality assurance, with a focus on continuous improvement, partnership working, and student engagement. QAA Scotland has responsibility for managing and delivering key components of the QEF.
5. For 2019-20 SFC provided funding of £993k to ES and £1,237k to QAA Scotland, to deliver their respective contributions to our quality frameworks in line with their individual Outcome Agreements commitments with SFC.

Education Scotland

6. ES is the Scottish Government agency with responsibility for supporting quality and improvement in Scotland's schools and colleges. The How Good is Our College (HGIOC) quality framework is designed to support and enable colleges to evaluate the quality of provision and services alongside reporting on progress in relation to SFC Outcome Agreements. HGIOC aligns with a suite of ES quality improvement frameworks to support external stakeholders to engage with colleges to review and enhance the quality of provision and services. The arrangements also enhance collaboration across colleges and

¹ [How good is our college?](#)

² <http://www.sfc.ac.uk/quality/quality-universities/quality-universities.aspx>

other educational providers to exemplify and share excellent practice across sectors

7. Each college uses the HGIOC to carry out a self-evaluation, resulting in an Evaluative Report and Enhancement Plan (EREP). The EREP is essentially an account of progress in responding to Outcome Agreement priorities and an evaluation of quality assurance measured against an agreed range of quality indicators.
8. **Annex A** updates the committee on Education Scotland’s support for institutions during the Covid-19 pandemics, and how they have refocused core support activities to ensure business continuity during the crisis. Gill Ritchie, HMI and Head of Scrutiny at Education Scotland will introduce the update and answer member’s questions.

QAA Scotland

9. QAA Scotland is part of the UK-wide Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, with devolved responsibility to develop and implement quality assurance and enhancement activities to support the needs of Scotland. QAA Scotland supports and guides our universities to manage the quality of the student learning experience, and delivers critical components of the QEF including:
 - Enhancement-led Institutional Reviews (ELIR)³, an evidence-based method of peer review, where staff and students from other institutions join a team of reviewers to assess the quality processes of each HEI. ELIR results in a judgement and a set of commendations and recommendations relating to the way the institution is securing academic standards and improving the student experience.
 - Enhancement Themes⁴: sector-wide initiatives to improve the learning experience of students. The Themes are topics that all Scottish HEIs focus on at the same time, with staff and students working together, sharing practice and generating new ideas to improve strategy, policy and practice in learning and teaching.
10. **Annex B** updates the Committee on QAA Scotland’s support for institutions during the Covid-19 pandemic, and outlines how they have ensured business as usual in taking forward its core activities during the crisis. Alastair Delaney,

³ <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/reviewing-higher-education-in-scotland/enhancement-led-institutional-review>

⁴ <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/quality-enhancement-framework/enhancement-themes>

QAA Director for Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland will introduce the update and answer member's questions.

Recommendation

11. The Committee is invited to note and comment upon these updates from Education Scotland and QAA Scotland on their work to support institutions during the Covid-19 pandemic and on steps they have taken to ensure continuity of their core functions during the crisis.

Publication

12. This paper will be published on the Council website following the meeting.

Further information

13. For further information contact: Derek Horsburgh, email: dhorsburghd@sfc.ac.uk (for university quality arrangements) or Keith Coyne, email: kcoyne@sfca.ac.uk, (for college quality arrangements).

Update to SFC Skills, Enhancement, Access and Learning Committee: 28 October, 2020

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to provide an update of Education Scotland's support for institutions during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Background

On 13 March 2020, before the closure of institutions, Education Scotland took the decision to postpone all scrutiny and professional learning and leadership activity to ensure that colleagues across the education system were able to focus on the immediate impact of closure of buildings. All our staff were advised that they should make arrangements to work from home from 19 March until further notice and on 20 March 2020, Education Scotland wrote to SFC offering support when and where needed.

Since colleges closed in March 2020, a significant amount of positive work has been undertaken by HM Inspectors of Education to help support continuity in learning. The starting point was a clear recognition of the considerable efforts colleges undertook to ensure that while buildings were closed, learning continued.

Education Scotland has changed how it is working to provide tailored support to colleges. This collective approach, drawing on the wide-ranging skills and expertise available from HM Inspectors, allows Education Scotland to respond flexibly and at pace to provide national advice and support. The primary focus of our support and recovery strategy has been to work closely with a range of partners to ensure that learners, college staff and leaders are supported to cope with the challenging circumstances in which we all found ourselves.

Our engagement with institutions has enabled HM Inspectors to provide an important conduit between colleges and SFC to gather intelligence locally in order to build a national picture.

In response to the Scottish Government's phased approach to recovery planning, the focus of the work of HM Inspectors will be on supporting the education system, including colleges, to plan and prepare for re-opening and continuity of delivery with physical distancing measures in place as it recovers from Covid-19.

Education Scotland, as Scotland's national improvement body for education, will provide professional advice to SFC on the approaches required to support colleges to recover through partnership with colleges, the Scottish Government and other stakeholders. These arrangements will take account of the significantly altered operating environment as a result of physical distancing measures, the on-going disruption to college activities, and transitional arrangements as colleges return to more familiar modes of operation.

Since March 2020, HM Inspectors have provided support to colleges in the following key areas:

Pausing of college scrutiny activity

In order to support colleges to address the challenges of dealing with closures and the move to an online or blended model of delivery, HM Inspectors paused all scrutiny activity from March 2020. This allowed colleges to focus on supporting learners and learning without the additional burden of preparing for progress monitoring visits by HM Inspectors.

The SFC/Education Scotland Outcome Agreement has been re-prioritised to include targets and deliverables that reflect current circumstances brought about by Covid - 19.

To ensure a continued and strengthened focus on learning and teaching approaches, particularly blended and online pedagogy, all college link HM Inspectors have undertaken intensive CLPL to equip them with a clear understanding of online and blended learning best practice approaches through action-led research. HM Inspectors have built on and strengthened existing collaboration with partner agencies such as CDN, sparqs, and GTCS to ensure best use of collective resources in supporting colleges through recovery.

Education Scotland has revised its Corporate Plan (see footnote) to ensure that all core activities are delivered within a new and much changed operating context. The revised plan identifies how Education Scotland will lead and support the education system during the recovery, with a key focus on supporting four key priorities: **system leadership, collaboration, education support and improvement, and professional learning.**

System leadership

HM Inspectors responded quickly in revising college quality arrangements to focus on helping colleges to recover, whilst maintaining a continued contribution to the implementation of SFC and the Scottish Government policy priorities for the quality of educational provision and services to support learning in colleges.

HM Inspectors through their regular and ongoing dialogue with practitioners and college leaders, will support colleges to reflect on the following areas.

Digital learning and teaching
Changes to the curriculum
Accessing services to support learning
Transitions in and out of college programmes

Through focussing on these key aspects of recovery, HM Inspectors will be able to gather information and evidence of recovery at a system level in a way which does not provide any additional burden on institutions. Through gathering this information it will help us support the system through being aware of what is

working well and where there are challenges facing institutions as they recover. To date, the revised approach to college quality arrangements has been well-received by the sector, having been developed through collaborative discussions held with the college Vice Principal Forum.

The new arrangements include increased engagement and a tailored programme of support activities for every college, commencing in October 2020.

A key role for HM Inspectors is to provide professional advice and this has continued throughout Covid -19. HM Inspectors continue to engage closely with policy colleagues, the FE & HE Ministerial Recovery Group, SFC, sector support agencies and other stakeholders to provide professional advice. To date HM Inspectors have provided advice on:

- Themes emerging from college scrutiny activity to March 2020
- College performance indicators
- CLPL requirements and delivery approaches
- Learner engagement
- College governance and training for new Board members throughout 2020/21
- Arrangements to support recovery and the role of HM Inspectors

HM Inspectors have also prepared analysis and reporting on college activities and performance, and contributed to on-going discussions as part of the SFC/ES Joint Working Group to share intelligence, plan for engagement, and review progress towards agreed outcomes.

HM Inspectors in recognising the need to promote and celebrate positive aspects of the response made by colleges to Covid-19, have captured a number of examples of highly effective practice and will disseminate and showcase these through national events hosted by CDN in late 2020. Further examples focussing specifically on approaches to learning, teaching and assessment, and learner retention will be gathered and published during the course of 2020/21. This will support practitioners to celebrate what is working well during the recovery year and promote system-wide learning to help colleges address common issues and challenges.

Collaboration

HM Inspectors have built on and strengthened existing collaboration with partner agencies such as CDN, sparqs, and GTCS to ensure best use of collective resources in supporting colleges through recovery.

HM Inspectors have recognised the need to understand how the learner experience has been impacted and changed by Covid-19, and in turn how colleges have responded to meet learner needs. We have increased engagement with *sparqs* and are working closely with colleagues to ensure that the learner voice is captured and used to inform evaluation and improvement. HM Inspectors have worked with

sparqs colleagues to align support materials and ensure clarity for staff in engaging with learners to support improvement. The materials will be launched jointly in November 2020. HM Inspectors and *sparqs* colleagues will work closely with colleges to help them ensure that learner views are captured and used to inform self-evaluation and planning for improvement.

Through regular and ongoing engagement link HM Inspectors will plan and learn together at a local level and use this dialogue to ensure that our support is responsive to need and provides tailored support which meets the unique needs of the institution.

Professional Learning

HM Inspectors have increased their engagement with key sector support agencies, including CDN, to plan for and provide CLPL opportunities for college practitioners. HM Inspectors have created a programme of professional learning sessions based on consultation with colleges and intelligence gathered regarding emerging development needs. The programme will commence in early November 2020, and will include 'virtual bridge' sessions covering: lessons from international experience in delivering during the pandemic; supporting reflection and evaluation of on-line delivery; learner retention and discussion-based events on delivery of practical subjects, school/college partnerships, and effective management communication in the new operating environment. Further sessions will be planned and delivered throughout the year in response to need.

Bespoke support for improvement

All colleges have a link HM Inspector in place who engages regularly with staff at all levels and works closely with each college to support improvement. In pausing scrutiny activity in colleges, the additional HM Inspector capacity available was re- focussed to significantly increase engagement with all colleges and support them to address the challenges of college closures. HM Inspectors will be agile and flexible in responding to requests for support from institutions. This intelligence is shared regularly with SFC colleagues to inform joint planning for approaches to recovery.

HM Inspectors have responded with agility and at pace to create a package of support materials for colleges to use in facilitating focussed recovery conversations and planning for adjustments to curriculum and services as a result of Covid-19.

The materials were developed in consultation with the college sector and SFC and focus on four key themes; curriculum, learning, teaching and assessment; services to support learning; transitions; and evaluation to facilitate improvement. The materials are designed to be used creatively and flexibly by college staff, learners and external partners to explore and harness ideas and approaches. Colleges, working collaboratively with their link HM Inspector, are using the materials and

outcomes of this work to support planning for improvement during the recovery phase.

Having adjusted college quality arrangements at pace in response to Covid-19, HM Inspectors recognise that further review of college quality arrangements will be required to meet the needs to the system post-pandemic.

HM Inspectors have begun an initial reflective review of the *How Good is Our College?* (HGIOC?) quality framework and associated quality arrangements to ensure that the sector is supported with refreshed quality arrangements, which take account of the changed operating environment beyond Covid-19.



QAA update to SFC Skills, Enhancement, Access and Learning Committee

Continuation of core activities

ELIR

1. The pandemic has meant that four review visits which were due to take place in spring 2020 were postponed. These review visits will now take place wholly online. The knock-on consequences of moving those four reviews include the need to adjust the timing of those ELIR visits which were planned for the 2020-21 academic year. The updated ELIR schedule can be viewed in the table below.

Institution	Report publication	Year of review
Glasgow School of Art	19 February 2021	2020-21
Glasgow Caledonian University	12 March 2021	
Heriot Watt University	5 March 2021	
University of St Andrews	19 February 2021	
University of Edinburgh	16 July 2021	2020-21
University of Stirling	13 August 2021	
Robert Gordon University	20 August 2021	
Abertay University	25 March 2022	2021-22
University of the Highlands and Islands	18 March 2022	

2. This has an impact on the ability of session 2021-22 to be used as an opportunity to reflect on the learning from the full ELIR 4 cycle before having to produce detailed material on the review method to follow ELIR 4. This is because the final reports from the ELIR 4 cycle would only be published early in 2022, partway through the reflection year and only very shortly before a Handbook for the next review method would need to be published. If the next review cycle began in 2022-23, the Handbook for the method would (by previous practice) be published around Easter 2022.
3. We are also aware that Institution-led Review (ILR) schedules are likely to have been affected. Where adjustments to ILR plans mean that the six-year maximum cycle might be exceeded, institutions should notify the Scottish Funding Council, and QAA Scotland officers will happily support colleagues in thinking about necessary adjustments. Institutions are encouraged to consider the impact on annual monitoring activity and the likely impact of any changes in dates on their ILR schedules as a whole (not only the current year).

Enhancement Theme

4. Work in the last year of the current Theme is focused on completing and evaluating projects, identifying impact on the student experience, and focusing on learning points to inform the next Theme. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the reporting and evaluation deadlines for institutions was extended, meaning reports on institutional activity are due to be received by QAA at the end of October. The final overall Theme evaluation will therefore be moved to mid-December.
5. The scheduled fourth international Enhancement Conference had been altered to become fully online, with two online events. The first of these took place in June, entitled 'Learning from disruption: exploring what counts in higher education', featured a selection of live webinars alongside the launch of new digital resources, including podcasts, blogs and case studies. Sessions and resources offered timely support to delegates, exploring the important role of evidence during a period of disruption and sharing learning from the current Enhancement Theme. Resources from the event can now be [accessed online](#).
6. [The second event, due to take place on 3-5 November 2020](#), will be an expanded online conference and celebration of the outgoing Enhancement Theme. As well as showcasing the many outstanding, innovative and influential projects undertaken as part of the Theme and the parallel session contributions accepted for the original face-to-face conference, the event will highlight expertise and practice from across the UK and internationally.
7. The next Enhancement Theme has also now started, and the home page for [Resilient Learning Communities](#) is live on the Enhancement Themes website. The Theme will be led by Professor Clare Peddie (University of St Andrews) with Professor Ruth Taylor (University of Aberdeen) and Mr Alex Hedlund (Heriot-Watt University) joining as the Deputy Leader and Student Leader, respectively.
8. Resilient Learning Communities explores the changing needs and values of an increasingly diverse student community, and a rapidly changing external environment. The key questions informing the Theme work are:
 - What will our learning communities look like by 2023? And how can we prepare for the learning communities of the future?
 - Who are our students and how will they want to learn? How will we gain a clear understanding of the nature and learning needs of our current and likely future student population? What granular information do we need to enable us to support their learning better?
 - How can we capitalise as a sector on the attributes students bring into their learning?
 - How do we ensure we are able to support our diverse learning communities? What might this mean for our staff and our infrastructure?
 - How should we anticipate, influence and respond to the changing external environment? How can we engage with our stakeholders and ensure we are influencing strategy and policy both in Scotland and beyond?
9. Two-sector wide activities were launched at the start of September: an early call for [expressions of interest](#) for collaborative clusters and development of a [Mural](#). [Mural](#) is a simple online collaborative whiteboard and provides an opportunity for staff and

students across the sector to identify potential collaborative clusters and whole sector projects.

Support for institutions during the pandemic

10. QAA have produced and published a large series of guidance and support for the higher education sector in response to the pandemic. A list of the publications can be found below. In addition to this, QAA has facilitated events such as webinars and online conferences providing further guidance and support to the sector. Information on upcoming events can be found on the [QAA website](#).

QAA COVID-19 Guidance and Support

11. [March 20th - Mitigating the disruption of studies to TNE students](#)
This advice from QAA is designed to support providers with navigating challenges associated with the disruption of studies to TNE students.
12. [March 23rd – Initial Guidance for HE Providers on Standards and Quality](#)
This release of the guidance responds to the initial concerns that universities and colleges brought to QAA's attention, including:
 - transitioning to online learning
 - adapting assessments for online platforms so that they remain rigorous and fair, and continuing to give timely and useful feedback
 - managing credit, progression and graduation
 - adapting admissions considerations as examinations for entry qualifications are postponed or cancelled
 - engaging students in their education
 - working with external examiners.
13. This guidance is intended to answer some potential questions that deal with credit, progression, assessment and graduation, with immediate impacts on areas covered by QAA's advice and guidance and the UK Quality Code. It does not set out regulatory requirements.
14. [April 7th - Thematic Guidance – Practice and Lab-based assessment](#)
Includes advice for the creative arts, music and performance, as well as laboratory and simulated clinical environments, with key guidance on topics such as alternative modes of assessment and student support.
15. [April 7th - Thematic Guidance – Securing Academic Standards and Supporting Student Achievement](#)
Includes key information on exams and assessments in the current environment; communication and consultation with students; the 'safety net'; or 'no detriment' approach to grading; credit volume and progression; degree algorithms; the use of externals; whether certificates or transcripts should be marked to indicate the special circumstances of this year; and advice on resits and appeals.
16. [April 8th - Thematic Guidance – Accelerated Degrees](#)
Focusing on topics including alternative assessments, progression, learning outcomes, student deferrals and delays.
17. [April 8th - Thematic Guidance – Work-based learning \(including placements/partnerships/apprenticeships/study abroad\)](#)

Provides guidance on professional and optional placements, study and work placements abroad, apprenticeships and partnership working.

18. [April 21st – Online delivery and student experience](#)
QAA published a new blog looking at supporting students to develop transition skills during times of uncertainty. This was accompanied with sharing of the resource hub from the 2019-20 Focus On: Technology Enhanced Learning project. Divided into six key areas of interest, the resource hub provides timely support on moving from physical to online learning, as well as guidance on other topical issues in technology enhanced learning
19. [April 24th – Examples of international practice](#)
Arranged by country/territory, this information reflects the various types of practice and approaches that have been taken to learning and teaching, assessment and feedback, and student support in view of the pandemic. Currently, examples are provided from Australia, Canada, China, Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Hong Kong, Singapore, Sweden and the United States of America. Although the study demonstrates a wide range of approach, it also highlights common features of that have proved effective:
 - Students benefit from clear and easily accessible information provided by the institution
 - The specific needs of international students during this pandemic has been recognised and acted upon by many institutions
 - The accessibility of the technology and materials to study online from home is central to the success of remote/online learning and teaching.
20. [April 28th – No detriment policies: A summary and guide to evaluation](#)
This new document provides more information about what 'no detriment' policies aim to achieve and outlines some of the measures providers can put in place to ensure that the academic standards of awards remain secure, while also recognising the challenging circumstances for students. The final section includes a series of reflective questions providers can also use to evaluate their approaches.
21. [May 1st – COVID-19 Statements on degree transcripts: Arguments for and against](#)
Should universities include transcript statements explicitly recognising that degrees were awarded during the COVID-19 pandemic? Would degrees be valued differently as a result? Should such statements be provided for all students across all providers? This publication looks at these key questions, the arguments on both sides, and includes reflective statements to enable providers to guide or evaluate their own approaches.
22. [June 2nd – Preserving quality and standards through a time of rapid change: UK Higher Education in 2020-21](#)
Recommends guiding principles for higher education providers in planning teaching and assessment for next year. The guidance has been produced following extensive interviews and discussions with university and college leaders and quality assurance teams to understand evolving plans at higher education providers across the UK.
23. [June 18th - Contracting to cheat in higher education: How to address essay mills and contract cheating \(second edition\)](#)

The publication shows that many UK higher education institutions have designed effective institutional strategies and academic integrity practices to educate staff, support students, reduce opportunities to cheat and detect academic misconduct. However, more needs to be done.

24. [July 3rd – Questions to inform a toolkit for enhancing quality in a digital learning environment](#)

As universities and colleges work to develop innovative digital learning environments, QAA has published guidance to help providers develop a toolkit in order to enhance the quality of digital learning for their students. Drawing on discussions with QAA member institutions, this publication offers key considerations and reflective questions to support higher education providers as they plan for next academic year. It also links to a range of helpful sources for further reading.

25. [July 30th - Complaints and appeals in the context of COVID-19](#)

Based on engagement with QAA Member institutions, students and a range of sector bodies, the paper looks at the emerging issues and practice around students' complaints and appeals.

26. [August 7th – Adapting to COVID-19: Smaller, specialist and newer providers of higher education](#)

The teaching and learning approaches in smaller and specialist institutions are often some of the key reasons why students choose to study there. Small group teaching, access to industry-standard equipment and practical learning are often typical of these providers. However, these types of learning have also been acutely affected by the pandemic, meaning that such providers may be disproportionately affected by the physical distancing measures currently in place.