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## The Tertiary Quality Project: SFC Overview

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### Purpose

1. This paper provides background information and context to the presentation by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) on the development of a new external review method for Scotland's colleges and universities.

### Background

2. SFC has a statutory duty under the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005 to secure provision for assessing and enhancing the quality of fundable further and higher education provided by fundable bodies, and to secure coherent high-quality provision by fundable bodies of high quality fundable further and higher education.
3. In October 2021 the Scottish Government accepted a recommendation from SFC's Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability to explore options for the development of a single quality framework for tertiary education that would 'strike the appropriate balance between assuring and enhancing the quality of tertiary provision', and 'recognise the distinct contribution as well as the interconnectedness of each part of the tertiary education system.'
4. At its meeting on 22 January 2022 SEAL received a paper (SEAL/22/02) updating members on engagement with key stakeholders and practitioners and leadership figures from both sectors around the development of a tertiary approach and plans for taking forward the Review's recommendation. SEAL has received updates in the Policy Update papers at each meeting to enable it to remain sighted on the project's progress.

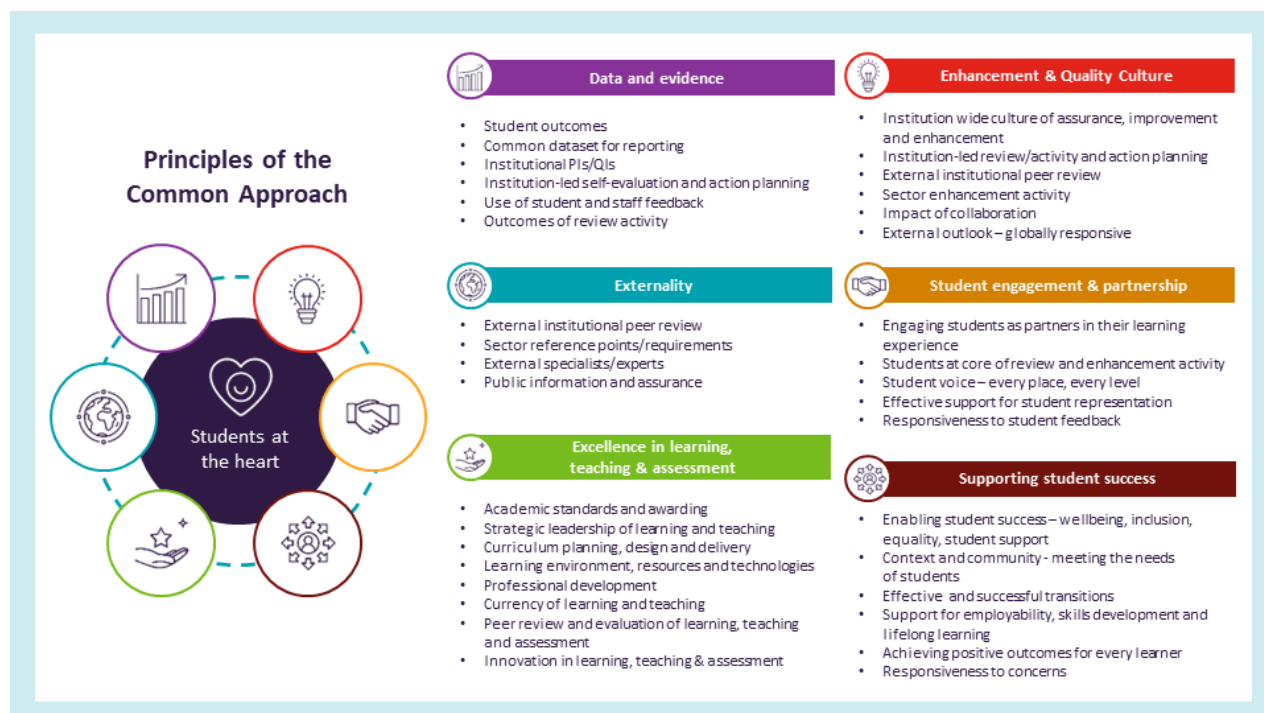
### Development of Tertiary Quality Project (TQP)

5. The development of a tertiary approach has been a shared endeavor between SFC and its partners – quality agencies, institutions, and students. SFC has organised the TQP over four distinct phases of work:
  - **Phase 1, Evidence and mapping (Nov 2021 to June 2022):** building evidence and mapping arrangements to explore whether a common approach to quality assurance and enhancement was possible and to establish a shared understanding of the strengths and commonalities across the sectors.
  - **Phase 2, Policy review (July to October 2022):** an analysis of evidence and stakeholder input to develop recommendations on a way forward.
  - **Phase 3, Co-creation (Oct 2022 to July 2023):** co-creation workshops and workstreams, seeking to develop understanding of practice across sectors; identify key areas for a tertiary quality framework; and look at data and evidence to enhance student outcomes within a quality context.

- **Phase 4, Implementation and delivery (July 2023 to July 2024:** establish a framework and detail of the new quality assurance and enhancement arrangements for implementation from AY2024-25.
6. Further details on each phase of the TQP can be found at [Annex A](#). A Tertiary Quality Steering Group (TQSG) was established in February 2023 to provide strategic advice and guidance to SFC as the project entered the co-creation and implementation stages. A list of TQSG members is available at [Annex B](#).

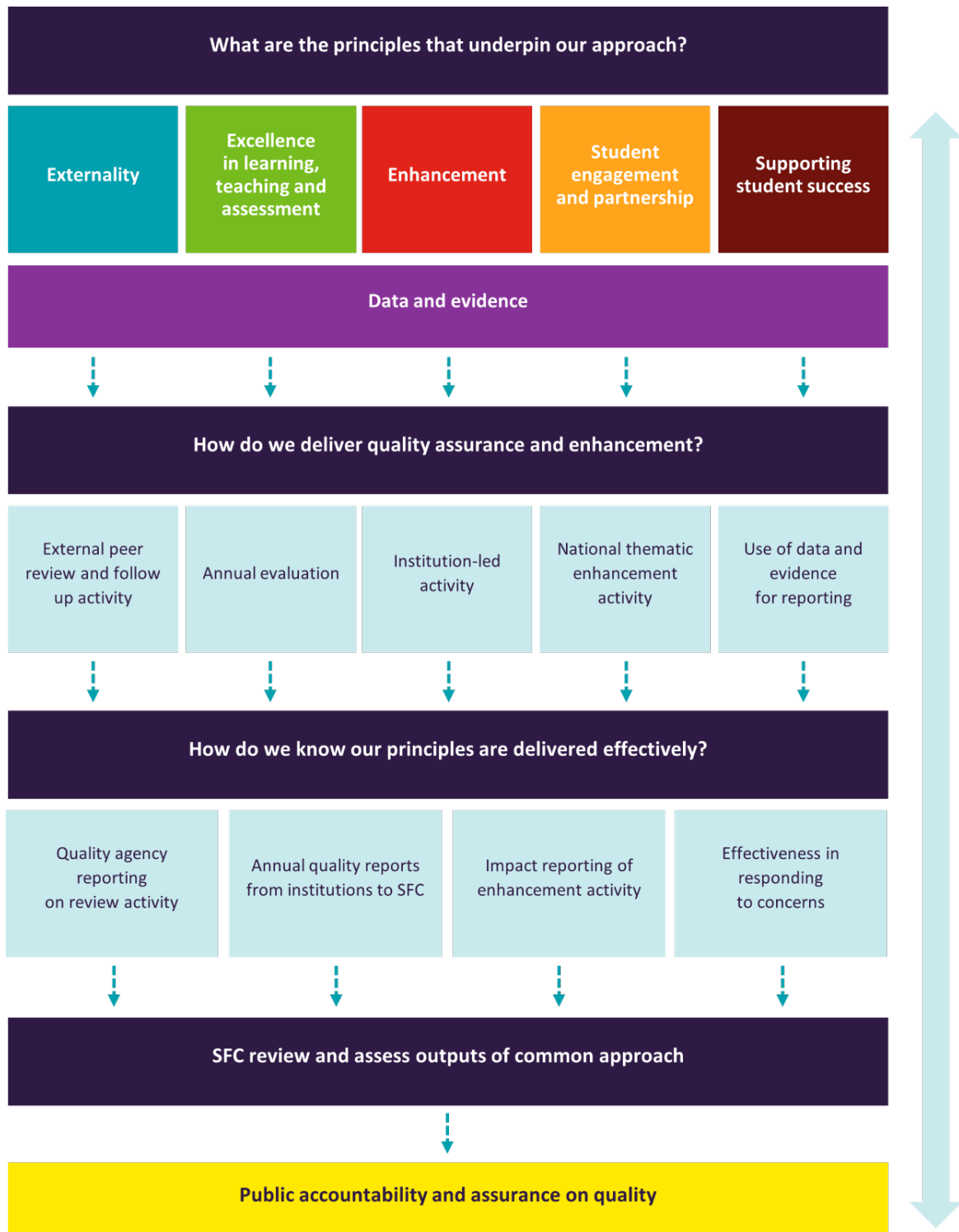
## The common approach to quality assurance and enhancement

7. During Phases 1 of the TQP a set of core principles were co-created to form the foundation on which a shared approach to quality assurance could be built. These principles were further refined and developed during a series of co-creation workshop and have been used to underpin the ongoing development of a common approach.



8. The common approach is the proposed new quality assurance and enhancement framework for Scotland’s colleges and universities developed through the latter stages of the TQP. It will comprise a shared set of principles, delivery pillars, 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 experience, and ensure accountability for public investment in learning and teaching (see diagram below). The common approach is an evolution of Scotland’s enhancement-led approach to quality assurance and draws on the strengths of the college and university sectors' existing arrangements. It will seek to answer the question ‘is the provision delivered by Scotland’s colleges and universities of high quality and is it improving?’.

## The common approach to quality assurance and enhancement



- The common approach is a partnership between SFC, colleges, universities, the quality agencies, and students, reflecting our belief that in Scotland quality assurance should be done with and not to institutions; that institutions retain ownership of the quality of the provision that they deliver; and that students should be full partners in their own learning. SFC has oversight of the common approach and is responsible 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.

## Commissioning an external review cycle for colleges and universities

10. External institutional review has been a key aspect of both the university and college approaches to quality assurance and will be an important delivery pillar in the common approach. Following a strong steer from the TQSG, and feedback from sector wide engagements, the SFC executive concluded that in order to meet the ambitions set out in the SFC review, SFC should commission a single agency to take the lead on the development and delivery of a single external review method for both colleges and universities – but one which has the flexibility to meet the developing needs of each sector.
11. QAA were Commissioned to lead the development and implementation of a new review methodology as they are independent from government, and a longstanding member of [ENQA](#), which ensures continued compliance with European Standards and Guidelines ([ESG](#)) – a necessary requirement of the university sector, and in line with the Scottish Government’s commitments as a signatory to the Bologna Process. They also have the confidence of both sectors to take this work forward and extensive experience of conducting enhancement-led external peer reviews within the Scottish sector, including of tertiary institutions.
12. SFC’s independent expert advice recommended that a commissioned approach with QAA for the procurement of a new tertiary external review methodology would provide appropriate reassurance around service requirements, performance levels, and value for money required by SFC, with a low risk of challenge.
13. In taking forward the Commission, QAA are required to work effectively with Education Scotland (ES) HMIEs, engaging the extensive experience and understanding of the college sector. We expect ES HMIE to have input into how the college sector can be supported to transition to a multi-year quality cycle, and we expect that, within the new review method development and delivery, QAA will work closely with the ES HMIE colleagues to draw on their expertise and knowledge to inform the assessment and enhancement of quality in colleges.

## Interim quality arrangements 2022-23 to 2023-24

14. SFC, working with ES and QAA, has developed interim arrangement set out in its Guidance to colleges and universities on quality for AY2022-23 to AY2023-24 ([SFC/GD/25/2023](#)). These arrangements provide assurance on academic standards and the quality of the student experience, while also allowing flexibility to work with stakeholders and the sectors to co-create and develop the common approach over the same period for implementation in AY2024-25. This will continue to enable SFC and its partner quality agencies to co-create, test, and adjust any new arrangements with the

sectors, and provide sufficient lead-in time for colleges and universities to make the required preparations for the new approach.

## Recommendations

15. The SEAL Committee is invited to note the contents of this paper.

## Publication

16. This paper will be published on the SFC website.

## Further Information

17. Further details on the TQP are available from the [project website](#). The website will be refreshed with regular updates as the project progresses.
18. Further information is also available from Derek Horsburgh, Senior Policy/Analysis Officer, Learning and Quality [dhorsburgh@sfc.ac.uk](mailto:dhorsburgh@sfc.ac.uk).

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## Annex A: The Tertiary Quality Project work phases

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### Phase 1: Building evidence and mapping arrangements

1. In this phase of the work SFC explored whether a common approach to quality assurance and enhancement was possible and to establish a shared understanding of the strengths and commonalities across the sectors. SFC undertook significant stakeholder engagement and co-creation of evidence with the sectors around how a common approach to quality for colleges and universities might be developed. An expert advisory and sector working groups were used to provide advice and guidance on the scope and parameters of a common approach to quality.
2. Key questions explored with our stakeholders and partners and through this phased of the work included:
  - What are the current strengths and what do we want to keep from our current approaches?
  - What are the similarities and differences in the college and university approaches?
  - How can we build on institutions' processes for supporting and reporting quality enhancement and quality assurance?

### Phase 2: Policy review evidence and stakeholder feedback

3. For Phase 2, (July to October 2022) SFC undertook a policy review of develop its Review recommendation, analysing the evidence and stakeholder input developed throughout Phase 1, with a view to supporting a decision point for the SFC before progressing into the next phase. This review considered stakeholder concerns and possible mitigations, and potential alignments with other SFC Review workstreams, along with wider sector reform work such as the response to the Ken Muir Review, and the Scottish Government's Post-school Purpose and Principles.
4. Based on the work undertaken through this policy review, the SFC concluded that a common approach to supporting quality across the tertiary sector would allow for:
  - clearer links between quality arrangements and successful student outcomes;
  - better support for student transitions and more seamless pathways for learners between senior phase, college, and university; and
  - enhanced oversight of some aspects of provision for learners that are not well, or are variously, covered under current arrangements, such as HE provision in colleges, and work-based learning programmes across both FE and HE.
5. On that basis SFC set out plans for a common approach to quality assurance and enhancement, working towards a target implementation date of AY2024-25. SFC has committed to ensuring that the new arrangements continue to comply with European

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Standards and Guidelines in line with Scottish Ministers' commitments as a signatory to the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area.

## Phase 3: Co-creation

6. Phase 3 of the work, (Oct 2022 to July 2023) was overseen by the Tertiary Quality Steering Group (TQSG) co-chaired by the SFC, college and university representatives, and students. Both Universities Scotland and Colleges Scotland are part of the TQSG, (see [Annex B](#) for full membership).
7. This phase involved a series of co-creation workshops and workstreams, seeking to develop understanding of practice across sectors; identify key areas for a tertiary quality framework; and look at data and evidence to enhance student outcomes within a quality context.
8. Workshops: a cross section of over 130 colleagues representing a broad range of the tertiary sector including students, quality agencies, colleges, universities and awarding bodies have contributed to co-creation workshops. These workshops focused on developing a shared understanding of quality processes in each sector, based on the extensive mapping activity completed during Phase 1, shaping draft principles for a common approach and on the effective use of data and evidence to support evaluation and successful outcomes for students.
9. Workstreams: The TQSG has discussed and agreed a number of workstreams to support co-creation with the sectors of specific elements of the new overall approach. These are, (with project lead indicated in brackets):
  - **Workstream 1:** Shaping the common approach - management of co-creation and integration of workstreams (SFC)
  - **Workstream 2:** Data and evidence to understand, evaluate and improve student outcomes (SFC)
  - **Workstream 3:** Strengthening institutional monitoring, self-evaluation and reporting on quality (College Quality Network and The Quality Forum/university quality network)
  - **Workstream 4:** Evaluating and enhancing the student learning experience and student partnership models (sparqs)
  - **Workstream 5:** Tertiary sector enhancement activity (QAA).

## Phase 4: Planning for implementation and delivery

10. In May 2023, SFC commissioned the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) to lead on the design, planning and delivery of a multi-year external peer-review cycle for colleges and universities for implementation in AY 2024-25. QAA will work closely with Education Scotland throughout, thereby drawing on their extensive experience and utilising their knowledge and understanding of the college sector to ensure that the new approach, and in particular the new external peer review method, is flexible enough to meet the needs of both the college and university sectors.

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11. During this phase (which will run until the end of the 2023-24 academic year), SFC will continue to work with QAA and all the sector leads, who are taking forward the development of the new arrangements through the workstreams that were initially commissioned during Phase 3. Updates relating to these activities will be shared with the sector as they are shaped and piloted during the coming academic year.
  12. The new approach, including the new external review cycle for colleges and universities will be implemented from AY2024-25, although the intention is to phase the timing of the first external reviews in colleges into the cycle slightly behind the first university reviews. Some aspects of the new approach, including a template for institutional self-evaluation and reporting on quality, will be piloted by some institutions on a voluntary basis in advance of their full implementation.



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## Annex B: SFC Tertiary Quality Steering Group membership

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Steering Group membership
<b>James Dunphy (Chair)</b> Director, Access, Learning and Outcomes, SFC
<b>Prof Moira Fischbacher-Smith (Co-Chair)</b> Vice Principal, Learning and Teaching, University of Glasgow
<b>Ellie Gomersall (Co-Chair)</b> President, NUS Scotland
<b>Simon Hewitt (Co-Chair)</b> Principal, Dundee and Angus College, and Chair College VP Network
<b>Dr Kyrsten Black</b> Registrar, Scotland's Rural College
<b>Dr Claire Carney</b> Vice Principal Student Experience, City of Glasgow College
<b>Dr Kirsty Conlon</b> Head of Learning and Teaching, Universities Scotland
<b>Douglas Dickson</b> Vice Principal Learning, Skills & Student Experience, Dumfries and Galloway College
<b>Simon Earp</b> Vice Principal, Performance and Improvement, West Lothian College
<b>Brian Green</b> Deputy Associate Principal, Learning and Teaching, University of Strathclyde, and Chair of QASHE (Quality Arrangements in Scottish Higher Education)
<b>Prof Tina Harrison</b> Assistant Principal, Academic Standards and Quality Assurance, University of Edinburgh
<b>Ann Heron</b> Head of Quality Enhancement, Ayrshire College, and Chair College Quality Network

<p><b>Nichola Kett</b> Head of Quality Assurance and Enhancement, University of Edinburgh, and Chair of The Quality Forum</p>
<p><b>Prof Lynn Kilbride</b> Vice Principal Academic Development &amp; Student Experience, Robert Gordon University</p>
<p><b>Eve Lewis</b> Director, sparqs</p>
<p><b>Robin McGregor</b> Vice Principal, Curriculum and Quality, North East Scotland College</p>
<p><b>Cathy McNab</b> Assistant Principal, Performance and Skills, West College Scotland</p>
<p><b>Prof Clare Peddie</b> Vice-Principal, Education (Proctor), University of St. Andrews</p>
<p><b>Prof Alastair Robertson</b> Pro Vice Chancellor, Learning and Teaching, Glasgow Caledonian University, and Chair of SHEEC</p>
<p><b>Andy Witty</b> Director Sector Policy, Colleges Scotland</p>
<p><b>Alastair Delaney (Observer)</b> Executive Director of Operations and Deputy CEO</p>
<p><b>Gill Ritchie (Observer)</b> Director, Scrutiny (Interim), Education Scotland</p>