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Self-Evaluation and Action Plan Thematic Report 2026

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Summary:	Purpose of this publication is to present to the sector a thematic summary of the SEAP submissions for 2024–25, submitted in December 2025.

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Table of Contents

Introduction and context 3
SFC SEAP Review Process 3
General feedback on the completion of the SEAPs 4
Themes arising organised according to the principles 5
Principle 1: Excellence in learning, teaching and assessment 5
Good practice 5
Areas of enhancement 6
Principle 2: Supporting Student Success 7
Good practice 8
Areas of enhancement 9
Principle 3: Enhancement and Quality Culture 10
Good practice 10
Areas of enhancement 10
Principle 4: Student Engagement and Partnership 11
Good practice 11
Areas of enhancement 12
Underpinning Principles – Data and Evidence and Externality 12
Good practice 13
Area for enhancement 13
Supporting the next SEAP submission 13
Further information 13

Introduction and context

1. Institutional Self-Evaluation and Action Plans (SEAPs) are an important output of the internal quality assurance and enhancement activity that all institutions undertake. They are designed to enable institutions to report on these activities both internally and externally. Externally, the SEAPs form part of two of the key delivery mechanisms of Scotland's Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework (TQEF) i.e. the annual quality engagements (AQE) with the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and the institutional liaison meetings (ILMs) with the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). They are also used to contribute to the evidence base for and action planning as a result of, the Tertiary Quality Enhancement Review (TQER).

2. The SEAP is one part of the evidence that will be used by SFC to evaluate and assure the "High Quality Learning and Teaching" outcome of the Outcomes Framework and Assurance Model (OFAM), and the annual quality engagement informs the monitoring thereof. These meetings serve the dual purpose of meeting the requirements of the TQEF and are also one of the quarterly engagements undertaken as part of the OFAM engagements. The SEAP also contributes to the monitoring of Student Interests Access and Success outcome of the OFAM.

3. Institutions are not required to submit a SEAP in those years of the review cycle where they undergo a TQER. In those years colleges and universities will instead submit a Strategic Impact Analysis (SIA) to the QAA focusing on self-evaluation against the principles of the TQEF. In using these underpinning principles, the SIA complements the approach taken in the development of the SEAP and is intended to support institutions to reflect on their effectiveness.

4. For those institutions undergoing a TQER and so submitting a SIA to the QAA, SFC will gain assurance on quality for that year from the external review itself and from SFC's ongoing review of annual student data submissions and other routine monitoring information (e.g., student satisfaction surveys).

5. The SEAP guidance is based on the principles of the TQEF. In 2025, the guidance was refreshed to address feedback from the first year of the process and can be found within the SFC Guidance on Quality for Colleges and Universities. Guidance on the drafting of the SIA can be found in Annex D of the TQER Guide for Institutions, produced by QAA.

SFC SEAP Review Process

6. The 2024-25 SEAPs were submitted to the Scottish Funding Council on the 2 December 2026. In total, 35 SEAPs were received, 21 from colleges (including UHI academic partners) and 14 from universities (including UHI and SRUC). Eight institutions are undergoing Tertiary Quality Enhancement Review (TQER) in 2025-26 and were not required to submit SEAPs.

7. The SEAPs were shared with the QAA. Within SFC, the SEAPs were reviewed by the relevant institutional OM and a member of the Student Interests, Access and Quality (SIAQ) Team. Each SEAP is read and reviewed by at least four staff across SFC and QAA.

8. Feedback from all reviewers was collated, discussed and used to inform the preparations for the individual annual quality engagement meetings that OMs undertook with their respective institutions.

9. As outlined in the guidance, during the annual quality engagements the focus is mainly on the institutional data highlighted in the SEAP and the provision of feedback on the completion of the SEAP.

10. This thematic review has been prepared by SFC staff drawing on the outputs of the individual review of the SEAPs, internal discussions and the engagement with QAA. Copilot, SFC's secure artificial intelligence application, was used only as a supporting aid to help organise and cross-check the key themes across the source material. The analysis, interpretation and judgements in this report remain those of SFC staff and all content has been reviewed and validated through established staff-led processes. The use of Copilot has enabled us to interrogate the source material in more detail and while the outputs of this activity have not been used verbatim, they have been used to augment the report, including being able to include more specific actions and activities that are included in institutional plans.

General feedback on the completion of the SEAPs

11. All institutions are to be thanked for their efforts in preparing and submitting their SEAPs reflecting on the 2024-25 academic year. It is clear that in most cases, the feedback provided in 2025 has informed the submissions, with many reports including less detail of standard processes and instead focusing on in-year progress and developments.

12. During the review and discussion of the SEAPs some concerns were raised about how clearly the purpose of the SEAP is understood. This often arose because of the highly polished presentation of some SEAPs, focusing heavily on strengths, rather than providing a balanced account identifying what institutions are doing well and where further improvement is needed. Ideally SEAPs should be practical working documents designed for internal use not for an external audience, with institutions demonstrating the thread of improvement from one year to the next through self-evaluation and progress updates relating to the actions identified.

13. The signalling of progress against actions identified in the previous year's SEAP was inconsistent. In some reports it was clear from the narrative where progress had been made while in others, updates had been made to the action plan which gave a similar indication. However, in some instances it was not clear why actions had been removed from the action plan and whether this was because they were complete or if it was because they were no longer of strategic importance. Institutions should give a clear indication either through the narrative or in the action plan, where actions from the previous year have been completed, deprioritised (with a rationale) or are still in progress.

14. In most reports the actions identified clearly linked to the self-evaluation narrative, but we would encourage institutions to review their action plans and actions to ensure that they are specific, measurable, achievable and clearly time-bound so that they can be effectively updated and progress reported on an annual basis. We do not expect all actions to be achieved in a single year; however, we do expect that the majority of actions will have an end date at which progress can be reviewed and impact and outcomes reported.

Themes arising organised according to the principles

Principle 1: Excellence in learning, teaching and assessment

15. In many SEAPs, the "Excellence in Learning, Teaching and Assessment" principle includes the most detail with many institutions once again highlighting a focus on curriculum review linked to the labour market and employer needs, showcasing portfolio planning activity and highlighting strong employer/industry partnership in shaping the curriculum. This focus on curriculum review could be strengthened through clearer evaluation of the impact and outcomes of changes to the curriculum.

16. It was noted that some institutions were at an early stage of implementing new strategies and initiatives, and the evaluation of the outcomes and impact of these changes will need to be considered and included in future iterations of the SEAP. Similarly, while there is a clear focus on professional development, it is at times difficult to assess overall engagement with, and impact of, these activities due to a lack of quantitative and qualitative evaluation.

Good practice

17. **Externality:** the impact of externality and the role of External Examiners and External Verifiers across both colleges and universities was evidenced throughout the SEAPs, with clear examples of how institutions utilise external expertise to inform their academic standards and align learning outcomes, assessment practice and professional standards. This could in some instances be enhanced by further mention of the themes arising from these activities. It is known that reports from these activities are a rich source of evidence of aspects of Learning, Teaching and Assessment that are going well or where further focus might be required.

18. **Digital infrastructure**: a number of institutions highlighted significant investment in digital infrastructure and blended learning spaces, including Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Virtual Reality (VR) technology and development of their Virtual Learning Environments (VLE). There was also a focus on institutions developing clear advice and guidance on the use of AI. This was coupled with evidence of positive student feedback on these developments and improvements in their accessibility.

19. **Staff development**: continues to be a strong theme in SEAPs with most institutions citing extensive examples of this, including structured CPD frameworks and teaching qualifications with reference to Advance HE routes and Post Graduate Certificates.

20. There were also several examples of the development of communities of practice and peer-learning opportunities, with targeted training around AI, digital skills and inclusive practice highlighted. Similarly, there was mention of the development of peer review models and observation approaches in some institutions.

21. **Currency of learning and teaching**: many institutions highlighted examples of how they maintain the currency of learning and teaching, citing examples of the integration of industry practice and employability skills and ensuring that consideration is given to emerging priorities like AI, digital advancements and sustainability in the curriculum. Innovations in the use of AI and digital spaces were mentioned alongside changes to assessment design and developments in work based and applied learning.

Areas of enhancement

22. **Curriculum planning, review and transformation:** as noted above, there continues to be a focus on curriculum planning and review, with many institutions identifying curriculum development and review as a central means of improving student outcomes, institutional agility and employability. A review of the action plans identified some commonality among the actions being taken including:

    - Developing curriculum frameworks, curriculum transformation projects or curriculum planning cycles.
    - Reviewing curriculum portfolios, programme viability and programme performance alongside reviews of approval, amendment and validation processes.
    - Aligning curriculum with labour market intelligence, regional skills needs, employer demand and institutional strategy.
    - Developing progression pathways, introducing new courses and /or introducing more flexible delivery models or work-integrated learning provision.
    - Embedding sustainability, employability, meta-skills, digital skills and inclusive practice into curriculum design.

23. **Governance and strategy:** several institutions provided evidence of a clear focus on further developing or adapting governance structures and increasing engagement with senior leadership. A significant number of actions focus on improving structures, accountability and alignment between strategy, quality and delivery. Common examples include:

    - Reviewing governance structures, terms of reference, committee remits and reporting lines, ensuring that student and staff representation is embedded within governance and clarifying roles, responsibilities and ownership of enhancement activity.
    - Aligning strategies with operational plans, curriculum plans, quality frameworks and SEAP reporting and developing action plans, monitoring arrangements and quarterly reporting.

- Improving communication of strategy, governance processes and decision-making routes.

24. **Assessment and feedback:** in addition to a number of actions that support staff development in learning, teaching and assessment, actions to maintain academic standards and integrity and improve assessment and feedback are also included in multiple institutional action plans. These include themes around:

    - Reviewing assessment and feedback policies and principles, trackers and turnaround expectations, with a view to improving consistency, timeliness and quality of assessment feedback.
    - Introducing or enhancing digital assessment platforms and online assessment and invigilation approaches, with consideration of assessment integrity and generative AI.
    - Reviewing external examiner processes, exam boards, moderation, verification and assessment governance.
    - There is also evidence of institutions undertaking revisions of a number of policies relating to assessment/extenuating/mitigating circumstances, specifically considering submission windows or self-certification to help deal with the volume of students requiring these mitigations.

25. **Digital infrastructure and pedagogy:** while there is some existing good practice in this area, it is also clearly an area for enhancement as the hardware and associated software develops and institutions respond by developing or reviewing digital strategies and digital skills plans and developing digital pedagogy and emerging technology training for staff. Some institutions highlighted examples of inconsistent use and accessibility of digital platforms with work ongoing to enhance virtual learning environment (VLE) platforms such as Moodle, Brightspace, Canvas, Blackboard or iLearn and the introduction of standardised VLE templates, accessibility tools and online learning resources.

Principle 2: Supporting Student Success

26. Student support continues to be a strong theme within the majority of the reports with the ongoing development of holistic approaches to supporting students being mentioned. Targeted interventions to support students to stay on their chosen programmes also continues to be a strong focus.

Good practice

27. **Student outcomes:** following feedback in the previous SEAP thematic report about the inclusion and evaluation of student outcomes, institutions responded positively by increasing their focus on this aspect of their reporting. Previously, institutions had identified actions to address retention and progression, and it was positive to note that, across a number of institutions, there was evidence of improvements in both retention and progression and some mention of improvements in positive destinations alongside strong performance against widening access targets.

28. **Proactive support**: a number of institutions highlighted initiatives to provide specific support for disabled and care -experienced students. This included embedding inclusive practice such as disability coordinators and support for students on application and during transition. In one instance an institution highlighted a fully inclusive approach to providing additional support by providing every student with an opportunity to meet with the student support team on admission, to discuss and identify possible support needs from the outset of their course.

29. **Transitions:** examples of successful transition approaches were mentioned by a number of institutions with clear evidence of well-planned and structured transition programmes in place, while some institutions highlighted further activity to redesign their transition models, including the implementation of improved pre-entry engagement and onboarding processes. This focus aligns well with one of the priority areas (i.e. Supporting transitions and exploring pathways) identified within current STEP topic, “Supporting diverse learner journeys”.

30. **Employability and skills development:** there is an ongoing focus on employability, skills development and lifelong learning, with examples of employability being integrated across curricula, through work-based learning and the embedding of meta-skills. There was also evidence of strong employer engagement models being used, such as establishing employer representative groups, mentoring, placements and internships. Further examples referenced the use of dedicated careers services and employability initiatives with evidence of some award-winning services.

31. **Complaints Handling:** following feedback about the inclusion of the complaints outcomes in the previous SEAPs, it was positive to note there was evidence of improved complaints-handling approaches and processes, with examples of feedback and complaints data being used to inform enhancement approaches. There were also instances of institutions taking a partnership approach to student concerns by collaborating with their Students’ Association to develop policy and practice, although for some, there is still some work to do to improve student awareness of complaints and concerns processes and the analysis of themes emerging.

Areas of enhancement

32. In some SEAPs there was limited evaluation of the impact of support for students and of professional support services. Institution-led Quality Review (ILQR) of support services needs to be considered alongside ILQR of subject provision and should include both quantitative and qualitative evaluation of support services.

33. **Student outcomes: student success, retention, attainment and progression** is one of the strongest themes across the action plans, aligning effectively with SFC's focus on the data, which is used to evaluate both the "High-Quality Learning and Teaching" outcome and the "Student Interests Access and Success" outcomes of the OFAM. Institutions frequently describe activities aimed at improving student outcomes, including:

    - Developing or implementing student success, retention or wellbeing strategies.
    - Using attendance, engagement, attainment and progression data to identify students at risk.
    - Introducing dashboards, warning systems or student support flags to enable implementation of early interventions to support students to stay on their programme of study.
    - Strengthening wellbeing, mental health, counselling, trauma-informed and compassionate support.

34. **Inclusion, equality, accessibility and widening participation:** many institutions describe actions focused on equitable outcomes, inclusive practice and reducing barriers for particular learner groups. Allied to the good practice noted, several institutions identified and acknowledged persistent gaps in attainment across a range of specific groups, with actions identified to address these gaps going forward, including (as noted previously) targeted support for care-experienced and disabled students, however in some this extended to widening participation learners, SIMD groups, minority ethnic students, mature learners, apprentices and students with protected characteristics. Examples of the types of recurring activities include:

    - Further developing equality outcome action plans, widening participation strategies and inclusion plans.
    - Reviewing disability support, personal learning support plans and alternative assessment arrangements, allied to generally improving the accessibility of learning materials.
    - Developing staff training on inclusion, accessibility, behaviour support, safeguarding and equality and embedding trauma-informed practice, compassionate and inclusive pedagogies.
    - Introducing reporting tools or campaigns around safety, respect, hate crime, safeguarding or wellbeing.

Principle 3: Enhancement and Quality Culture

35. It was clear from the review process that a number of institutions are continuing to take steps to align their internal processes with the principles of the TQEF, including a more data/ evidence focused approach to internal analysis and reporting to support the annual SEAP submission and continuous improvement.

Good practice

36. **Quality culture**: there is ongoing evidence of the embedding of institution wide approaches to quality assurance, improvement and enhancement highlighting alignment between internal governance and processes and external standards including the TQEF and the UK Quality Code. There continues to be a focus on developments in the use of data to inform institutional evaluation, utilising dashboards, analytics and monitoring systems to drive improvement. While there was reference to capacity constraints impacting on progress in some institutions, there were also some very good examples of staff engagement in shared development and ownership of new approaches.

37. **Collaboration:** as with the previous submissions, institutions provided evidence of strong employer and partner collaboration across regional, national and international partnerships contributing to the enhancement of their provision. In some institutions there was evidence of an increasing focus on international collaboration in particular and expanding Transnational Education (TNE) activity. Reference was also made to global benchmarking and integrating international activity into enhancement processes and the student experience.

Areas of enhancement

38. **Institution-Led Quality Review (ILQR),** the Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework (TQEF) sets an expectation that institutions manage their quality activities across all provision and support services in a way that aligns with SFC's guidance on ILQR.

39. While colleges previously undertook activities that support an institution-led approach, we recognise this is a transition of practice and as such, through the SEAPs, we considered how effectively ILQR was being developed and implemented. While it is still early days, reference to ILQR in the college SEAPs was variable with some demonstrating a clear focus on this requirement, while others are still considering how to address it.

40. **Institution-Led Quality Review of Support Services** remains an action from the last Quality Enhancement and Standards Review (QESR) for a small number of universities. Progress in these specific institutions and more widely with this aspect of ILQR, will be monitored by QAA.

41. **Scotland's Tertiary Enhancement Programme (STEP)**, details of institutional engagement with STEP was variable with some institutions including explicit reference to the STEP projects while others made brief or no reference at all to their engagement in the projects. While the nature and extent of engagement with STEP will vary depending on institutional context and capacity, institutions should consider how they share the outputs of the STEP projects internally with staff and how their engagement is presented in the SEAP.

Principle 4: Student Engagement and Partnership

42. The "Student Engagement and Partnership" principle was the most uniform in terms of content across the SEAPs although it was notable that the focus was on representation rather than partnership.

43. There were a few excellent examples of students being involved in developing and reviewing the content of the SEAP, however in most SEAPs it was not clear what input the students had into the process. We would encourage institutions and students to consider how to build on student partnership generally as well as in the SEAP process and make this more explicit in the reports.

44. Some institutions would benefit from greater analysis of their student feedback and inclusion of the student perspective across a wider range of principles in the SEAP i.e. using some of the themes arising from the National Student Survey, Student Satisfaction and Engagement Survey or institutional surveys to illustrate strengths or identify areas for enhancement across all the principles.

Good practice

45. **Student representation:** across the majority of the SEAPs, there were good examples of effective and robust student representation highlighting strong formal structures, such as engagement in working groups, partnership agreements and governance frameworks. There were some references to improvements to student representative recruitment, training and induction although some institutions reported poor take-up of training opportunities and inconsistent engagement of student representatives in related activities, consequently some actions relating to student representation are included under the student partnership heading below.

46. **Student Voice:** some institutions described well developed and varied approaches to gathering student voice via the traditional surveys, but also through bespoke institutional approaches like short pulse surveys, focus groups and working groups. This widened approach to engagement saw improvements for some in the visibility of the Students' Association through their involvement too. Similarly, several institutions highlighted a variety of mechanisms to respond to student feedback including task forces and action trackers, also emphasising how they closed the feedback loop to students.

47. **Student Learning Experience model**: it was positive to see most SEAPs included reference to the use of the Student Learning Experience model, with some innovative examples of how the model is being used in practice for example using specific building blocks from the model to gather feedback about specific topics. There was some mention of the Student Partnership Ambition Statement, however this was more limited and would benefit from wider utilisation.

Areas of enhancement

48. **Student Partnership**: is developing well in some institutions with examples of students being involved in policy development, wellbeing initiatives, the triangulation of data, recruitment of senior staff and regulatory developments. However, in some instances there were missed opportunities to engage students as partners in ongoing developments which suggests that student partnership will continue to be an area for enhancement for some time to come. Some of the common activities associated with student engagement, representation and partnership appearing in the actions plans include:

    - Reviewing or redesigning student voice and representation models and working with Students' Associations to increase student representative recruitment, visibility and training.

49. Further embedding students in governance, curriculum review, quality processes and action planning and in some instances developing or refreshing Student Partnership Agreements and/or Student Charters

Underpinning Principles – Data and Evidence and Externality

50. Reference to externality is embedded in the headline principles so has not been referenced here.

51. The data included in the SEAP guidance is the key data that is used in the OFAM and SFC colleagues triangulate the data included in the SEAPs with the data we hold for each institution. While it is up to institutions to decide what data to include in the SEAP submission, it is best practice for data that is included, to reference the three-year trend and analysis thereof. SFC colleagues will consider the data in some detail and note if there are trends in the metrics that have not been picked up in the SEAP or aspects of the data that don't match our understanding of the institution's data. The discussion at the institutional meeting is an important opportunity to check our understanding and add any context that may have been missed in the report.

Good practice

52. The inclusion of data has improved in the latest submissions with a greater focus on the key metrics described in the guidance. Some institutions have included well developed analysis of the data, including trend analysis over three years and have effectively linked the analysis in the narrative to key actions in the action plan. The use of data annexes tracking the three-year trend across data sets is positive, particularly where the narrative in the main document refers to, and aligns with, the trends illustrated.

Area for enhancement

53. Many institutions have identified data as a mechanism for improving decision-making, monitoring impact and supporting targeted intervention, some of which has already been included in the headline principles. However, other activities commonly mentioned in the action plans relate to improving data quality, consistency and integration across systems, establishing common datasets for annual review and training staff in data interpretation, Power BI and dashboard use.

Supporting the next SEAP submission

54. SFC is in the process of reviewing the SFC guidance on quality for colleges and universities but there is no plan to make substantive changes to the SEAP guidance. Any changes to the guidance overall will be highlighted in the introduction to the refreshed guidance.

55. CDN continues to develop and deliver Tertiary Quality Enhancement Resources including the Tertiary Self-Evaluation Toolkit in partnership with SFC, QAA, sparqs, colleges and universities and is available on the CDN LearnOnline.

56. sparqs resources provide valuable reference tools for institutions and students, key items include the Self Evaluation and Action Plan Guidance for students' associations and student officers the sparqs Student Learning Experience Model, sparqs Scotland's Ambition for Student Partnership and sparqs SEAP: Practical Guide to Student Partnership.

57. The next SEAP, reflecting on academic year 2025-26 is due for submission on the 30 November, but as this is a public holiday, the submission deadline will be **1 December**. Institutions should submit their SEAPs to SFC via quality@sfc.ac.uk

Further information

58. If you have any queries or require any further information, please contact the Learning and Quality Team, email: quality@sfc.ac.uk