UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

QUALITY ASSURANCE COMMITTEE

Analysis of Findings from Quality Enhancement and Standards Reviews (QESR) Conducted During Session 2022-23

Scottish Higher Education Institutions

December 2023

Contents

About this report

1   A new enhancement-led institutional quality review method for Scottish higher education institutions is currently under development and will be delivered across two phases. Phase 1, comprising Quality Enhancement and Standards Review (QESR) and Institutional Liaison Meetings (ILM), is taking place in 2022-23 and 2023-24.

2   QESR is an enhancement-led, evidence-based method of peer review. Each review team consists of staff and students drawn from other higher education institutions (HEIs) across Scotland and the UK. QESR considers how well, from the evidence and information available to the review team, an institution is continuing to maintain an effective and enhancement-led approach towards the management of academic quality and standards, and the quality of the student experience.

3   The QESR team reviews the documentation submitted and meets with staff and students at the institution in a one-day review visit, which normally takes place virtually. After visiting the institution, the QESR team writes a report. The findings set out in the report will be used to provide context for the institution's external review in Phase 2 of the overall review method.

4   During session 2022-23, seven QESRs were carried out (a list of the institutions reviewed can be found at Annex 1). This report provides a summary of the findings of these reviews, outlining good practice and recommendations for action. The report provides more detail on findings relating to the tertiary enhancement topic - *The future of learning and teaching: defining and delivering an effective and inclusive digital and blended offering.* Each institution was asked to submit relevant documentation that outlined enhancement activity or the institution's strategic approach relating to this topic.

5   This analysis is undertaken by QAA. It is submitted to the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) to support the duty for quality assurance of provision delivered by HEIs in Scotland under the *Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005*. The analysis is also considered by the sector Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC) and The Quality Forum (TQF). It informs sector-led development and enhancement activity, allowing examples of practice to be picked up and shared in greater detail as part of sector enhancement activity or by individual institutions.

6   A full report will be published in summer 2024 in order to incorporate the second year of the Phase 1 arrangements. This will include an update on the below as well as more detail on institutional approach to quality enhancement and academic standards and quality processes.

Summary of QESR findings

Overview

7   Across the seven reviews conducted, there were 20 examples of good practice and 16 recommendations for action. In both cases, these appear to be distributed across a wide range of topics, with few overarching themes emerging at this stage. The table below shows this distribution. It should be noted that if a topic is not noted as either good practice or having recommendations for action, this does not necessarily mean that it was not considered as part of the QESR.

Topic	Number of instances of good practice	Number of institutions identifying good practice	Number of recommen-dations for action	Number of institutions identifying recommen-dations for action
Learning and teaching strategy	4	4	0	0
Student partnership	4	4	0	0
Student support	3	3	1	1
Findings relating to the sector-wide enhancement topic	3	3	1	1
Institutional approaches to enhancement	3	3	0	0
Development and implementation of strategy / implementation of change	2	2	1	1
Use of data and evidence to inform self-evaluation and decision-making	2	2	1	1
Professional development opportunities for students	0	0	3	2
Professional service review	0	0	3	3

Good practice

8   There were four examples of good practice relating to learning and teaching strategy. These were: the embedding of strategic plans for learning and teaching within a wider Student Experience Strategy;[1] widespread engagement with, and ownership of, learning and teaching by staff and students;[2] the clarity of the strategy and effective delivery through integration and collaboration across workstreams;[3] and the effective operationalisation of learning and teaching strategy through frameworks, working groups and projects.[4]

9   A further four examples of good practice related to student partnership. These were: the use of embedded and collaborative approaches;[5] students being offered a wide range of opportunities to engage in decision-making;[6] and the use of student internships.[7]

10   Three examples of good practice were identified relating to student support. These were: development of support in relation to blended and online learning;[8] the relationship between the institution and its students' association to provide student support;[9] and the use of a 'one-stop-shop' approach.[10]

11   There were three examples of good practice relating to the tertiary enhancement topic - *The future of learning and teaching: defining and delivering an effective and inclusive digital and blended offering.* These were: an inclusive approach with support for staff and students;[11] the use of digital champions;[12] and the use of a collaborative and strategic approach.[13]

12   Three examples of good practice were identified relating to institutional approaches to enhancement. These were: the use of a Learning and Teaching Panel;[14] the effective use of data to inform enhancement activity;[15] and a strategic institutional approach to enhancement.[16]

13   There were two examples of good practice relating to development and implementation of strategy. These were alignment between strategic planning and school and professional service priorities[17] and an institution-wide, student-centred approach to policy and strategy development.[18]

14   There were two examples of good practice relating to the use of data and evidence to inform self-evaluation and decision-making. These were an enhancement-focused approach to annual programme monitoring[19] and the effective use of student journey data to inform enhancement activity.[20]

15   In addition to the above, there were single examples of good practice relating to: widening participation;[21] engagement with the Enhancement Themes;[22] assessment;[23] equality, diversity and inclusion;[24] and a reflective and enhancement-focused approach to annual programme monitoring.[25]

Recommendations for action

16   The reports of three institutions identified recommendations for action relating to professional development opportunities for students. In two cases, these related to postgraduate students who teach[26] (one of these also related to staff who teach)[27]; the other related to training for student representatives.[28]

17   A further three reports[29] highlighted the need for more systematic approaches to professional service review (a theme that emerged clearly during the ELIR 4 cycle). Specific recommendations included explicit focus on enhancement, consistent engagement with staff and students, and externality.

18   In addition to the above, there were single recommendations relating to: the tertiary enhancement topic (see below);[30] implementation of change;[31] strengthening the use of data in quality processes;[32] ensuring greater consistency in design and delivery of assessment;[33] ensuring greater consistency in feedback on assessment;[34] personal tutoring arrangements;[35] curriculum review;[36] ensuring that students have access to external examiner reports;[37] and student engagement in surveys.[38]

Findings relating to the tertiary enhancement topic

Positive practice

19   Institutional quality processes have generally been found to be effective in relation to monitoring and reviewing digital and blended provision, and, as noted above, three examples of good practice were identified in relation to this topic.

20   Beyond the examples of good practice already described, examples of positive practice in relation to digital and blended provision are detailed in the table below.

Institution	Examples of positive practice
University of Aberdeen	• Acting on recommendations from an in-depth institutional review of this topic • Micro-credential in Delivering Tutoring for Online Courses, focusing on Principles for the Delivery of Education • Structures in place to ensure accessibility; equality, diversity and inclusivity impact assessments carried out • Work underway to embed work-based learning in online delivery • Comprehensive support resources for students and staff
University of Dundee	• Strategic priority to transform the institution to be a truly digital community, with staff and students supported to develop the skills they need • The role of curriculum transformation in meeting this strategic priority • Investment in technology including hybrid teaching spaces and lecture recording technology • Common format for all modules to ensure consistency on the virtual learning environment (VLE) • Laptop loan scheme; access to e-learning induction and support materials
University of Glasgow	• Driven by strategic imperative • Documentation provided to QESR team demonstrated 'sound engagement' with the topic
Queen Margaret University	• Commitment to a student-centred approach - students are engaged as partners in decision-making about developments such as the investment in a new VLE • Continued transition away from pandemic-related adaptations to long-term, strategic approach • New fully online postgraduate programmes coming online • Greater flexibility due to lecture recording • Laptop loan scheme; access to e-learning induction and support materials
Royal Conservatoire of Scotland	• Development of a Digital Strategy as well as the consideration of this topic in the Learning and Teaching Strategy and curriculum review • The creation of a centralised digital support, development and management unit • Investment in a new online dashboard and app for staff and students • Continued careful consideration of the balance between in-person and online provision, with input from industry partners
University of Strathclyde	• Pre-existing strategic commitment to the topic; received a commendation in ELIR 4 • Digital champions, comprehensive training for staff, and high-specification infrastructure • Governance of online and blended learning developed to be responsive to student and staff feedback

	• Internal surveys to gauge students' experiences of learning online
University of the West of Scotland	• One of three areas of strategic focus
	• Digital Transformation Project leading to strategic investment
	• 'Digital first' approach to design of learning, teaching and assessment
	• Emphasis on flexibility and on learning design that embraces diversity

Ongoing challenges and opportunities for development

21   As detailed above, one institution received a recommendation in relation to digital and blended learning. This related to a need to ensure greater consistency across programmes with relation to connectivity, access to digital learning spaces, provision of lecture recordings, and adoption of online feedback on exam outcomes.[39]

22   Beyond the recommendation already described, other areas identified as opportunities for development included the setting of minimum standards.[40] One report made clear that investment in the digital estate was a challenge, along with differing levels of engagement across the staff body.[41]

Annex 1: Institutions included in this report

The institutions included in this report and the abbreviated forms of their titles, as used in identifying them in the endnote of the report, are as shown in the following list.

ABD   University of Aberdeen

DUN   University of Dundee

GLA   University of Glasgow

QMU   Queen Margaret University

RCS   Royal Conservatoire of Scotland

STR   University of Strathclyde

UWS   University of the West of Scotland

Endnotes (references to institutions)

[1] QMU
[2] ABD
[3] GLA
[4] STR
[5] QMU, ABD, STR
[6] RCS
[7] ABD, STR
[8] ABD
[9] ABD
[10] UWS
[11] ABD
[12] DUN
[13] STR
[14] QMU
[15] DUN
[16] STR
[17] DUN
[18] UWS
[19] QMU
[20] DUN
[21] UWS
[22] ABD
[23] ABD
[24] ABD
[25] QMU
[26] STR, UWS
[27] UWS
[28] UWS
[29] QMU, DUN, STR
[30] GLA
[31] UWS
[32] UWS
[33] RCS
[34] QMU
[35] ABD
[36] RCS
[37] ABD
[38] QMU
[39] GLA
[40] QMU
[41] RCS