

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

UNIVERSITY EDUCATION COMMITTEE

QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCY SCOTLAND (QAAS) INSTITUTIONAL VISITS UPDATE**1. PURPOSE OF THE PAPER**

The purpose of this paper is to provide the University Education Committee (UEC) with an update on the Quality Assurance Agency Scotland (QAAS) annual Institutional visits during 2021/22.

2. PREVIOUS CONSIDERATION BY /FURTHER APPROVAL REQUIRED

	Board/Committee	Date
Previously considered/ approved by:	n/a	
Further consideration/approval required by:	n/a	

3. RECOMMENDED ACTION

The UEC is asked to **note** the update below and the note of the first visit held, attached as *Annex A*.

4. DISCUSSION**4.1 BACKGROUND**

4.1.1 Each year, the Quality Assurance Agency Scotland (QAAS) undertakes work on behalf of the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) as part of its Outcome Agreement (OA), to provide assurance to the SFC that it is fulfilling its statutory obligation under Section 13 of the *Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005* to secure that provision is made for assessing and enhancing the quality of fundable higher education provided by fundable bodies.

4.1.2 This has, in the recent past, included annual visits to Institutions and, on a periodic basis, the Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) 4 cycle. The ELIR 4 cycle has, however, now concluded and, to allow a review of the ELIR process to be undertaken before another ELIR cycle, or an agreed replacement, begins, transition arrangements have been put in place for academic year 2021-22. These include, for the University of Aberdeen specifically, two institutional liaison visits, designed to better understand successes and challenges and to discuss topics including, but not limited to:

- ELIR actions;
- Ongoing sector priorities;
- The quality of online and blended delivery and arrangements for assuring academic standards and quality;
- Arrangements for student representation, participation and engagement in their learning experience;
- Student satisfaction with their learning and teaching and broader student experience.

4.2 INSTITUTIONAL VISIT 1: QUALITY PROCESSES

- 4.2.1 The first of the University's meetings with the QAAS was held on 15 February 2022. The meeting, focused on Quality Processes was attended by QAAS, Ruth Taylor (Vice-Principal (Education), Gillian Mackintosh (Director of Academic Services and Online Education) and Emma Tough (Assistant Registrar). A representative of the SFC was also in attendance, as an observer of proceedings. The meeting was very positive, with discussion focused on Internal Teaching Review (ITR), QA aspects of Transnational Education (TNE) and the University's annual report on its quality processes to the Scottish Funding Council (SFC). A note of the meeting is attached as *Annex A*.

4.3 INSTITUTIONAL VISIT 2: STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENTS AND APPROACHES

- 4.3.1 The second of the University's meetings with the QAAS is scheduled for 6 June. This meeting will discuss strategic developments linked to learning and teaching, sector themes, student engagement and ELIR progress, with documentation to be submitted in advance including:

- Information relating to developments in student partnership working, including the Student Partnership Agreement;
- The University's ELIR action plan;
- Information relating to any changes in the University's approach to quality enhancement;
- The University's annual summary and/or analysis of student feedback from internal and external student surveys linked to the quality of teaching and learning and the broader student experience, such as the National Student Survey (NSS).

- 4.3.2 Preparations for the second visit are currently underway, engaging colleagues from the Academic Services and Student Experience teams. This includes work to review the University's progress with the recommendations of the QAAS following ELIR 4 in 2018 (paper *UEC/130422/011* on the UEC agenda further refers). An update on the visit and any recommendations arising from it, will follow to a future meeting of the UEC.

4.4 FUTURE REVIEW

- 4.4.1 As the University last underwent ELIR in 2018, periodic review is expected shortly. While the future approach to Institutional review has not yet been determined, as review of ELIR remains ongoing, the steer received from QAAS and SFC representatives has, to date, been that it is unlikely that the University will undergo Enhancement Led Institutional Review (ELIR) in 2022/23, with review arrangements expected to be similar to those in place for 2021/22. Members of the UEC will be kept update to date with any further guidance received in this regard.

5. FURTHER INFORMATION

Further information is available from Ruth Taylor, Vice-Principal (Education (ruth.taylor@abdn.ac.uk), Gillian Mackintosh, Director of Academic Services and Online Education (g.mackintosh@abdn.ac.uk) or Emma Tough, Assistant Registrar (e.tough@abdn.ac.uk).

27 March 2022

Freedom of Information/Confidentiality Status: *Open*



Meeting 1 Record

Tuesday, 15 February 2022

Participants

Caroline Turnbull, Acting Director of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, QAA

Dr Demelza Curnow, Quality Enhancement Manager, QAA

Professor Ruth Taylor, Vice-Principal Education, University of Aberdeen

Emma Hay, Assistant Registrar, University of Aberdeen

Dr Gillian Mackintosh, Director of Academic Services & Online Education, University of Aberdeen

In attendance

Kathryn O'Loan, Assistant Director, Learning and Quality, SFC

Key Topics / Issues discussed

Topic 1: Institution-led Review (ILR)

- The University's process is called Institutional Teaching Review (ITR). All reports go to the Quality Assurance Committee (QAC) and the University's representatives explained that higher level actions or comments progress to the University Education Committee (UEC), whose membership includes all School Directors of Education. A governance review was in progress and the University representatives confirmed that, in revising the remit of membership of QAC and UEC, they are mindful of ensuring appropriate levels of scrutiny of ITR reports, including institutional-level issues and ongoing attention to actions.
- The ITR process is being revised at present. One of the key developments will be ongoing monitoring of actions from ITRs right up to the point of the next ITR. This is in contrast to the previous approach whereby action plans were only considered one year after the ITR. Whilst this had not taken place historically, University representatives confirmed that all ITRs that have taken place over the last year will have ongoing monitoring and this would pick up pace. This would also address the identified issue of overdue actions potentially falling outside of committee oversight.
- As a process, the University representatives suggested that the effectiveness of ITR is considered through both formal and informal mechanisms. This includes reflections on each occasion that an ITR report is received at QAC and, in addition, an overarching annual review.
- Although ITR normally takes place at School level, there were two ITRs that took place at discipline level within the School of Medicine, Medical Sciences and Nutrition. The University representatives confirmed that this School is the exception and that they have found discipline-level to be more appropriate in managing the volume and diversity of provision within this School, although they were satisfied that School-level reviews work effectively for the rest of the University. Consistency within the School and an overview are achieved through the single School Education Committee. Further, the School's

Director of Education is closely involved with both reviews, as well as a number of other senior staff.

- University representatives confirmed that the absence of a student on the ITR panel was the exception rather than the norm and, in the case of Medical Sciences, was a consequence of the student panel member withdrawing late on in the process owing to unforeseen circumstances. Student panel members are normally either sabbatical officers or the Student Association's nomination from the Education Committee and the University has found both models to be effective.
- In the ITRs provided, by far the greatest proportion of external panel members was drawn from other higher education providers in the UK, although the process makes provision for overseas providers and representatives from industry. The University representatives confirmed that they did use industry externals and gave engineering as an example where this had been effective. They explained that the driver for selection was to involve externals who would best enable the School's development.
- All panel members are supported in their review of ITR documents by the Quality Office. Chairs are drawn from the QAC membership so are also well-placed to guide panel members through the process. The University representatives added that, as well as providing training to support panel members, internal members were often drawn from areas that were shortly to be going through ITR themselves to support understanding of and engagement with the process.
- Staffing issues were identified across some ITR reports. The University representatives noted two tranches of funding to address the shortfall in posts and outlined other activity to support staff, including a toolkit that would enable Schools to work more efficiently.
- Some of the resourcing issues identified in ITR reports had been attributed to the ambitious academic portfolios being delivered. The University's representatives confirmed that all provision is subject to a robust planning process when programmes are initially proposed and developed and there needs to be confidence at an institutional level at that point that the programme is viable. Schools then have authority on an ongoing basis for the courses that they are offering within programmes. They noted that the picture was complicated somewhat by the fact that several programmes may use a particular course. They outlined a piece of work that had begun the previous year to support Schools in decision-making around course-level portfolio but that this was a work in progress.

Topic 2: Annual monitoring

- In reporting on the ITR outcomes for the SFC annual monitoring report, University officers explained that the key actions identified were most commonly drawn from those on which there had been the most discussion during the ITR event.
- With regard to postponed reviews by Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs), University officers confirmed there had been no impact on students and both the University and relevant Schools continued to work closely with PSRBs. The University was also taking a proactive approach in working with PSRBs on how their requirements may evolve in the future based on learning during the pandemic. They cited examples of members of the University of Aberdeen taking a sector lead in Education and contributing extensively to the national debates in dentistry and medicine.
- QAA officers had sensed from the report to SFC that the University had not expected to see an improvement in retention for 2020/21, which the University's representatives

agreed was the case. They noted that work to analyse data was ongoing. In exploring data so far, however, they concluded that improved retention was attributable to a number of factors which had been introduced to mitigate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic but which had led to a more generally inclusive and supportive environment. These included: more flexibility on the pace of learning; more innovative approaches to fieldwork and lab-based work; a better understanding of the complex needs of some students; and more innovative assessment. There had also been strengthened personal engagement with many students on an individual level, particularly within Schools. They were now considering how to retain these benefits for the future.

- With regard to the ELIR 4 recommendations, the University representatives provided assurance that the University's structures were being used to ensure that conversations continued on the recommendations that had emerged from the most recent ELIR. In some cases – for example, postgraduate pastoral tutoring – the recommendation had been absorbed into wider University initiatives. As the QAC minutes had indicated progress in some areas but also some continuing aspects to resolve, QAA officers requested a short update table that outlined how actions were being taken forwards and who the responsible officer(s) were within the University. University representatives welcomed this suggestion and noted that they would also bring that mechanism into their formal committee processes.
- Efforts to address workload challenges have included the introduction of a risk-based annual course review process which requires fuller information on some courses and reduces the requirements of others. University representatives gave TNE courses and new courses as examples of those that would be required to complete the fuller version. At present, QAC members work with Schools to agree which courses will be expected to complete the fuller version and data are used to inform decisions. QAA officers encouraged reflection on the process as it develops and recommended establishing a standard data model for transparency and robustness.
- Noting that the degree-level engineering apprenticeship had been suspended, QAA officers explored how the issues identified had evaded the programme approval stage. University representatives outlined work in reconsidering the University's engagement in apprenticeships and the likely withdrawal from this area of provision at the current time although the situation will be kept under review. There had not been sufficient understanding by the decision-makers at the time of approval regarding the infrastructure that was necessary to support apprenticeships and the very specific nature of those structures. Central departments and members of the Senior Management Team were working closely with the School to support current cohorts to successful completion. In the future, the University's focus may move to upskilling instead of apprenticeships.

Topic 3: Appeals, complaints and cases of academic malpractice

- The category of C7 in *Appeals* was observed to be an outlier in the data. This refers to appeals specifically from students who have failed to engage in their studies or respond to interventions from the University and, as a consequence, have had their class certificate removed. The University representatives outlined additional work that was taking place to explore and address cultural challenges that led to some students being less responsive to attempts by the University to provide support until they have missed too much to retrieve the situation. Professor Taylor and Dr Mackintosh would shortly be

visiting the Qatar campus and this was something they would be discussing with colleagues there.

Topic 4: Data trends

- The University noted in its submission that their internal work in this area had been delayed owing to unexpected staff absence so this will be deferred until the second meeting.

Topic 5: Assurance of Q&S, including UKQC

- University officers described the mapping to the UK Quality Code as a living document which they took to committee biannually and used both in assurance and to identify areas where there were opportunities for enhancement. In terms of their approach, they considered they had aimed for the middle ground relative to the sector overall, with sufficient detail for it to be of genuine practical use but not so much that it became unwieldy. They confirmed that the mapping document was used across the University by staff at all levels and had been well-received. They also noted that the exercise had helped draw out connections between different policies and strengthened their quality management.
- QAA officers noted that the University had signed up to the QAA QE-TNE process.

Topic 6: AOB

- The University is currently working on the re-licensing of its Qatar campus which is a requirement of Qatar.
- The second meeting would include:
 - how the University was addressing the sector challenge relating to unexplained grade improvement and degree outcomes;
 - the Aberdeen 2040 initiative;
 - data trends (see *Topic 3* above);
 - progress on the action plan from the most recent ELIR and how monitoring and action would be monitored up to the next review; and
 - a further discussion on the University's governance arrangements, with a particular focus on the University Education Committee (UEC).
- The University noted that they anticipated their next institutional review in 2023 so were keen for an update on the method and timing of the next cycle. QAA representatives advised that, currently, they expected arrangements for the next two sessions to have a number of similarities with the current year, although some amendments may be necessary to ensure ongoing compliance with European criteria. Beyond that, work was continuing with the SFC as it took forward its plans to support the development of a Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework which would apply to colleges and universities. QAA expects the next cyclical review method to commence during academic session 2024-25 with the arrangements for the next two sessions being used as a 'part 1' of the next review cycle.

Topic 7: Update from QAAS

- An update from QAAS was shared via e-mail after the meeting.

Follow-up actions agreed between QAA Officer and Institution

- The University would provide a short update table to show progress against recommendations made at the ELIR. This would include how actions were being taken forwards and who was responsible. It would be used to inform a conversation at the second institutional liaison meeting on monitoring of action and how this would continue up to the next institutional review.
- The University would provide a sample of annual reports, beginning with the courses for one programme and then following the process and documentation through to QAC reporting.
- QAA would forward an update by email.
- QAA would share a note of this meeting with the University within the next two weeks. The University would have the opportunity to review this for factual accuracy.

Observations / Recommendations by the QAA Officer

- Following the retirement of the Dean of Quality, the University has reviewed its quality management arrangements and will shortly be advertising for a Head of Quality instead. Unlike the Dean roles, which are for three-year terms, this would be a permanent position and intended to enable greater resilience and consistency. The new arrangements will be kept under review for the first year and the University confirmed they would consider having a Dean of Quality as well if they concluded that would be useful. Although this will be a professional services role, applicants with an academic background will be welcomed. Overall, there has been expansion of resource for the quality management function.
- There is a significant change agenda in progress as the University seeks to enhance the student experience based on what has been learnt through the pandemic about the complexity of its student body and those individuals' needs.
- The revised annual monitoring process supports a risk-based approach that means reporting requirements can be reduced under some circumstances. This process is still under development. There would be clear benefits in establishing a standard data set and criteria that determine whether a fuller or lighter-touch annual course review is necessary.
- A Senate Effectiveness Review has led to the Quality Assurance Committee (QAC) moving from its current place as a sub-committee of the University Education Committee (UEC) to being a direct committee of Senate. New terms of reference are in progress. This is expected to provide an opportunity for more effective ongoing monitoring, particularly of institutional teaching review. QAA officers encouraged this approach.
- There has been an issue around staffing resource but the University has released two tranches of funding to address this now that the recruitment situation is clearer. The University confirmed that the staff:student ratio (SSR) is improving and that this is being complemented by additional work to support academic staff through a workload review. There is also work in progress to support Schools in portfolio decision-making and other toolkits to support efficiency. The continuation of this is encouraged.