

## UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

## UNIVERSITY EDUCATION COMMITTEE

## QUALITY ENHANCEMENT AND STANDARDS REVIEW: FINDINGS

## 1. PURPOSE OF THE PAPER

The purpose of this paper is to provide members of the UEC with the findings of the recent Quality Enhancement and Standards Review by the Quality Assurance Agency Scotland (QAAS), which took place on 14 February 2023. In particular, the paper notes that the Review team is **confident** in the University's progress.

Members of the Committee are invited to **discuss** the findings of the Quality Enhancement and Standards Review.

## 2. PREVIOUS CONSIDERATION BY /FURTHER APPROVAL REQUIRED

	Board/Committee	Date
Previously considered/approved by	Court	26 April 2023
Further consideration/ approval required by	UEC QAC	16 May 2023 18 May 2023

## 3. RECOMMENDED ACTION

Members of the UEC are invited to discuss the findings of the Quality Enhancement and Standards Review detailed in the Report attached as **Appendix A**.

## 4. BACKGROUND

4.1 The Quality Assurance Agency Scotland (QAAS) review process, Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR), completed its fourth and final cycle in 2021/22. ELIR has been replaced by a new external institutional review methodology which will be a two-phase approach as follows:

- **Phase 1:** Quality Enhancement and Standards Review (QESR)/Institutional Liaison Meeting (ILM) (2022/23-2023/24)
- **Phase 2:** Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework (TQEF) (2024/25 onwards)

4.2 The new external institutional review method is being developed in the context of a major Scottish Funding Council (SFC) Review: *Coherent Provision and Sustainability: A Review of Tertiary Education and Research*. A key outcome of this review to date, has recommended the development of a new Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework (TQEF). The TQEF will cover both Further and Higher Education provision under a single framework. The requirements to comply with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) also influenced the revised process along with a comprehensive evaluation of ELIR 4. The new TQEF is being developed in close consultation with the sector and is due for implementation in 2024/25.

4.3 Pending completion of the development of the TQEF, there is a need for continued external review of quality to ensure the SFC can fulfil its statutory obligations under section 13 of the *Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005* in regard to quality assurance and enhancement. As such, the QAAS have implemented a phased approach to quality enhancement arrangements, with Phase 1 commencing in

2022/23-2023/24, and Phase 2 commencing in 2024/25, coinciding with the publication and launch of the TQEF.

4.4 During the two academic years which comprise Phase 1 (2022/23 and 2023/24) an institution will undergo QESR during one and will have an Institutional Liaison Meeting (ILM) in the other. The relative timing of QESR and ILM are driven by the timing of ELIR 4 and, as an institution who underwent ELIR early in the cycle, the University's QESR visit took place in 2022/23 with an ILM being scheduled for 2023/24.

4.5 The Quality Enhancement and Standards Review (QESR) for the University took place on 14 February 2023, following a comprehensive submission of required documentation. On the day, a number of sessions took place with the Review panel:

- Session with HEI Key Contacts
- Session with Students
- Session with Quality Assurance-focused Staff
- Session with Quality Enhancement-focused Staff

## 5. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

5.1 There are only two possible outcomes from this process: confident, or not confident. The Review team reached the following conclusion for the University of Aberdeen: "From the evidence presented, the review team is **confident** that the institution is making effective progress in continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision to enable effective arrangements to be in place for managing academic standards and the quality of the student learning experience." In addition, four areas of good practice were identified, and only two recommendations for action both of which the Review team understood were actions already being taken forward by the University. These are summarised below and outlined in detail in the report, attached as **Appendix A**.

5.2 The report has been reviewed for factual accuracy by the Vice-Principal (Education), Dean for Quality Assurance and Enhancement, and Director of Academic Services and Online Education, and returned to QAA Scotland. The report was published on the QAAS website on 11 April 2023.

5.3 The QESR report identified the following areas of good practice:

5.3.1 *Effective implementation of University strategies*: the University has an effective approach to strategic planning in relation to teaching and learning, particularly the engagement with the strategy and its underpinning action plans.

5.3.2 *Engagement with Enhancement Themes*: the University has successfully embedded learning from the national Enhancement Themes, particularly in relation to institutional policy and practice.

5.3.3 *An Inclusive Approach to Blended Education/Learning and Teaching*: the University has made significant progress with its vision for blended education, effectively using learning and recommendations from its in-depth review and evaluation of blended and online learning to develop the vision for education.

5.3.4 *Student Partnership*: the University and Aberdeen University Students' Association (AUSA) have a long-standing, embedded and collaborative relationship based on partnership working across all aspects of University life.

5.4 In terms of identified recommendations, the QESR report identified the following:

5.4.1 *Student Access to External Examiner Reports (QAC)*: ensuring the publication of External Examiner reports by the end of the academic year 2022/23. Progress is being made to develop communications to Schools and to students in this regard.

5.4.2 *Personal Tutoring (UEC, via SSEC)*: continuing work to finalise the University's approach to personal tutoring arrangements, ensuring the provision of equity of experience for all students, and that the

support is clearly communicated by the end of the academic year 2022/23. Progress is being made to consolidate this information and to present it to students in a meaningful way.

- 5.5 Next steps include the development of an action plan, which will follow from the recommendations made by the review team and will be approved through the University Education Committee and the Quality Assurance Committee, with ongoing monitoring taking place. The Institutional Liaison Meeting (ILM) which forms part of the follow-up to the QESR visit will take place on 23 January 2024.

## **6. FURTHER INFORMATION**

Further information is available from Ruth Taylor, Vice-Principal Education ([ruth.taylor@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:ruth.taylor@abdn.ac.uk)) Steve Tucker, Dean for Quality Assurance and Enhancement ([s.j.tucker@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:s.j.tucker@abdn.ac.uk)), and Gillian Mackintosh, Director of Academic Services and Online Education ([g.mackintosh@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:g.mackintosh@abdn.ac.uk))

4 April 2023

**Freedom of Information/Confidentiality Status:** Open

# Quality Enhancement and Standards Review

University of Aberdeen

## Review Report

February 2023



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## Introduction

This is a report of a review under the [Quality Enhancement and Standards Review](#) (QESR) method conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) as part of Phase 1 of the Scottish Quality Enhancement arrangements at the University of Aberdeen.

The review took place on 14 February 2023 and was conducted by a review team, as follows:

- Mr Rory O'Neill (Student Reviewer)
- Ms Katrina Swanton (Coordinating Reviewer)
- Dr Gillian Thomson (Academic Reviewer)

QESR is Phase 1 of a two-phase approach that enables the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) to fulfil its statutory obligation under Section 13 of the *Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005* to ensure that provision is made for assessing and enhancing the quality of fundable higher education provided by fundable bodies for academic quality and enhancement between 2022-24.

The main purpose of the review was to:

- provide assurance about the provider's management of its responsibilities for academic standards to inform an enhancement-led full institutional review in Phase 2
- provide assurance about the provider's management and enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities for students to inform an enhancement-led full review in Phase 2
- report on any features of good practice
- make recommendations for action.

## About the University of Aberdeen

Founded in 1495, the University of Aberdeen is one of Scotland's four ancient universities.

The Aberdeen 2040 Strategy states that the University remains committed to its foundational purpose of being open to all and dedicated to the pursuit of truth in the service of others. The University achieves its purpose through excellence in its core activities of education and research. The 20 Commitments in Aberdeen 2040 are underpinned by its four Strategic Themes which, over the next 20 years, will shape the University's learning, discovery and actions. The Themes are inclusive, interdisciplinary, international and sustainable.

The University describes itself as offering a flexible undergraduate curriculum that encourages students to grow as independent learners, with its degree programmes combining breadth and depth. The postgraduate curriculum is growing and, as with the undergraduate curriculum, draws from the University's research.

The University currently offers over 600 undergraduate and over 380 taught postgraduate degree programmes, many of which are professionally accredited, across a wide range of disciplines, with the latest statistics showing it has approximately 21,500 students, with approximately 685 studying on transnational campuses and 1055 studying online. The University currently has 3,600 staff.

The University has two campuses: one is at King's College in Old Aberdeen; and a second campus, accommodating Medicine, Dentistry, Medical Science and Nutrition, is located

adjacent to Aberdeen Royal Infirmary. The University established a partnership with Al Faleh Group (AFG) College in Doha in 2017 which sits alongside other transnational education partnerships.

## Findings

From the evidence presented, the review team is **confident** that the University of Aberdeen is making effective progress in continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision to enable effective arrangements to be in place for managing academic standards and the quality of the student learning experience.

## Good practice

The QESR team found the following **features of good practice**:

- **Effective implementation of University strategies:** The University has an effective approach to strategic planning in relation to learning and teaching, with a particular strength being the widespread engagement with, and ownership of, the University Strategy and its underpinning action plans, by staff and students. Among all staff there is a clear understanding of how the strategy and action plans inform institutional priorities, supported by appropriate monitoring and evaluation of impact to ensure the achievement of strategic goals (paragraph 13).
- **Engagement with the Enhancement Themes:** The University has successfully embedded learning from the national Enhancement Themes, enabling Theme priorities to be realised in a wide range of institutional policy and practice including ongoing work to decolonise the curriculum. Student interns play active roles in the delivery of the University's Learning and Teaching Enhancement Programme (LTEP) of Themes-related projects and the institution adopts a range of approaches to effectively share practice including a cross-institutional community of practice which is valued by staff (paragraph 14).
- **An inclusive approach to blended education/learning and teaching:** The University has made significant progress with its vision for blended education. It has effectively used the learning and recommendations from its in-depth review and evaluation of blended and online learning and assessment practice to support the development of its vision for Education, its Principles for the Delivery of Education and a comprehensive suite of support materials and resources for both students and staff (paragraph 36).
- **Student partnership:** The University and Aberdeen University Students' Association (AUSA) have a long-standing, embedded and collaborative relationship which is based on genuine and effective partnership working across all aspects of university life. This relationship brings a wide range of benefits including representative structures that support the diversity of the student population, students as engaged members of strategic Task and Finish Groups, and the successful development of the student intern role which provides effective opportunities for students to play a full part in the development of university policy and practice associated with learning, teaching and the wider student experience (paragraph 20).

## Recommendations for action

The QESR team makes the following recommendations for action:

- **Student access to external examiner reports:** Ensure that all students have access to external examiner reports for their programme of study by the end of academic year 2022-23 (paragraph 30).
- **Personal tutoring:** Continue work to finalise the University's approach to personal tutoring arrangements, to ensure it provides equity of experience for the University's changing student population, particularly postgraduate taught students, and the support provided is clearly communicated to all students by the end of academic year 2022-23 (paragraph 29).



# Institutional approach to quality enhancement

## Strategic approach to enhancement

1 The QESR team is confident that the University has effective arrangements in place to appropriately monitor and review its strategic approach to enhancement. The team considered a range of documents, including the Aberdeen 2040 Strategy and its implementation plan, the Education Action Plan, Principles for the Delivery of Education, SFC Outcome Agreement report, and minutes from meetings of key institutional committees with responsibility for quality and standards, and for learning, teaching and the wider student experience. In addition, the team met with staff and students during the review visit.

2 The University's Strategy - Aberdeen 2040 - sets out the direction of the University for the next 20 years and is focused on four strategic themes: 'inclusive, interdisciplinary, international and sustainable'. The Strategy also responds to five interdisciplinary challenges which the University is committed to tackling. Aberdeen 2040 sets out a range of commitments with respect to each of the strategic themes, with a core set of strategic themes for education and research. A comprehensive implementation plan to 2025 has been developed to facilitate the delivery of Aberdeen 2040 over an initial five-year period, along with a detailed action plan, which is updated on a rolling annual basis. The University Senior Management Team (SMT) has responsibility for the implementation plan and detailed action plan with progress reviewed at least twice per year. Each of the academic schools and professional services also produce annual plans with a focus on delivery and support for education and research.

3 Staff and students confirmed that a comprehensive and collaborative consultation was carried out to support the development of the Strategy with appropriate opportunities provided to contribute. Students who met the QESR team had a clear understanding of the aims of the Aberdeen 2040 Strategy and its four strategic themes, and provided the QESR team with a number of examples where its implementation was already impacting positively on aspects of their studies and student life. These include students being involved in the University's project to decolonise the curriculum and the use of student interns in a number of the Task and Finish Groups (paragraph 6) which have been established to support the delivery of the University's vision for education.

4 The staff met by the QESR team also had a clear understanding of the aims and themes of the Aberdeen 2040 Strategy and spoke very positively about the impact that the Principles for the Delivery of Education are having on their approaches to teaching and learning (paragraph 7). The team heard from staff that the themes contained within Aberdeen 2040 were, in a number of instances, seen as directly aligning with professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) requirements for those disciplines undergoing accreditation. Staff also confirmed that the themes within the Strategy are being used by the academic schools during the Internal Teaching Review (ITR) process, where staff found them useful to align to in order to effectively communicate work being done (paragraph 41).

5 The University's vision for education, aligning with the Aberdeen 2040 Strategy, is set out in a five-year, high-level Education Action Plan (to 2025), which has been developed to 'recognise that Education at the University of Aberdeen encompasses a broad range of areas and some of which go beyond the Aberdeen 2040 aims and actions'. In addition the University has developed a more detailed annual plan of activities which is updated on a rolling annual basis. This suite of documents explains the University's 'Education Strategy'. The Vice-Principal Education has responsibility for delivery of the Education Strategy, with oversight and monitoring provided by the University Education Committee (UEC). The University's vision for Education is based on five principles: 'Nurture active learning; Make

most effective use of in-person teaching; Assessment should be authentic and efficient; Provide timely and meaningful feedback; Ensure accessibility and inclusivity'. The QESR team notes the comprehensive nature of both the Education and Annual Action Plans which clearly set out the University's approach, and that their development has usefully drawn on reviews of the institution's practice implemented during the pandemic (paragraphs 32-36).

6 A number of Task and Finish Groups (TFGs) and Steering Groups, involving both staff and student interns (paragraph 17) from across the University, have been established to support the implementation of the Education Action Plan. These groups report progress and findings to a range of committees including UEC, and are used as an effective mechanism to share good practice across the University. The QESR team learned from staff that the Aberdeen 2040 Delivery of Education has been, and the Graduate Attributes and Skills TFGs will be, instrumental in the delivery of the education strategic objectives. The International Experience TFG is working in conjunction with other TFGs, to develop approaches to support virtual student mobility with the Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) pilot being an early example of developing practice. In addition, the Transforming Experience of Students through Assessment (TESTA) pilot is already generating a real eagerness among the staff involved to try different forms of assessment. Staff outlined that the TESTA pilots are already starting to deliver practical changes including approaches to formative feedback, and inclusivity and accessibility within assessment design.

7 The QESR team learned that during 2020-21, a range of approaches was used to capture student and staff views on the blended delivery of teaching, learning and assessment, and the Evaluation of Blended Learning report was produced (paragraphs 3 and 32). The QESR team is impressed by how the University has used this information to develop its Principles for the Delivery of Education for Academic Year 2022-23, which have been designed to align to and support the education strand of the Aberdeen 2040 Strategy (paragraph 2).

8 School Directors of Education play a key role, along with staff and student members of each School Education Committee, in embedding the University's vision for education and its associated action plans, including monitoring and evaluation of the outcomes. The School Director of Education role is an effective conduit for supporting the implementation of institutional strategy within the academic schools and supporting the sharing of good practice.

9 The QESR team can confirm that the University has appropriate plans and mechanisms in place to support it to effectively engage with the Scottish Enhancement Themes, including the current Resilient Learning Communities Theme, for which the University's Vice-Principal Education is Deputy Theme Leader and a member of the QAA Scotland Theme Leadership Team, providing strategic leadership to support the delivery of the Theme. The Dean for Quality Assurance and Quality Enhancement and the student Vice-President Education are also members of the Theme Leaders' Group (TLG). The University's Year 3 plan outlines the University's cross-institutional approach to the delivery of its Themes' work, which is aligned to the Aberdeen 2040 Strategy (paragraphs 2-5), its approach to digital/online learning (paragraphs 32-36), and involves staff and students working in partnership.

10 At the time of this review, the University's Learning and Teaching Enhancement Programme (LTEP) was funding over 20 active projects related to the current Enhancement Theme including staff and student mental wellbeing and accessibility for all, with more projects planned for the final year of the Theme (2022-23). Many of the LTEP projects involve student interns, who are also part of the University's wider student intern network

(paragraph 17). Staff who met the QESR team discussed the specific example of a project where student interns were developing an evidence base on how care-experience students use the University student services.

11 The QESR team understands that outcomes from the LTEP projects will be presented at the University's annual Academic Symposium on Resilient Learning Communities in April 2023. Both the annual Academic Symposium and an institution Community of Practice (with representation from all the academic schools and the professional services areas) are being used to share developments in policy and practice related to the University's Enhancement Themes work and the implementation of the Education Strategy.

12 The University also contributes to wider Themes work including the 'Understanding Micro-credentials and Small Qualifications in Scotland' project, the 'Anti-Racist Curriculum Project' and the 'Valuing and Recognising Prior Learning and Experience' project. The QESR team heard that staff have been actively encouraged to share the Enhancement Themes projects and resources they are working on by submitting proposals to conferences, and in June 2023 the University will host an international sector conference which aims to share practice and celebrate higher education, focusing on compassionate approaches to education, and will positively promote the achievements of the current Resilient Learning Communities Enhancement Theme. The team understands that through linkages with the sector-wide Anti-Racist Curriculum Project, the University's Decolonising the Curriculum Steering Group is developing a set of principles and working on a suite of resources to support the academic schools to make changes to their curriculums. The University is also continuing to work on the development of a toolkit of case studies and resources from its Theme-related projects.

13 The QESR team has identified as **good practice** the University's effective approach to strategic planning in relation to learning and teaching, with a particular strength being the widespread engagement with, and ownership of, the University Strategy and its underpinning action plans, by staff and students. Among all staff there is a clear understanding of how the strategy and action plans inform institutional priorities, supported by appropriate monitoring and evaluation of impact to ensure the achievement of strategic goals (paragraphs 2-5).

14 The University has successfully embedded learning from the national Enhancement Themes, enabling Theme priorities to be realised in a wide range of institutional policy and practice including ongoing work to decolonise the curriculum. Student interns play active roles in the delivery of the University's Learning and Teaching Enhancement Programme (LTEP) of Themes-related projects. The institution also adopts a range of approaches to effectively share practice including a cross-institutional community of practice, as part of its annual Academic Symposium and through the production of a range of toolkits and resources. The University actively contributes to a range of sector-level Theme work including the 'Understanding Micro-credentials and Small Qualifications in Scotland' project, the 'Anti-Racist Curriculum Project' and the 'Valuing and Recognising Prior Learning and Experience' project. The QESR team has identified the University's approach as **good practice**.

## Student partnership

15 The QESR team is confident that the University has an effective approach to developing and maintaining student engagement and partnership arrangements. The team considered the Student Partnership Agreement (SPA) for session 2021-22, the review documents for the SPA, key committee minutes, and meetings with staff and students. The team noted that, at the time of this visit, the SPA was being reviewed by a joint working group consisting of representatives from the University and the Aberdeen University Students' Association (AUSA). In meeting staff involved in the SPA development, the team learned that AUSA and the University are currently working together to ensure that, in the future, the SPA is more objective-focused and identifies priority actions. In meetings with the team, student representatives recognised the value of the SPA as a tool for embedding the ethos of partnership with the University and the associated engagement in supporting student partnership working between both organisations.

16 The QESR team considers the University of Aberdeen's approach to student engagement to be a particular strength, with evidence of student feedback and participation across all key processes linked to the management of quality and standards. The University has in place appropriate policies and procedures to ensure appropriate representation of students on key university committees related to quality assurance and enhancement including University Court, and Senate and its sub-committees including the University Education and Quality Assurance Committees. Students have ex-officio membership of these committees from the AUSA President and Vice-President (Education) or their nominees. Students confirmed that the University provides appropriate training to support students undertaking committee representation roles.

17 From the documentation supplied by the University on its Education Strategy (paragraphs 5 and 6), the QESR team view student involvement in each of the Task and Finish Groups (TFGs) and working groups, and the establishment of the role of student intern as particularly positive because this allows students to be equals in the decision-making associated with these groups. The team heard in meetings with staff and students, that student engagement in this way is supporting a strong culture of partnership working - for example, in areas such as Decolonising the Curriculum (paragraph 12), and appointing student interns to support on aspects of developments such as the Principles for Delivery of Education (paragraphs 33 and 34) and the TESTA pilot project (paragraph 6). Student interns who met the team expressed a great amount of ownership for the work that they are engaged with including, for example, running student focus groups, and staff also commented positively on the levels of student engagement that the institution is currently experiencing in key enhancement projects.

18 At academic school level, undergraduate and postgraduate taught student representation is through elected Class Reps who attend the Staff-Student Liaison Committees (SSLCs), and elected Student Association School Convenors who are the lead student representative for each School. Student Association School Convenors support elected class representatives and attend academic school-level committees - for example, School Education Committees. The QESR team understands that elected Postgraduate Research (PGR) student representatives are also members of the Doctoral Reps Group, which meets regularly with the PGR School to discuss PGR matters. The Doctoral Reps group provides a platform for School PGR representatives to collectively represent the PGR community. It provides a direct line of engagement between all PGR students, the PGR School and university committees. Members of the Doctoral Reps Group attend various university committees and working groups including the PGR Committee, Research Policy Committee and the PGR Task and Finish Group. Based on evidence from committee minutes and meetings with staff and students, academic staff clearly demonstrated an

openness to receiving feedback from students and addressing issues raised quickly and fully. Students commented positively on their experience as representatives, confirmed they had appropriate opportunities to give feedback on strategy and policy development and on key decisions. Students also confirmed that the class representative training provided by the AUSA had been useful and accessible to engage with and had effectively prepared them for their role.

19 The QESR team can confirm that the University offers an appropriate range of formal and informal mechanisms to allow all students, regardless of place, mode and stage of study, to feed back on their experience including participating in the National Student Survey (NSS), the Aberdeen Student Experience Survey (ASES), SSLCs, focus groups and Course Feedback Forms. Students confirmed that they are confident that this data is effectively used in decision-making across the University to improve the student experience.

20 The University and AUSA have a long-standing, embedded and collaborative relationship which is based on genuine and effective partnership working across all aspects of university life and was identified by the QESR team as **good practice**. This relationship brings a wide range of benefits to the student experience including representative structures that support the diversity of the student population and students as engaged members of strategic Task and Finish Groups. The development of the student intern role provides effective opportunities for students to play a full part in the development of university policy and practice associated with learning, teaching and the wider student experience with students often taking leadership roles in the work with which they engage. Students are clear that their contributions are valued and acted upon.

## Action taken since ELIR 4

21 The QESR team is confident that the University has effective arrangements in place to monitor and review the actions taken in response to ELIR 4. The team considered the ELIR 4 follow-up report, action plan and minutes from key university committees and followed up on key areas in meetings with staff and students.

22 The evidence submitted allowed the QESR team to conclude that the University has continued to enhance and embed the commendations made during the last ELIR. For example, the University remains dedicated to its commitment to fair access and supporting student transition, linking their overarching strategic direction to their strategy for equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) as outlined in the Aberdeen 2040 Strategy. Examples of successfully completed initiatives include the North of Scotland University Collaborative Project and the University of Aberdeen Business School Outreach Project.

23 The QESR team learned, through meeting with senior staff, that progress with the recommendations from ELIR 4 was considered by the Senior Management Team (SMT) and presented to University Senate. The University Education Committee (UEC) has been responsible for monitoring the effectiveness of the changes made in response to ELIR 4 and has ongoing responsibility to monitor and evaluate the implementation of further actions arising.

24 ELIR 4 identified seven recommendations, on each of which it is evident that the University has taken action in a systematic way, with the University's action plan providing a detailed record of progress and the status of each action. The QESR team note that three recommendations remain ongoing and no specific completion dates for these were provided in the documentation supplied. Senior university staff acknowledged that these recommendations remain ongoing and that an action plan has been compiled to ensure these would be completed by the end of this academic year.

25 Based on the evidence supplied by the University, the QESR team are content that the four completed ELIR recommendations have been appropriately addressed. The relationship between the Postgraduate Research School and the academic schools has been further developed through a range of changes including: harmonising and improving processes for recruitment, induction, training and monitoring the progress of PGR students; rebuilding the PGR website; the establishment of a 'Doctoral Researchers Group (DRG)'; a professional development programme for PGR supervisors; a supervisor's handbook; a workshop for those who are new to the supervision of PGR students; and regular update training sessions for experienced supervisors. The team heard that these developments, particularly the training for PGR supervisors, has been very positively received by academic staff.

26 The QESR team is satisfied, based on the information provided, that appropriate progress has been made with respect to the management of arrangements for collaborative partnerships to allow the University to ensure that the Register of Partnerships and Collaborative Provision is current and complete. The University's Academic Services team has responsibility for maintaining this register. The team learned that all collaborative agreements are approved by the Programme Management Committee before progressing through standard university quality processes for programme approval, annual monitoring and Internal Teaching Review (ITR). Staff involved in supporting the delivery of collaborative partner programmes confirmed that external examiners have responsibilities for both home and collaborative partner versions of programmes.

27 The University has established appropriate mechanisms to ensure that all new staff complete its 'Learning and Teaching in HE' course within one year of joining the institution and receive a range of support information from the Centre for Academic Development (CAD). PGR students who teach are also required to complete a professional development programme. Finally, the QESR team concluded having considered a range of documented evidence, including a sample of ITR reports and school Critical Analysis reports, that the role of professional services has been strengthened within the University's ITR process and is consistent with sector expectations (paragraph 41).

28 In response to the ELIR 4 recommendation, the University is currently undertaking an extensive review of its personal tutoring system, which senior university staff recognised had taken longer to carry out than expected. Early positive outcomes of this review have been greater clarity of, and support for, the role of the Senior Personal Tutor and a website containing support information for staff and students, which has been well received by those who met the QESR team. The current personal tutor arrangements for undergraduate (UG) students are well understood by staff and students. However, arrangements for postgraduate taught and postgraduate research students appear to be more bespoke and vary depending on subject area. The ELIR team noted that the term 'personal tutor' is not consistently adopted with a variety of other roles used to fulfil the function of a personal tutor.

29 While all students assured the team that they knew they could approach academic staff and access the University's centralised student support services when they needed help, the QESR team **recommends** that the University continues work to finalise its approach to personal tutoring arrangements, to ensure it provides equity of experience for the University's changing student population - particularly postgraduate taught students - and the support provided is clearly communicated to all students by the end of academic year 2022-23.

30 Since ELIR 4, the University has reviewed its arrangements for the monitoring, training and induction of external examiners (EEs), setting out a model where training delivery is split, carried out centrally for university-wide aspects of the role and followed by

training in academic schools for specific discipline requirements. Further clarification has been provided to EEs regarding training responsibilities and there is now a dedicated area within the University's virtual learning environment which contains policy and institutional information and training requirements. The QESR team understands that providing students with access to EE reports for their programmes is an ongoing matter. The team found in meeting with students, they had some knowledge of the role of external examiners through their course handbooks but very little understanding of the external examiners reports for their programmes - that these reports should be available to them, how to access the reports and how external examiner feedback informs practice. The QESR team therefore **recommends** that the University ensures that all students have access to external examiner reports for their programme of study by the end of academic year 2022-23.

## Sector-wide enhancement topic

31 The QESR team is confident that the University has effective arrangements in place to monitor and review its approach to defining and delivering effective and inclusive digital/blended learning. The team considered the update paper provided by the University, the Evaluation of Blended Learning report, minutes from key institutional committees, and met with staff and students.

32 The QESR team is able to confirm that the University has been further developing its online and blended learning approaches as a result of digital developments accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The University's approach is grounded in the recommendations made following a wide-ranging and comprehensive evaluation of blended teaching, learning and assessment across the institution conducted in 2021. The resulting evaluation report is comprehensive in its consideration of data, including feedback from both students and staff, and informed by sector-wide practice and evidence. Work to action all of the recommendations in the evaluation report remains ongoing.

33 The QESR team was impressed by the manner in which the University has effectively used this evaluation information to support the development of its 'Principles for the Delivery of Education for Academic Year 2022-23', which have been designed to align to and support the education strand of the Aberdeen 2040 Strategy. The team note that these Principles were developed through work supported by one of the student interns (paragraphs 10 and 17), discussed across all the academic schools through mechanisms like School Education Committees, were formalised through the University committee structure, and are framed in terms of commitments to learning and teaching from both staff and students.

34 These Principles have been designed to be both student and staff-facing, and a set of resources and toolkits has been developed for both groups to facilitate a community of learning, with the University setting out its commitment to delivery and outlining the expectations for student engagement with the process. Staff spoke positively about the support that had been developed for them and outlined a number of specific resources that have influenced and supported changes in their learning and teaching practice. These include a micro-credentials upskilling course (Delivering Tutoring for Online Courses) which has been offered in advance of each academic year since the pandemic, focusing on the Principles for the Delivery of Education, and a range of detailed case study examples to support implementation of the evaluation recommendations.

35 The Aberdeen 2040 Strategy and the Principles for the Delivery of Education make clear the importance of embedding inclusivity and accessibility throughout the overarching strategy. The Digital Accessibility Working Group supports the institution to be compliant with regulations in this area. Regular Equality and Diversity Impact assessments will continue as part of the delivery of learning and teaching across the institution. Working groups have also

been established to embed work-integrated learning opportunities for students incorporating online delivery methods and to raise the awareness of contract cheating among students and provide additional support.

36 The University has made significant progress with its vision for blended education. It has effectively used the learning and recommendations from its in-depth review and evaluation of blended and online learning and assessment practice to support the development of its vision for Education, its Principles for the Delivery of Education and a comprehensive suite of support materials and resources for both students and staff. The QESR team considers this to be a feature of **good practice**. Staff and students spoke about the positive impact on the learning, teaching and assessment experience of students and provided a range of examples of changes to practice including more variety of assessment formats, direct linkage of teaching material to the four pillars of the Strategy, and students in Aberdeen working collaboratively with students in international partner campuses and with professionals overseas.

## Academic standards and quality processes

### Key features of the institution's approach to managing quality and setting, maintaining, reviewing and assessing academic standards

37 The QESR team is confident that the University has effective arrangements for the monitoring and review of its approach to managing quality and to setting, maintaining, reviewing and assessing academic standards. The team considered the University's Academic Quality Handbook; samples from the annual monitoring process; internal teaching review documentation; papers and minutes from institutional committees; and met with staff and students. There was a high level of consistency across the sources of evidence considered by the team, which demonstrates processes that are well understood and had clear outcomes.

38 The QESR team found that the University's arrangements for managing quality and setting standards meet the expectations of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code) and align with the guidance issued by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC). Institutional policies relating to programme and course development and approval are aligned to sector expectations expressed in the Quality Code, take account of relevant Subject Benchmark Statements, the *Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework* (SCQF) and relevant qualification frameworks. The team was assured that the University had a robust plan for reviewing and updating the policies under the remit of UEC up to 2024-25, including incorporating recommendations from current Task and Finish Groups (paragraph 6). In addition, a new working group (Academic Policy and Regulations Group (APRG)) is responsible for the development and regular review of education policy and regulations and for ensuring their alignment with the Quality Code and wider academic infrastructure. Any recommended changes to the University's education policies and regulations arising from APRG's work would be approved by the University Quality Assurance Committee (QAC).

39 The University's Academic Quality Handbook contains the University's policies, procedures and regulations relating to all aspects of teaching and learning. The effectiveness of these policies and procedures is overseen by the QAC chaired by the Dean of Quality Assurance and Enhancement, which has representation from each school and the student body. The University uses three processes to monitor and review academic standards across all its taught provision: Annual Course Review (ACR), Annual Programme Review (APR) and Internal Teaching Review (ITR).



40 Each of the academic schools manage the ACR process, reviewing these forms internally. All ACR forms are also submitted to QAC and a sample of these are considered, typically targeting higher risk courses - such as those delivered by a partner, new courses or courses where problems have been previously identified. APRs are submitted by the academic schools to QAC and are discussed, with the sample of minutes considered by the QESR team demonstrating that any policy issues identified are referred to relevant committees for consideration, as appropriate.

41 ITR is conducted at school-level by panels comprising internal and external academic peers and student members, informed by an evidence-based critical analysis, and supported by the school's quality assurance repository (which is prepopulated with course and programme annual monitoring reports and their responses; professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) reports and responses; past ITR submissions and follow-up reporting; and the School Plan, quality assurance metrics and action plans). Since the last ELIR, the ITR process has been amended to integrate professional services review and reflect the extent and quality of interactions between student-facing professional services, and the academic school and its students to identify areas for enhancement (paragraph 27). Staff from relevant professional services, including Registry, the Careers and Employability Service, Student Experience and Student Support engage in each school's ITR. Based on the sample of ILR documents supplied, the QESR team is assured that the ITR process is robust and effectively supported by the University.

42 The University has effective arrangements in place for the management of assessment. The University's Academic Quality Handbook details the Code of Practice on Assessment which lists the University's Common Grading Scale and undergraduate degree classifications and awards within postgraduate programmes. The QESR team was assured that students knew how to access information relating to assessment and degree outcomes. The University has recently begun piloting TESTA (paragraph 6) in two of its Schools and the team was assured that the University has been moving to incorporate more authentic and flexible assessment approaches through the Principles for the Delivery of Education as part of the Education Strategy overseen by the University Education Committee (UEC) (paragraphs 33 and 34). External examiners are required to comment on the appropriateness of assessment processes and the comparability of provision at other institutions. Based on the sample of reports supplied, the team can confirm that EEs are generally positive about the University's management of assessment. The external examiner report template clearly allows for responses to be made at school and university level and returned to the examiner to close the loop on their feedback.

43 The University has recently completed a Senate Effectiveness Review undertaken by Advance HE. This Review recommended changes to the remit and memberships of UEC and its sub-committees, and recommended that the QAC be established as a direct Committee of Senate, rather than as a sub-committee of UEC. Documents provided by the University qualify that UEC will have focus on the strategic oversight of education provision and its alignment to Aberdeen 2040. The committee will also have oversight of innovation, academic development and enhancement, together with focus on the wider student experience including employability and entrepreneurship, student mobility and student support. QAC will have focus on the quality assurance of UG, PGT and taught elements of PGR provision together with oversight of the development, review and monitoring of university policy relating to education provision. This change came into effect in academic session 2022-23, and the QESR team noted that it was already being positively received by staff; in particular, the development of a new Academic Regulations and Policy Group, and the support being provided to QAC members by the Academic Services team in helping to summarise and produce university-wide thematic information for consideration by QAC (paragraph 46).

44 Collaborative programmes are subject to the same quality processes as on-campus programmes. In addition to this, further detailed reports related to the University's transnational education (TNE) and partnerships are presented and discussed at QAC annually, allowing greater institutional oversight of any themes or concerns that might emerge across the University's collaborative provision. The University has signed up to QAA's new TNE quality evaluation and enhancement scheme - 'QE-TNE'. It was reported to UEC that, by registering for the QAA QE-TNE Scheme, the University is investing in the quality of the students' academic experience and demonstrating its commitment to the advancement of UK higher education delivered overseas.

## **Use of external reference points in quality processes**

45 The QESR team is confident that the University has effective arrangements in place to monitor and regularly review its approach to the use of external reference points in quality processes. As part of the review, the team considered the mapping of policies, procedures and quality processes against the Quality Code, minutes of key committees, external examiner reports, annual SFC reporting and met with staff.

46 The QESR team noted the comprehensive and clear mapping of the University's policies, procedures and quality processes against the Quality Code, and this mapping is published on the University website. The team heard that the mapping is intended to be a 'live' document and can confirm that plans are in place to ensure that the Academic Regulations and Policy Group considers and updates one mapping section at each meeting to ensure that it remains up-to-date (paragraph 43). Staff confirmed that the mapping exercise had usefully highlighted areas of practice which would benefit from improvement - for example, enhancements to the University's placement policy, which are subsequently being incorporated into the work of the Student Placement Task and Finish Group.

47 The University's programme development, monitoring and review processes take account of, and remain current with, key external reference points, including the Quality Code, Subject Benchmark Statements and the *Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework* (SCQF). Programmes are also expected to align with PSRB requirements where appropriate. The QESR team saw evidence of the use of key reference points in ITR processes. In meeting with staff with recent experience of the University's ITR process, the Subject Benchmark Statements (SBS) in particular, were highlighted as a useful reference point in devising the structures for programmes.

48 The QESR team noted in the evidence provided that, as part of the University's ITR process, course-level curriculum maps to the relevant SBS are produced by programme teams and these mappings also detail how students will meet the University's Graduate Attributes. Feedback from external examiners, in addition to industry experts and other key external stakeholders, is gathered as part of programme development and review, and also where programme teams are progressing significant amendments to existing courses and programmes.

49 External examiners comment on academic standards and assessment arrangements, in addition to drawing comparisons with provision at other institutions, providing ongoing assurance on the use of external reference points. Staff spoke positively about how external examiner reports are used during the Annual Programme Review (APR) process to support enhancements to programmes and courses. The QESR team understands that, at the time of this review, the University's analysis of external examiner reports was underway for session 2020-21 with the final report scheduled to be considered by the QAC in March 2023.

## Use of data and evidence to inform self-evaluation and decision-making

50 The QESR team is confident that the University has effective arrangements in place to monitor and review its approach to the use of data and evidence to inform self-evaluation and decision-making. The team considered evidence from the institution including the Outcome Agreement Self-Evaluation, the University's use of data on continuation, degree outcomes/classifications, academic complaints and appeals, samples of Annual Programme and Course Review forms, feedback from students through survey responses to the National Student Survey (NSS) and the Aberdeen Student Experience Survey (ASES), and meetings with staff and students.

51 The University has clear processes for considering student survey and feedback information that is monitored and used to enhance practice. The University uses a range of survey mechanisms including course-level feedback forms which are administered during each term, the ASES and NSS. The University's analysis of its NSS results is benchmarked against the sector and compared with previous results, with issues arising discussed at the University Education Committee (UEC), along with an action plan to take forward enhancements across the University. The data from the ASES is considered by both UEC and its sub-committee - the Student Support and Experience Committee (SSEC) - and the academic schools are asked to prepare responses to matters arising from this survey. In meeting with staff and students from across the institution, the QESR team learned that additional informal approaches were being used to gather student feedback including discussion boards. Staff viewed these informal approaches as helpful mechanisms for 'identifying quick wins' in terms of responding to student feedback in session (paragraph 19).

52 Course Feedback forms, along with student performance information, feedback from Staff-Student Liaison Committees (SSLCs) and focus groups, external examiners, Programme Advisory Boards and, where applicable, PSRBs are considered and reported on in key university quality processes including Annual Course and Programme Review (ACR and APR) and Internal Teaching Review (ITR). The sample of documents provided to the team demonstrated that this information is reflected on by staff and used to support enhancements to courses and programmes - for example, subsequent amendments to assessment formats. As part of the University's annual monitoring processes, ACRs and APRs are considered at school level and at university level by the QAC, which provides feedback to the academic schools on the sample of ACRs it considers and identifies areas for development and good practice from across the APRs.

53 The UEC is responsible for oversight of academic appeals and complaints, academic misconduct and continuation data. It is evident to the QESR team that such overview reports are used to identify and action areas to enhance the student experience. For example, the QESR team noted from the documents provided that University Senate had received an analysis of degree classifications which illustrated an increase in the numbers of first or upper-second-class honours classifications awarded by the University since 2016-17. The team explored with senior staff the University's understanding of possible reasons for this and how the University intends to continue to monitor this. Senior staff outlined that based on its analysis, its high standard of applicants, and its use of Grade Point Average (GPA) and Grade Spectrum during the COVID-19 pandemic - as part of the 'no detriment' policies for students, have influenced the increase. However, the introduction of the new GPA system as the only measure of degree classification is likely to impact on the number of good honours going forward. Staff also discussed how having information on degree outcomes for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Groups (BAME) had identified an awarding gap for these students, with the University currently working on plans to address this. The QESR team views this development positively and understands that this

information will continue to be kept under review by the University Senate.

54 The QESR team also explored with senior staff, the University's response to an increase in Academic Misconduct Cases, which will involve working in partnership with students to understand how these situations arise, in order to develop further support for students. The team heard that a student intern is currently working on improving understanding of students' attitudes to misconduct and views around contract cheating and artificial intelligence (AI).

55 The QESR team learned from staff that a project is ongoing to extend access and use of the new business intelligence platform across the University. Priority has been given to the development of university-level information, analysis and reporting such as NSS and degree classifications. The team understands that a recent development means Directors of Education can access data pertinent to their own school on areas such as non-continuation, student progress and enrolments.

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