

Learning from ELIR 2008-11

**Student representation and
engagement in quality**



Sharing good practice

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Introduction

Student representation and engagement in quality has been a significant success in Scottish higher education, with a continuing trend towards increased student engagement in learning and teaching at a range of levels within institutions and across the sector, including recognition of the student voice in strategic decision-making. Since 2003, the national development service, student participation in quality Scotland (sparqs), has been working to assist and support students, Students' Associations, and institutions to improve their effectiveness and engagement in quality assurance and enhancement in institutions across Scotland. The first Enhancement-led institutional review (ELIR) cycle commencing in 2003 saw the introduction of student reviewers as full members of ELIR teams. By the end of the first cycle in 2008, almost all institutions in the Scottish HE sector had a student member on the panels of institution-led reviews at the subject level; this was a major advance. In the second cycle of ELIR, it is clear that institutions continue to work successfully in partnership with Students' Associations to strengthen student representation and engagement in quality as a key plank of enhancement and an essential underpinning to improvement of the student learning experience.

Enhancement-led institutional review includes specific consideration of the management of the student experience, including the effectiveness of the institution's approach to engaging students in their learning; student feedback; the effectiveness of the institution's management of the student learning experience on collaborative programmes; and institution-led monitoring and review of quality and standards.

This overview of student representation and engagement in quality draws on the evidence of the 14 ELIR reviews conducted in 2008-09, 2009-10 and 2010-11.

The purpose of the report is to utilise this evidence to:

- provide an indication of the progress Scottish higher education institutions are making in promoting more effective student representation and in encouraging greater student engagement in quality processes
- to highlight examples of positive practice identified in the ELIR reports
- to note areas for ongoing development identified in the ELIR reports in order to inform enhancement projects both at sectoral level and in individual institutions.

Summary overview

The evidence demonstrates that institutions continue to work to promote more effective student engagement, and to strengthen the focus on the student experience. This is apparent in a variety of different ways, and at a range of levels within institutions.

Partnership with Students' Associations

- Students' Associations and institutions are working in close partnership to further enhance student representation and student engagement in quality processes.
- Institutions and Students' Associations display determination and commitment to address issues and improve student engagement through strategic initiatives.

Improved student representation

- Student representation at senior and strategic level is working well overall.
- Student representation at programme level is being strengthened, with greater focus on the student learning experience, and is working well overall.

Gathering and responding to student feedback

- Institutions are employing a wide range of diverse methods to gather student feedback, including participation in national surveys such as the National Student Survey (NSS).
- Institutions are increasingly aware of the need for consistent and effective communication back to students about the outcomes and actions taken in response to their feedback, although in some institutions further work is required to ensure the feedback loop is always closed. Currently the feedback loop is not always closed.
- Institutions are using student feedback to inform strategy and some have adopted a more strategic approach to gathering student feedback.

Student engagement in subject reviews and service area reviews

- Student engagement in institution-led subject review continues to be valued by both staff and students.
- Student membership of institution-led subject review panels is in place at all Scottish higher education institutions.
- Student members on review panels help to provide a greater focus on the student experience, as part of a more holistic approach to enhancing the student experience.
- Students are also engaging successfully in separate reviews of student-facing support functions.

Representation and engagement of postgraduate students

- Institutions continue to develop and refine mechanisms for the representation and engagement of postgraduate students in quality, and to strengthen the research community, including through participation in Higher Education Academy surveys.

Communication with students

- Institutions are increasingly using technology to communicate more directly with individual students, and especially to gather student feedback online.

Progress in small specialist institutions

- Since the first ELIR cycle, the small specialist institutions have made significant progress in formalising student representation at the strategic level, and are now looking to develop the opportunities for student engagement in strategy and policy matters.

Commitment to improving the student experience

- Several ELIR reports explicitly acknowledge institutions' commitment to enhancing the student experience, as evidenced through particular developments and initiatives, or comment on the creation of a culture which encourages staff to enhance the student experience. Where they are captured at a general level, students' views of their learning experience are also positive.

Areas for development

Areas variously identified in ELIR reports for further development include:

- the development of opportunities for students to engage in strategic and policy matters relating to their learning experience
- improving student representation at school level, through more effective engagement with student school officers, and review of effectiveness of subject-level student-staff liaison committees
- improving representation of postgraduate research students and encouraging greater participation of postgraduate and part-time students on student representative committees
- developing effective mechanisms for communication with the wider student body on institution-wide matters and on significant institutional changes which impact on students' learning experiences
- variability in practice on student representation at faculty/school level
- building on informal feedback mechanisms to develop more systematic feedback arrangements, and improving feedback mechanisms for hard-to-reach student groups
- monitoring the student learning experience across different locations and modes of study to ensure broad equivalence in the student experience

- monitoring and managing the research student experience
- promoting consistency of practice across the institution, including in the implementation of key policies.

Positive practice identified in ELIR reports

The following section lists areas of relevant positive practice identified in the ELIR reports of ELIR reviews conducted in sessions 2008-09, 2009-10 and 2010-11. The bulleted points are drawn from the ELIR summary reports.

Partnership with Students' Associations

Edinburgh College of Art

- **Student engagement** - work has been undertaken jointly with the Student Representative Council to promote consistency in formal student representation, including staff and students' training to support engagement at the programme level.

Edinburgh Napier University

- **Student partnership** - the Students' Association has an effective partnership with the University, and performs an active role in the development and implementation of strategic initiatives.

Glasgow Caledonian University

- **Student representation** - there is an effective working relationship between the University and the Students' Association. Together they have introduced the school officer role, which is helping to improve student representation.

Heriot-Watt University

- **Student representation** - overall, the University has an effective student representation system at its Scottish campuses, including a mature and professional partnership between the University and the Students' Union. There is a developing student representation system at the Dubai campus.

University of Aberdeen

- **Partnership with the Students' Association** - the University has worked in partnership with the Students' Association to improve student representation, and there is a strong working relationship between the University and the Students' Association.

University of Dundee

- **Student engagement** - there is a well developed relationship with Dundee University Students' Association. This partnership, which takes a joint approach to involving students in quality assurance processes, is helping to embed student representation across the University.

University of Glasgow

- **Partnership with the Students' Representative Council (SRC)** - over recent years, the University and the SRC have developed a strong and effective partnership. This partnership has delivered significant developments in policies and provision, all of which contribute positively to the student learning experience.

University of St Andrews

- **Student representation** - in an initiative led by the Students' Association, school student presidents have been introduced from the start of the current academic year. The University and the Students' Association are encouraged to work together to secure the continuity of the scheme.

University of Strathclyde

- **Partnership with the Students' Association** - a positive partnership has been developed between the University and the University of Strathclyde Students' Association (USSA), for example, working together to improve the class representative system.

University of the West of Scotland

- **Student partnership** - the Students' Association has had a positive impact, adding value to the student experience, as does the partnership between the student sabbaticals and the senior officers of the University. There are a number of mechanisms in place to ensure student views inform strategy, policy and practice across the institution.
- **Learning Manifesto** - in a student-led initiative, students and staff have produced a Learning Manifesto which sets out core values and a set of principles to underpin future approaches to learning and teaching support at the University.

Improved student representation

Scottish Agricultural College

- **Student representation** - the College has an effective system of student liaison groups at subject level. Over recent years, the College has put in place enhanced arrangements for student representation at more senior levels, and has advanced plans to establish Students' Association Sabbatical Officer and Development Officer posts.

University of Glasgow

- **Student representation** - a number of enhancements have been made to the student representative system, including more widespread opportunities for students to undertake a representative role; effective training and support for student representatives; and the University's recognition of student representative activity on students' transcripts.

Gathering and responding to student feedback

Edinburgh College of Art

- **International exchanges** - opportunities for students to undertake international exchanges are actively promoted and the College carries out an annual review of its exchange partnerships, which represents good practice.

Edinburgh Napier University

- **Student feedback** - the University has effective arrangements for gathering feedback from students. Library Information Services is a positive example of the use of student feedback to inform the enhancement of services for students.

Glasgow Caledonian University

- **The Saltire Centre** - the Saltire Centre, which opened in 2006, is an innovative learning space which is still evolving, with changes to the way in which the space is used having been made as a result of student feedback.

Heriot-Watt University

- **Student feedback** - the University has effective arrangements for responding to the outcomes of the National Student Survey, including detailed action planning. The University intends to mirror these procedures for responding to the other external student surveys it participates in. Students indicate that the University's own online Course Feedback Survey is effective; student views are listened to, and the University is generally successful in closing the feedback loop.

Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh

- **Student views** - the range of formal and informal opportunities for students to provide feedback on their learning experiences, including student representation on programme-level committees.

Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (formerly Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Dance)

- **Student focus** - the extent to which the Academy is student-focused: the Academy seeks to listen and respond quickly to matters raised by students in relation to their subject provision, notably through its Monitoring, Evaluation and Review process. There is also a supportive relationship between the Students' Union and senior staff, and a range of informal opportunities for students to provide feedback on their experience.

Scottish Agricultural College

- **Student feedback** - the College has a strong commitment to listening and responding to student feedback, using both formal mechanisms such as student questionnaire surveys, and more informal approaches grounded in the close working relationships between students and staff. The College has taken a number of steps to enhance its use of student questionnaires, including how it gives feedback to students on how their views have been acted upon.

University of Glasgow

- **Student feedback** - the University has well established mechanisms for gathering student feedback, and has continued to enhance these arrangements, including through the extensive use of a number of different surveys which seek to gather feedback from different groups of the student population.

University of Strathclyde

- **Gathering and responding to students' views** - extensive use is made of a range of internal and external surveys and other mechanisms for gathering students' views. The outcomes of these are used to inform institutional strategy and initiatives.

University of the West of Scotland

- **Evaluative and consultative approach** - the University has successfully embedded a culture of evaluating its policies and practices, and modifying future approaches on the basis of the evidence gathered. The University's Strategy for the Enhancement of the Quality of Learning, Teaching and Assessment has had a positive impact in this regard. The new Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy has been developed using a consultative approach including a wide range of students and staff. The University is encouraged to build on this enthusiastic engagement to ensure that the Strategy will be finalised by the target date.

Student engagement in subject reviews and service area reviews

Edinburgh Napier University

- **Quality Framework** - the University's arrangements for setting and maintaining academic standards and for monitoring and reviewing the quality of its programmes are robust. The review of the Institution's Quality Framework has created more opportunities for critical reflection, and a greater focus on the enhancement of the student learning experience.

Glasgow Caledonian University

- **Enhancement-led Internal Subject Review** - the University has effective quality assurance processes in place which are consistently applied and which include consideration of all students. Of particular note is Enhancement-led Internal Subject Review (ELISR), which is a thorough and effective process leading to the sharing of good practice across discipline areas.

Scottish Agricultural College

- **Student involvement in review processes** - the College makes effective use of students' views in validation and review processes, including the recent inclusion of a student panel member in its internal subject review process.

University of Glasgow

- **Student participation in institution-led quality reviews** - the participation of student reviewers in the periodic reviews of academic departments is a recognised success. Student reviewers have more recently also been included in the review of the University's student-facing services, and this is a positive development.

University of St Andrews

- **Quality monitoring and review** - the University's Internal Review of Learning and Teaching Process is in line with the Scottish Funding Council guidance. The process is carefully implemented and promotes thoughtful responses from the schools.

University of Strathclyde

- **Quality monitoring and review** - the University's quality review arrangements meet the Scottish Funding Council guidance.

University of the West of Scotland

- **Integrated quality assurance processes** - the University has rigorous and effective arrangements for the approval, monitoring and periodic review of its programmes. An integrated set of quality assurance procedures are in place, which have been successfully adapted to reflect the new academic structure.

Representation and engagement of postgraduate students

Glasgow School of Art

- **Postgraduate provision** - postgraduate taught students expressed high levels of satisfaction with their programmes, and postgraduate provision is well supported and coordinated by the Postgraduate Coordinator.

Heriot-Watt University

- **Postgraduate research student experience** - the University's Research Student Coordinators Group plays a positive role in coordinating support for research students, and research students are generally satisfied with their learning experience.

Scottish Agricultural College

- **Postgraduate research student experience** - the College has taken significant steps to enhance the research student experience, including improved student induction and students' integration into the College's wider research environment.

University of St Andrews

- **Research student induction and training** - there is a thorough approach to the induction and training provided for postgraduate research students, covering generic and discipline-specific skills development.

University of the West of Scotland

- **Research student training and support** - there is an extensive and flexible student training programme, which is coordinated by the Innovation & Research Office. The Office also fulfils a positive role in providing support for postgraduate research students.

Communication with students

University of Aberdeen

- **Communication with students** - the Curriculum reform project has been effectively communicated to students, who understand its goals and importance, particularly in relation to the development of graduate attributes.

University of the West of Scotland

- **Communication and dissemination** - there are a number of mechanisms for promoting communication across the institution, including the positive role played by the subject development groups in engaging subject-level staff in quality assurance and enhancement processes. The Student Experience Group has also been valuable, providing a holistic overview of the learning experience.

Progress in small specialist institutions

Edinburgh College of Art

- **Commitment to enhancement** - the College has demonstrated its commitment to enhancing the student experience through a wide range of developments and initiatives. Students are enthusiastic about the curricular developments and the improvements in the learning environment.
- **Student engagement** - work has been undertaken jointly with the Student Representative Council to promote consistency in formal student representation, including staff and students' training to support engagement at the programme level.
- **Student satisfaction** - students, in general, express high levels of satisfaction with their experience at the College and are enthusiastic about a number of recent developments, including the changes made to First Year Studies (Art and Design), and the increased opportunities for working collaboratively in groups comprising students from a variety of years of study. A number of these developments have been facilitated by the College Estates Strategy, which has had a positive impact on the learning environment.

Glasgow School of Art

- **Postgraduate provision** - postgraduate taught students expressed high levels of satisfaction with their programmes, and postgraduate provision is well supported and coordinated by the Postgraduate Coordinator.

Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (formerly Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Dance)

- **Student focus** - the extent to which the Academy is student-focused: the Academy seeks to listen and respond quickly to matters raised by students in relation to their subject provision, notably through its Monitoring Evaluation and Review process. There is also a supportive relationship between the Students' Union and senior staff, and a range of informal opportunities for students to provide feedback on their experience.
- **Student views** - the positive views students have of their learning experience; the students particularly appreciate the accessibility of the teaching staff; the range of opportunities provided to perform at a variety of venues inside and outside the Academy; and the contacts they have with communities of professional practice.

Scottish Agricultural College

- **Student representation** - the College has an effective system of student liaison groups at subject level. Over recent years, the College has put in place enhanced arrangements for student representation at more senior levels, and has advanced plans to establish Students' Association Sabbatical Officer and Development Officer posts.
- **Student feedback** - the College has a strong commitment to listening and responding to student feedback, using both formal mechanisms such as student questionnaire surveys, and more informal approaches grounded in the close working relationships between students and staff. The College has taken a number of steps to enhance its use of student questionnaires, including how it gives feedback to students on how their views have been acted upon.
- **Student involvement in review processes** - the College makes effective use of students' views in validation and review processes, including the recent inclusion of a student panel member in its internal subject review process.
- **Postgraduate research student experience** - the College has taken significant steps to enhance the research student experience, including improved student induction, and students' integration into the College's wider research environment.

Commitment to improving the student experience

Edinburgh College of Art

- **Commitment to enhancement** - the College has demonstrated its commitment to enhancing the student experience through a wide range of developments and initiatives. Students are enthusiastic about the curricular developments and the improvements in the learning environment.

Edinburgh Napier University

- **Quality enhancement** - the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy provides a sound basis for delivering quality enhancement activity across the University;

a well established Teaching Fellow Scheme plays a significant role in promoting quality enhancement; and there is clear evidence of an enhancement culture, with subjects and schools undertaking enhancement initiatives which have a positive impact on the student learning experience.

University of St Andrews

- **Quality enhancement culture** - the University has been successful in creating a culture which encourages staff to enhance the student learning experience. It has taken a number of successful initiatives aimed at involving more staff and students in enhancement activity, and is encouraged to continue this work.

Areas for development identified in ELIR reports

While student engagement in quality is positive overall, ELIR teams identified a range of areas in individual institutions where further development was required. ELIR reports have variously asked institutions to take action in the following areas.

Student engagement in strategy and policy

- Develop opportunities for students to engage in strategic and policy matters relating to their learning experience, including supporting the further development of the Students' Union. Related to this, the [institution] is encouraged to continue its programme of training provided by sparqs.
- Reflect on how to ensure the sustainability of the contribution made by the Students' Association to a significant range of quality enhancement activities.

Student representation and engagement

- Reflect on how to engage student school officers more effectively in discussions on strategy and policy, to review the effectiveness of subject level student-staff committees, and to review [the institution's] representation arrangements for postgraduate research students.
- Continue to develop the arrangements for student representation on school academic boards, including addressing variation in practice between schools, and the constitution of the boards.
- Encourage greater participation of postgraduate and part-time students on student representative committees.
- Progress planned actions to make student-staff liaison committees more accessible to the whole student body and more effective in their work.

Communication with the wider student body

- Ensure there are effective mechanisms in place for consulting and communicating with students on institution-wide matters.
- Give greater attention to communicating with the student body on significant institutional changes which impact directly on students' learning experiences.
- Continue to reflect on the most effective means of consulting and communicating with students, particularly on matters relating to the move to the new campus.
- Continue ongoing reflection and activities to promote to students [the institution's] 'Student Voice' website, which is an innovative and potentially powerful tool for communicating to students on how their feedback leads to actions aimed at improving the student learning experience.

Student feedback

- Ensure students have equivalent formal opportunities to provide feedback on their views without losing the best features of the existing informal arrangements, and to make more systematic use of the outcomes of student feedback it gathers.

- Develop a means of obtaining a holistic view of student opinion to supplement or, in some cases, replace the variety of surveys that currently exist.
- Continue with plans for introducing opportunities for students to provide feedback anonymously in one School.
- Continue efforts to engage students' participation in student questionnaire surveys, given the importance which the institution places on student involvement in quality management.
- Progress existing positive steps to improve feedback mechanisms for hard to reach student groups as part of the [institution's] programme of work to enhance the 'feedback' loop more generally.
- Undertake more detailed monitoring of students' learning experience across different locations and modes of study, through utilising its new student information management system.

Monitoring the student experience

- Introduce more explicit arrangements for monitoring and managing the research student experience.
- Carefully monitor the student experience in one of the campuses and respond appropriately to ensure that the learning experience is broadly equivalent across the institution.

Variability in policy and practice

- Ensure that key institutional policies are implemented consistently by all Schools to provide greater equivalence in the student experience across the [institution].
- Exploit the opportunities offered by the planned academic restructuring to promote greater consistency of practice across the [institution], while recognising and retaining the many aspects of good practice evident in the existing structure.

Appendix A: Relevant links

Links to relevant ELIR reports are provided below:

Edinburgh College of Art

www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/Pages/Edinburgh-College-Art.aspx

Edinburgh Napier University

www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/Pages/Edinburgh-Napier.aspx

Glasgow Caledonian University

www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/Pages/Glasgow-Caledonian.aspx

Glasgow School of Art

www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/Pages/Glasgow-School-Art.aspx

Heriot-Watt University

www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/Pages/Heriot-Watt-University.aspx

Scottish Agricultural College

www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/Pages/Scottish-Agricultural-College.aspx

Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh

www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/Pages/Queen-Margaret-University.aspx

Royal Conservatoire of Scotland

(previously Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Dance)

www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/Pages/Royal-Scottish-Academy.aspx

University of Aberdeen

www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/Pages/University-of-Aberdeen.aspx

University of Dundee

www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/Pages/University-of-Dundee.aspx

University of Glasgow

www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/Pages/University-of-Glasgow.aspx

University of St Andrews

www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/Pages/University-St-Andrews.aspx

University of Strathclyde

www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/Pages/University-of-Strathclyde.aspx

University of the West of Scotland

www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/Pages/University-West-Scotland.aspx

The following reports and links may also be of interest:

QAA annual sector overview report to SFC for academic year 2009-10
www.sfc.ac.uk/effective_institutions/qualityassurance/quality_scotlands_universities.aspx

QAA annual sector overview report to SFC for academic year 2010-11
www.sfc.ac.uk/about_the_council/council_board_committees/Committeepapers/2011/QEGPC26October2011.aspx

QAA summary overview of HEI annual reports to SFC on the outcomes of internal and external quality reviews at subject level, for academic year 2009-10
www.sfc.ac.uk/reports_publications

Learning from ELIR 2003-07: Emerging approaches to student engagement in quality assurance and enhancement
www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Learning-from-ELIR-2003-07-Emerging-approaches-to-student-engagement-in-quality-assurance-and-enhancement.aspx

Sparqs
www.sparqs.ac.uk

Sparqs Handbook for Course Representatives in higher education
www.sparqs.ac.uk/sharingpractice/clearing-det.php?id=18

Outcomes of Sparqs project on student engagement
www.sparqs.ac.uk/sharingpractice/section.php?cat=82

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