

# **The Robert Gordon University**

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APRIL 2007

## **Preface**

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) exists to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education (HE) qualifications and to encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of HE.

To do this, QAA carries out reviews of individual higher education institutions (HEIs) (universities and colleges of HE). In Scotland this process is known as Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR). The Agency operates equivalent but separate processes in Wales, England and Northern Ireland.

### **Enhancement-led approach**

Over the period 2001 to 2003, QAA, the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council, Universities Scotland and representatives of the student body worked closely together on the development of the enhancement-led approach to quality in Scottish HE. This approach, which was implemented in academic year 2003-04, has five main elements:

- a comprehensive programme of review at the subject level, managed by the institutions
- improved forms of public information about quality, based on addressing the different needs of the users of that information including students and employers
- a greater voice for student representatives in institutional quality systems, supported by a national development service (known as the student participation in quality scotland - sparqs - service);
- a national programme of enhancement themes, aimed at developing and sharing good practice in learning and teaching in HE
- ELIR involving all of the Scottish HEIs over a four-year period, from 2003-04 to 2006-07. The ELIR method embraces a focus on: the strategic management of enhancement; the effectiveness of student learning; and student, employer and international perspectives.

QAA believes that this approach is distinctive in a number of respects: its balance between quality assurance and enhancement; the emphasis it places on the student experience; its focus on learning and not solely teaching; and the spirit of cooperation and partnership which has underpinned all these developments.

### **Nationally agreed reference points**

ELIR includes a focus on institutions' use of a range of reference points, including those published by QAA:

- the *Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)*
- the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*
- subject benchmark statements, which describe the characteristics of degrees in different subjects
- *Guidelines on preparing programme specifications*, which are descriptions of what is on offer to students in individual programmes of study. Programme specifications outline the intended knowledge, skills, understanding and attributes of a student completing that programme. They also give details of teaching and assessment methods and link the programme to the SCQF.

## **Conclusions and judgement within ELIR**

ELIR results in a set of commentaries about the institutions being reviewed. These commentaries relate to:

- the ability of the institution's internal review systems to monitor and maintain quality and standards at the level of the programme or award. This commentary leads to a judgement on the level of confidence which can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's current and likely future management of the quality of its programmes and the academic standards of its awards. The expression of this judgement provides a point of tangency between the ELIR method and other review methods operating in other parts of the UK. The judgement is expressed as one of: broad confidence, limited confidence or no confidence
- the institution's arrangements for ensuring that the information it publishes about the quality of its provision is complete, accurate and fair
- the effectiveness of the institution's approach to promoting an effective learning experience for students
- the combined effect of the institution's policies and practices for ensuring improvement in the quality of teaching and learning
- the effectiveness of the institution's implementation of its strategy for quality enhancement.

## **The ELIR process**

The ELIR process is carried out by teams comprising three academics, one student and one senior administrator drawn from the HE sector.

The main elements of ELIR are:

- a preliminary visit by QAA to the institution in advance of the review visit
- a Reflective Analysis document submitted by the institution three months in advance of the second part of the review visit
- a two-part review visit to the institution by the ELIR team; Part 1 taking place five weeks before Part 2, and Part 2 having a variable duration of between three and five days depending on the complexity of matters to be explored
- the publication of a report, 20 weeks after the Part 2 visit, detailing the commentaries agreed by the ELIR team.

## **The evidence for the ELIR**

In order to gather the information on which its commentaries are based, the ELIR team carries out a number of activities including:

- reviewing the institution's own internal procedures and documents, as well as the Reflective Analysis institutions prepare especially for ELIR
- asking questions and engaging in discussions with groups of relevant staff
- talking to students about their experiences
- exploring how the institution uses the national reference points.

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## Introduction

1 This is the report of an enhancement-led institutional review (ELIR) of The Robert Gordon University (the University or RGU) undertaken by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). QAA is grateful to the University for the willing cooperation provided to the ELIR team.

2 The review followed a method agreed with Universities Scotland, student bodies and the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), and informed by consultation with the Scottish higher education sector. The ELIR method focuses on the strategic management of enhancement; the effectiveness of student learning; and the use of a range of reference points. These reference points include: the *Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)*, the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*, subject benchmark information, and student, employer and international perspectives. Full detail on the method is set out in the *Handbook for enhancement-led institutional review: Scotland* which is available on the QAA website.

## Style of reporting

3 ELIR reports are structured around three main sections: internal monitoring and review of quality and standards and public information; the student experience; and the effectiveness of the institution's strategy for quality enhancement. Each section contains a sequence of 'overviews' and 'commentaries' in which the ELIR team sets out its views. The first commentary in the first main section of the report leads to a single, formal judgement on the level of confidence which can be placed in the institution's management of quality and standards. The judgement is intended to provide a point of tangency with the methods of audit and review operating in other parts of the UK where similar judgements are reached. In the second and third main sections of the report, on the student experience, and the effectiveness of the institution's quality

enhancement strategy, there are no formal judgements, although a series of overviews and commentaries are provided. These are the sections of the ELIR report which are particularly enhancement focused. To reflect this, the style of reporting is intended to address the increased emphasis on exploration and dialogue which characterises the team's interaction with the institution on these matters. The reader may, therefore, detect a shift in the style of reporting in those sections, and this is intended to emphasise the enhancement-led nature of the method.

## Method of review

4 The University submitted a Reflective Analysis (RA) which set out the institution's strategy for quality enhancement, its approach to the management of quality and standards, and its view of the effectiveness of its approach. Other documents available to the ELIR team with the RA included the institutional profile at 27 February 2007; Annual Review 2005-06; Academic Quality Handbook; Towards 2010: our new vision, mission and values; Organisational Regulations; Academic Regulations; Undergraduate Prospectus 2007; and a Postgraduate Guide. The RA provided the focus for the review and was used to develop a programme of activities by the ELIR team to provide a representative illustration of the way the University approaches the management of quality, enhancement and academic standards.

5 The University submitted three case-studies with its RA. These were chosen by the University to illustrate three aspects which define the University's view of an effective student learning experience: enhancing access to degree courses; the development of student questionnaires to evaluate the student learning experience; and enhancing student employability.

6 The development of the RA was overseen by the University's ELIR Steering Group which comprised: the Convener of the University's Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee; the Dean of the Department for the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching and

Assessment; the Convener of the Learning Infrastructure Subcommittee; the deans of faculty; the Dean of Students; the Academic Registrar; the Student Association President; and the Students' Union Management Committee President. The draft RA was made available for wider consultation on the University's website, and was submitted to the December 2006 meetings of the University's Academic Council and Board of Governors, following which the final version of the RA was produced. The clear, open and honest nature of the RA provided a very helpful starting point for the review.

7 The ELIR team visited the University on two occasions: the Part 1 visit took place on 21 and 22 March 2007, and the Part 2 visit took place between 23 and 26 April 2007.

8 During the Part 1 visit, members of the University's Executive Group gave a number of presentations to the ELIR team on the key developments in their areas of responsibility with respect to the student experience. The team also met with the Vice Chairman of the University's Board of Governors; senior staff with responsibility for managing quality assurance and enhancement across the University; a group of staff involved in internal subject review; and a group of students including those with a representative role at course, school, faculty and University levels. These meetings enabled the team to explore a range of matters, many of which had been raised by the University in the RA, including strategic planning and the review of the University's 2010 vision; the development and implementation of the University's quality enhancement strategy, the characteristics of the 'holistic student experience' at the University; and student engagement, participation and representation.

9 During the Part 1 visit, the University made available a set of documentation which had been identified within the RA and a small amount of supplementary information identified during the course of the visit. This enabled the ELIR team to develop a programme of meetings and to identify a set of documentation for the Part 2 visit.

10 The ELIR team comprised Professor Michael Bradford; Dr Peter Easy; Ms Ann Kettle; Dr Gavin McCabe (reviewers), and Ms Irene Bruce (review secretary). The review was coordinated on behalf of QAA by Dr Janice Ross, Assistant Director, QAA Scotland.

## **Background information about the institution**

11 Robert Gordon's Technical College became a Scottish Central Institution in 1903, having had its origins in 1750 as the educational arm of the Robert Gordon's Hospital. In the nineteenth century, it incorporated the Aberdeen Mechanics Institute and the Aberdeen Pharmaceutical Society, and provided the site for Gray's School of Art. It changed its name to the Robert Gordon's Institute of Technology in 1965, and in 1989 was accredited by the Council for National Academic Awards to confer its own awards. University status was awarded in 1992.

12 The University's mission, as set out in its Strategy 'The Robert Gordon University - Towards 2010', is to 'inspire and enable the transformation of individuals, economies and societies' and its vision is 'to be internationally recognised for excellence in professional education and applied research'. Led by the Principal and the Executive Director (Planning and Resources), a review of the 2010 Strategy is currently underway, with a view to extending the strategic vision and aims to 2015 and beyond.

13 The academic activities of the University are divided into three faculties, each with constituent schools or cognate departments: the Faculty of Design and Technology; the Faculty of Health and Social Care; and the Aberdeen Business School. The University is based on two sites: the Schoolhill Campus, based in Aberdeen's city centre; and the Garthdee Campus, a modern estate some four miles south-west of the city centre.

14 At July 2006, the University had a student population of approximately 13,300, of whom 65 per cent were full-time and 35 per cent were part-time. Some 68 per cent are undergraduates, 30 per cent are taught



postgraduates and 2 per cent postgraduate research students. In the same year, there were 1,436 staff, of whom 530 were academic and research staff.

### **Institution's strategy for quality enhancement**

15 Since 2002, the University has made the 'holistic student experience' the focus of enhancement, and the associated strategic approach has been to evolve 'explicit, systematic and integrated annual enhancement planning procedures, with the plans informed through a combination of internal appraisal and reflection on national and international good/effective practice'. The University's Teaching and Learning Strategy seeks to 'provide a learning experience...which supports, develops and inspires students to realise their potential and prepare them for the world of work, further study, lifelong learning and citizenship'.

### **Internal monitoring and review of quality and standards and public information**

#### **Overview of the institution's internal arrangements for assuring the quality of programmes and maintaining the standards of its academic awards and credit**

16 In its RA, the University described the context in which it has continued to develop and enhance its internal arrangements for assuring quality and standards since the last QAA continuation audit in 2001. A particular emphasis is placed on the adoption of the 'holistic student experience' (see above, paragraph 15 and below, paragraph 89) as an explicit driver of the University's approach to quality assurance and enhancement, this replacing a previous focus on the student academic or curricular experience. Other factors which the RA indicated have informed the development of procedures include the views and advice of external peers engaged in the University's internal processes, and the impact

of changes created by the external quality assurance and enhancement environment.

17 The RA also stated that three key documents together describe and support the University's approach to quality management: the Academic Quality Handbook which defines quality assurance procedures and provides guidance and advice for staff; the Academic Regulations which set out the regulatory framework for all of the University's credit-bearing provision; and the Organisational Regulations which describe and regulate the University's governance and deliberative structures.

18 The RA identified a number of committees with key responsibilities for the oversight and implementation of the University's arrangements for quality assurance and the monitoring of quality and standards. The senior committee in this respect is the Academic Council, convened by the Principal, with a statutory duty delegated from the Board of Governors for the planning, development and supervision of the academic work of the University. The Academic Council has a number of subcommittees including the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (QAEC), and the Research Degrees Committee (RDC) which have responsibility for the quality assurance of taught and research degree programmes respectively.

19 In the University's view, its approach to the internal quality assurance of its taught provision is characterised by the adoption of institution-wide policies and procedures which are monitored and developed by QAEC as a senior committee in the deliberative structure, with devolved implementation overseen through the executive role of the deans. Consistency in such an approach is assisted by the advisory and regulatory context created by key documents, chiefly the Academic Quality Handbook, and the supporting work of the Academic Affairs Department and the Department for the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching and Assessment (DELTA) (see below, paragraphs 23-24).

20 The focus on the holistic student experience has influenced the University's approach to its committee structures which have been revised to increase the role of staff from student support services, most notably through membership of the Learning Infrastructure Subcommittee of the QAEC. More recent revisions to the committee structure have included the disbanding of faculty boards. This partially reflects the enhanced executive role of the deans of faculty in respect of quality assurance processes which previously had been the responsibility of faculty boards. At faculty level, the University has introduced faculty quality enhancement committees (FQECs) with a remit to consider the enhancement of the student experience on taught programmes in the faculty (see below, paragraph 121). School academic boards are responsible for the operation, management and quality assurance of the schools' portfolio and report through the committee structure to faculty and University level.

21 The University's review of its deliberative structures is continuing and the ELIR team learned that the Academic Development Subcommittee (ADSC), which is currently a joint committee of the Academic Council and Board of Governors, may well become a direct and standing subcommittee of the Academic Council. The University believes that this would be a more appropriate reporting line given the role which the ADSC plays in approving major changes to courses and in respect of the development of collaborative activity. Discussion is also continuing on the role and remit of the QAEC's Teaching, Learning and Assessment Subcommittee (see below, paragraph 121).

22 Executive responsibilities for quality assurance are generally expressed through the convenership of the key committees: QAEC, the RDC, FQECs and school academic boards. One important exception is the extended executive authority of the deans of faculty who have individual responsibility for approving transactions arising from quality assurance procedures including module approvals and

minor course changes, and who occupy a key position in relation to the annual appraisal of courses and programmes. In the RA, the University stated that in establishing these executive responsibilities, it wished to enhance the effectiveness of its quality assurance procedures at faculty and school levels by facilitating 'faster transactional activity'. Deans are required to report all activities approved under their executive authority to each meeting of QAEC.

23 Support for the University's quality processes is provided by the Academic Affairs Department. This support includes the operation of the appropriate committees and the oversight of the development and implementation of quality procedures. A member of staff of the Department is also appointed to each faculty as a devolved quality officer. As part of its current role, DELTA has responsibilities for the scrutiny of documents in internal approval and review processes.

24 Established in November 2006 through the merger of two existing units (the Centre for Learning and Teaching and the Department of e-Learning), DELTA is still in its early months of operation and has also inherited many of the functions and responsibilities of its predecessor departments. The ELIR team learned that DELTA is reviewing and evaluating its contribution to the University including its quality processes (see below, paragraph 29).

### **Internal approval, monitoring and review Module and course approval**

25 Other than in cases where it forms part of the validation event for a new course or programme, modules are approved through a process which includes scrutiny by an external academic peer and the appropriate school academic board prior to being submitted to the dean of faculty for final approval.

26 All new courses are subject to a two-stage approval process; the first stage of which includes an assessment by the ADSC of the course's rationale, strategic fit and resource implications. If approved, the course passes to a second stage validation event. The validation

is undertaken by a panel of which at least one member is external to the University. In cases where a completely new programme is being proposed (or where over 40 per cent of the SCQF credit of an existing programme is being changed), a second external member with an appropriate industrial, professional or commercial background is also included. In cases where recommendations or conditions are placed on an approval by the validation panel, the responsibility for responding is at school level.

27 The University considers that its procedures for approval are well-established and tested. The two-stage process ensures institutional, faculty and school involvement and the reasonably frequent meetings of the ADSC enable the University to respond quickly to market opportunities. The RA stated that the University systematically collects and analyses feedback from validation panel members, both internal and external, who endorse the rigour and strength of the approval procedures.

28 The ELIR team considered sample material related to the approval process including the relevant sections of the Academic Quality Handbook, reports of validation events, and the minutes of appropriate committees. In general, the Academic Quality Handbook is comprehensive and well structured. Those sections which deal with validation and approval set out the University's requirements for each stage of the process clearly. Each of those stages is supported by further written advice and guidance. The validation reports seen by the team were also comprehensive and informative records of the event which demonstrated the thoroughness of the validation panel's coverage.

29 Two important prevalidation stages in the approval process at the University are the documentation scrutiny, and DELTA approval. The former process is conducted by the appropriate faculty quality officer and confirms that the documentation prepared for the validation meets University regulations and guidelines. The latter process requires DELTA to consider and approve a number of aspects of

the documentation including course aims and learning outcomes, teaching and learning methods, proposed assessment methods, and all module descriptors. The ELIR team discussed with the staff whether there might be some potential for duplication or confusion between the DELTA approval and the academic approval which is the responsibility of the validation panel. The team learned that there is a clear intention for DELTA to clarify its role and provide more focused support and developmental advice to staff at earlier stages in both the validation and review processes.

30 Overall, the ELIR team was able to confirm the University's view of the soundness of its validation and approval procedures. They are well-established, well-documented, and make an appropriate use of external advice including the systematic involvement of employers and professional peers. The team would confirm the benefits of the University's intention to clarify the respective roles of DELTA and validation panels in these processes.

### **Annual Appraisal**

31 In its RA, the University defined the Annual Appraisal process as being 'designed to monitor the quality and standards of all taught credit-rated award-bearing provision and to facilitate the identification, dissemination and implementation of enhancement activity'. The process involves five defined stages which take place between September and December following the academic year under review. Underpinning the whole of the appraisal process, the first stage involves individual reviews of modules which draw heavily on student evaluation. These individual module appraisal reports are used to compile course or programme reviews which are considered by school academic boards. The boards then identify issues to be forwarded to faculty level through a school appraisal report. At the faculty level, the deans review all school appraisals and submit a summary report to QAEC. At this final stage, QAEC reviews the deans' reports together with other contextual information including an analysis of external examiners' reports and the outcomes of student

questionnaires. QAEC reports to the Academic Council on the outcomes of the appraisal round indicating planned University-level actions.

32 The introduction of the module-level appraisals in 2005-06, and the primacy which they afford to student evaluation through questionnaires, was perhaps the most significant outcome of a recent review of the overall process. In the view of the University, this focus on module evaluation has helped to achieve a more systematic approach to identifying key areas for enhancement. The University also employs data-driven performance indicators which prescribe thresholds of student achievement. Any failure to reach these thresholds triggers a requirement for specific consideration in the appraisal. For example, at module level an accompanying comment must be made where an undergraduate first year module's pass rate is below 90 per cent (or 95 per cent for later undergraduate stages and taught postgraduate modules). In course and programme appraisals, similar thresholds are set in relation to student satisfaction responses on course organisation, teaching quality and assessment methods. The University expressed its satisfaction with the general outcomes of the first cycle of the revised process. It has already undertaken a further evaluation of the Annual Appraisal process and will develop it by a review of the performance indicator thresholds, and a consideration of the format in which data related to performance indicators is presented. It is also reflecting on whether all modules should undergo annual appraisal or whether such appraisal should be restricted to those where there is evidence of underperformance against the prescribed thresholds.

33 The ELIR team considered a range of material related to the annual appraisal process, and the process was discussed in meetings with staff and students. Although there has been only one cycle of the process, the team would confirm the University's analysis of the introduction of module-level appraisal. The appraisal reports are succinct and focus clearly on the issues of student achievement and the

student learning experience. The team also learnt that academic staff appreciate the introduction of module appraisal since it brings them into closer contact with a process which previously had begun at course or programme level. In the view of the team, the module appraisals form a valuable basis for the overall Annual Appraisal process and have the potential to make a substantial contribution to the University's enhancement agenda. For this reason, the team would encourage the University to consider, during its continuing evaluation of its approaches to Annual Appraisal, the contribution which comprehensive module-level review can make to staff and student involvement in a key quality assurance and enhancement process.

34 At the course and programme level, the Appraisal reports are successful in gathering together the enhancement activities prompted by the module-level appraisal. The sources of evidence for these reports continue to be dominated by student involvement through questionnaires; for example, an undergraduate course Appraisal report would draw from the First Year Experience Questionnaire, the module evaluation questionnaires, and the RGU Experience Questionnaire (see below paragraphs 83-88). This is in addition to views which might be expressed through staff/student liaison committees. The suite of questionnaires used by the University is a very effective tool in its annual appraisal activities and evidence of its commitment to comprehensive feedback from students. Reports from external examiners are also a key source of evidence for appraisal at course level. In discussion with the University, the ELIR team heard that the chosen timescale for the annual appraisal process (which is completed at the Academic Council in December of any given year) means that not all external examiners' course reports may have been submitted by that date. The team shared the view of the University that the advantages of a timely appraisal round outweighed the disadvantages that this might create in the gathering of all possible feedback.

35 Scrutiny of school appraisal reports by the ELIR team demonstrated their role in providing a useful synthesis at school level, including the identification of cross-school issues. At faculty level, the team was also able to confirm the value of the summary reports from deans to the QAEC. The deans' reports contain a measure of compliance checking to ensure that the various stages of annual appraisal have been properly conducted, as is appropriate given their executive role. Overall, the team found the summary reports to be reflective, self-critical and valuable in setting out future enhancement activities.

36 The ELIR team noted the serious and comprehensive consideration given to the outcomes of the annual appraisal process at QAEC and the Academic Council. In particular, QAEC devotes one of its scheduled meetings to consideration of the deans' reports, placing them in a broader context formed by scrutiny of a range of other quality related matters including questionnaire evaluation, analysis of external examiners' reports, and a review of performance indicators.

37 From a comparison of the 2004-05 and 2005-06 reports, the ELIR team formed the view that the benefits of the changes introduced by the University in its annual appraisal of academic provision are clear, particularly at the course level. The 2005-06 reports are more focused and better structured, and the systematic use of performance indicator thresholds to trigger responses provides clear evidence of the University's wish to assure the quality and standards of its courses and programmes. It is also apparent that a significant effort has been made to increase the use of annual appraisal as an enhancement tool.

### **Internal Review**

38 Internal Review is the process adopted by the University as a formal mechanism to review, on a six-year cycle, its subject provision. The coverage of the Review is in two parts: subject review, and re-approval of the courses associated with the subject provision under review. The process is characterised by the

production of an Analytical Account by the relevant school, together with a separate volume comprising information on the courses and programmes being considered for re-approval. Other contextual documentation is also made available.

39 The review documentation is first scrutinised for adherence to University regulations, and (as with the course approval process) approval is sought from DELTA related to course aims, learning outcomes, teaching and learning methods, and assessment (see above, paragraphs 24-29). The review is conducted by a panel which includes internal staff members, external subject and professional peers (who constitute at least half of the panel membership), and a student representative. The panel stage may extend over three days and results in a review report containing a judgement of 'confidence' or 'no confidence' in each of the subjects under review. It is the responsibility of the school to respond to any conditions or recommendations attached to those judgements. In addition to that response, a three-year interim review is held to monitor progress against actions and outcomes. The process of Internal Review is supported by clear and concise guidelines and advice in the Academic Quality Handbook.

40 In the view of the University, the primary purpose of Internal Review is to assure that there is effective management of the quality and standards of its subject provision and that there is evidence of a commitment to continuous development and enhancement. The process has been in place for three years and has developed from earlier versions of periodic review but now with an emphasis on the systematic approval of individual subject areas. In the RA, the University indicated that the current review process had led to clear efficiencies since it incorporated into one process previous internal school reviews, external subject review and an element of formal Internal Quality Audit. During the three years of operation, the University has also introduced a series of changes designed to improve the process including amending the

panel membership and encouraging a much greater emphasis on evaluation and enhancement in the Analytical Accounts prepared by the schools (see below, paragraph 133). An external evaluation of the process in its second year of operation resulted in a positive endorsement and a recommendation that the University should include a student member on the review panel. In its own evaluation of Internal Review, the University identified three areas where it felt that the process had been particularly successful: the involvement of student panel members; the combination of subject review and course re-approval; and what it described in the RA as 'a discernable shift within the associated Analytical Accounts from a compliance culture...to a greater emphasis on self-critical reflection'.

41 Students who had participated in some capacity in Internal Review confirmed to the ELIR team that they considered it to be a valuable and useful experience. Those who had acted as panel members particularly emphasised that the process had served to increase their own confidence in the quality of the University's academic provision, and that they had been well integrated into the panel as a whole. These positive views endorsed the University's own view of the value of student membership of Internal Review panels as a practical example of its aim to ensure that 'effective engagement with students is integral to the University's approach to the assurance and enhancement of the quality of teaching and learning' (see below, paragraphs 81-82).

42 From the ELIR team's reading of relevant documentation and its discussions with groups of staff and students, it was clear that Internal Review is a large-scale and ambitious process, and the team saw evidence that the University pays appropriate attention to its maintenance and development. Internal, and in one case external, evaluations of the process are regular and have recently addressed, for example, the issue of the convenership of review panels and the nature and focus of review reports.

43 The ELIR team considered that the Internal Review process was successfully achieving the University's stated aims. The efficiencies of the revised process have been realised, and the Internal Review process, while potentially complex, is well-organised and comprehensive. The enhancement focus of the process is being more clearly defined and promoted, and there is evidence that staff are responding positively to this. Those who met the team considered Internal Review to be an effective, thorough engagement with subject provision which encouraged self-reflection. Although only in the early stages of implementation, the involvement of student panel members and the contribution that they are making to the process is an evident strength.

### **Research degrees**

44 Responsibility for the quality assurance and enhancement of research degrees is placed with the Research Degrees Committee (RDC). Each faculty also has a research degrees subcommittee (FRDSC) reporting to the University RDC but assuming responsibility for much of the routine operation and management of research degree programmes. The RA noted that the revised *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, had been the catalyst for a significant review and redevelopment of its own quality assurance procedures, including those related to registration, induction and progression arrangements for students. The new arrangements came into force in 2005-06 and are captured in a dedicated section in the Academic Quality Handbook as well as the Academic Regulations.

45 The University considers the revision of its approach to the management and quality assurance of research degrees was timely in that it coincided with an intention to expand research degree provision from a modest base. In undertaking this revision, it is clear that many of the principles underpinning the University's approach to the quality assurance of undergraduate provision are replicated, with appropriate adaptation, for its research degree provision. Student evaluation is sought through

module questionnaires for research methods modules and through more general questionnaires at the end of the first year of registration and following the submission of a thesis. Schools are also asked to complete research degree appraisal overview reports on an annual basis which also cover many of the areas which are contained in the Annual Appraisal of undergraduate courses. The progress of individual students is monitored through the joint completion by student and supervisor of an Annual Progress Report.

46 The RA stated that the new arrangements, which have been in place for one year, have resulted in a more effective oversight of the quality and standards of research degrees at both faculty and institutional levels. A particular emphasis is placed on the success of the new faculty research degrees subcommittees as not only having increased faculty ownership and responsibility, but also having allowed the University Research Degrees Committee to assume a greater monitoring and development role.

47 The ELIR team reviewed material related to research degrees and also held discussions with groups of staff and students. Given that the arrangements for research degrees are still relatively new, it is unsurprising that there may be areas for further improvements. For example, the team noted a recent issue related to the poor rate of timely returns of student annual progress reports by some schools. The committee structure of the University, up to and including the Academic Council, had responded firmly to this issue in order to resolve it, and the team would encourage the University to continue to be vigilant in ensuring that a process which is central to the research degrees student experience is not compromised in the future.

48 The ELIR team noted examples of good practice in research degrees management, including the independent convenership arrangements for FRDSCs; the development of formal assessment criteria to assist examining teams; and the use of an independent internal convenor for the examination of theses. The

team considered that the University might review its current practice in appointing examining teams. The University's Academic Regulations are clear that the RDC is responsible for appointing examiners for each research student. In practice, the routine management of this responsibility has been delegated to FRDSCs, and other than on particular occasions where an FRDSC formally seeks the advice of the University's RDC on the appointment of an examiner, there is no final approval of examiners at University level. In this sense, practice differs from the University's approach at undergraduate level where the appointment of external examiners is endorsed by the Academic Council. The team also noted from the FRDSC minutes over the previous year that the majority of examiners had been approved by RDC Convener's action rather than by full committee discussion. Although the team learned that such action would not be taken by the Convenor without some consultation with another senior University RDC member, it was apparent that the approval of examiners for research degrees, in a majority of cases, is dependent on a process which lies outwith the University's deliberative structure. The University should review its approach to the quality assurance of research degrees in relation to the identification of internal and external examiners who are responsible for maintaining the University's academic standards.

49 The ELIR team noted that it was common for FRDSCs to discuss potential conflicts of interest in relation to proposed examiners. These mostly occurred where there was an identified connection between a proposed examiner and the student to be examined or a member of the student's supervisory team. The University's regulations rule out the appointment of any external examiner who has previously been involved in the supervision of a student, or who is currently involved in any other assessment arrangements within a school. The regulations do not cover the issue of conflicts of interest caused by personal or professional connections. In order to continue to ensure it appoints examiners who are clearly independent, there would be benefit in the

University reviewing its Research Degree Curriculum Vitae and Examination Arrangements forms so that there is an opportunity for potential examiners to make a self-declaration of any past or current contacts with the school or the University, or with the student to be examined.

### **Collaborative provision**

50 At the time of the ELIR, the University had a limited amount of collaborative provision. This included a validated final year of a BA in Hospitality Management at Motherwell College, and a series of articulation arrangements with a range of colleges under its Degree Link programme (see below, paragraph 92). The University is also increasing the amount of credit rating of external provision that it undertakes, particularly in partnership with the National Health Service and corporate clients. Arrangements for the development, approval and review of collaborative provision are set out in the Academic Quality Handbook, the relevant section having undergone significant recent revision as a result of the publication of the revised *Code of Practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*.

51 The ELIR team reviewed papers related to the validated programme and to a series of collaborations with a corporate partner. In the former case, the processes described in the Academic Quality Handbook had been followed and the team saw evidence of a robust and thorough approval procedure. In the latter case, a different approach had been adopted to reflect the greater complexity of the collaboration in which the University was involved in both credit rating existing in-company provision and also offering an award in its own name in partnership with the company. In discussion with staff, the team heard that the University's practice in such circumstances was to adapt its processes to match the needs of the exercise whilst maintaining the principles underpinning its approach to all collaborative provision as articulated in the Academic Quality Handbook.

On the evidence of the papers seen by the team, including the report of relevant validation events, this approach had been both pragmatic and effective. The University's volume of collaborative provision is not currently extensive, although potential new opportunities are being explored. The team considered that the University's combination of fixed processes, and managed variance of processes when required, was appropriate.

### **External examining**

52 The University appoints external examiners to all award bearing courses and other credit rated provision. The Academic Affairs Department has responsibility for oversight of the appointment process, and final approval of appointments is given by the Academic Council. All external examiners are offered a formal briefing by the University before assuming their responsibilities.

53 External examiners submit their reports on an annual basis to the University using a standard pro forma. The reports are distributed by the Academic Affairs Department to course management teams, with provision for the Senior Vice-Principal to make an immediate response to an examiner where this may be appropriate. It is the responsibility of course management teams to make a detailed and formal response to issues raised by external examiners. Such responses are submitted to the appropriate school academic board as part of the Annual Appraisal report (see above, paragraphs 31-37). On an annual basis, QAEC receives a summary evaluation of all external examiners' reports.

54 The ELIR team viewed the process used by the University for the appointment of external examiners, and the receipt and consideration of their reports, to be robust and operating effectively. The presentation of issues raised by external examiners and the responses to them during the Annual Appraisal process and at QAEC were particularly clear and comprehensive.



## Overview of the use made of external reference points for assuring quality and standards

55 In addition to the use of external examiners, the RA included details of how the University engages with other external reference points, including the Academic Infrastructure, describing these as 'integral to the University's quality assurance procedures'.

### QAA Code of practice

56 The RA stated that the sections of the *Code of practice* provided it with 'benchmarks of good practice' and that it had systematically mapped and evaluated its own procedures against the precepts of the *Code*. In all cases, this work has been undertaken through the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (QAEC) with the exception of the section related to postgraduate research programmes which was overseen by the Research Degrees Committee.

57 The ELIR team noted the regular consideration by QAEC of the University's arrangements in relation to the *Code of practice*. Through a series of mapping exercises, each section of the *Code* has been analysed and any precepts with which the University does not judge that it is fully aligned to are noted and appropriate actions highlighted. The most recent of these reports, considered by QAEC in February 2007, demonstrated that the remaining major action to be taken by the University is related to *Section 3: Students with disabilities*. The team noted that a clear and detailed plan of action had been devised to meet all of the precepts of this section of the *Code*.

### Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework

58 All awards of the University are fully aligned with the *Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework* (SCQF) in terms of both volume and level of credit. The University also uses the SCQF generic level descriptors as a reference point for developing course and module learning outcomes. In the RA, the University noted a number of academic developments which had been enabled by the

application of the SCQF, including the credit rating of external provision for corporate and other clients.

### Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies and employers

59 Given its vision to seek 'excellence in professional education' a relatively large proportion of the University's academic programmes lead to recognition or accreditation by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs). The RA noted that the University works closely with PSRBs in a number of areas, including using appropriate PSRB benchmarks and competency frameworks in the process of course development, and enabling joint validation or review activities where this is possible. Employers are also involved in the University's quality processes particularly as panel members for approval and review events and in a range of advisory capacities.

60 The ELIR team noted the procedures for interaction with PSRBs contained in the Academic Quality Handbook, and that responses to the outcomes of accreditation visits were compiled at school level and approved by the appropriate dean of faculty. At an institutional level, QAEC is advised of engagements with PSRBs through the Annual Report - Quality Event Outcomes which is received at its November meeting. It was clear to the team that the University was integrating PSRB links successfully into its overall quality processes.

### Commentary on the ability of the institution's internal review systems to monitor and maintain quality and standards

61 The University's internal quality processes are well-established and regularly reviewed. They are supported by high quality documentation including a clear and comprehensive Academic Quality Handbook. The committee structure which has responsibility for, and oversight of, quality assurance and the monitoring of academic standards is generally effective, and recent changes to increase the involvement of schools and staff from student-facing support

departments have proved successful. The new executive responsibilities of the deans of faculty also appear to be operating effectively, and the monitoring of their individual decisions by the QAEC provides an appropriate balance.

62 Operational support for quality processes through the Academic Affairs Department is of a high professional standard. The detail of the role of the Department for the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching and Assessment (DELTA) is still to be confirmed; however, initial evidence would suggest that it has significant potential in further developing enhancement approaches in some of the major University quality processes.

63 The University's processes for the approval, monitoring and review of taught academic provision are robust, fit for purpose, and have a growing focus on quality enhancement. The approval of courses is undertaken through a well-tested and established process. There would be benefit in the University clarifying further the future role of DELTA in relation to the course validation process. The Annual Appraisal of the quality and academic standards of courses has recently been developed through the introduction of module-level evaluation. This process, and the substantial use of student opinion to underpin the annual review of courses, are strengths. The deans' reports to the QAEC are appropriately reflective, self-critical and valuable in setting out future enhancement activities. The University undertakes comprehensive consideration of the outcomes of the Annual Appraisal process through the QAEC and the Academic Council. Periodic Internal Review is a comprehensive and well-organised process which is successfully achieving the University's stated aims. Its enhancement focus is being more clearly defined and promoted. Although only in the early stages of implementation, the involvement of student panel members, and the contribution which they are making to the process, is an evident strength.

64 The University makes appropriate use of external benchmarks and reference points. The system of external examining is robust and operating effectively. The use made of the

Academic Infrastructure is effective and is the subject of continuous review by the University. The University is integrating PSRB and employer, links successfully into its overall quality processes.

65 The arrangements for the quality assurance and enhancement of research degrees have recently undergone significant revision. The revised arrangements include aspects of good practice including the independent convenership arrangements for faculty research degrees subcommittees, the development of formal assessment criteria to assist examining teams, and the use of an independent internal convenor for the examination of theses. There would be benefit in the University considering revisions to its practice for the appointment of examiners, including offering further guidance on the issue of the independence of such examiners.

66 While the University's collaborative provision is not extensive, it has robust and thorough procedures for its management, underpinned by sound general principles of partnership. In some cases, it has adapted its procedures appropriately to meet the needs of particular academic and professional provision.

67 Overall, broad confidence can be placed in the University's current, and likely future, management of the quality of its provision and the academic standards of its awards.

### **Overview of the institution's approach to ensuring that the information it publishes about the quality of provision is complete, accurate and fair**

68 The University produces a wide range of publications describing its academic provision; it also publishes a number of handbooks and other advisory guides for prospective students. Responsibility for the accuracy of University-level publications, such as the prospectuses for undergraduate and postgraduate provision, rests with the Directorate of Student Recruitment, working with staff at course and programme level. In addition, a member of staff of each faculty is identified as being

responsible for checking and approving the accuracy of these documents. The teams for student admissions and marketing within the Directorate of Student Recruitment also approve all information for external publication.

69 It is the University's intention to create a single Course Information Database (CID) as a repository of data which can be used to produce a range of documents for different audiences. This will include a level of course-specific information in the form of programme specifications. The CID has been under development since the original concept was introduced in 2002-03. Although technical and other difficulties have hampered progress, the RA stated that the CID is currently in the final stages of population and should be ready for full implementation in 2007-08.

70 More detailed handbooks for students are produced at school level. Guidelines for their content are provided by the University and, in a recent development, deans of faculty have been asked to audit the accuracy and quality of such handbooks through sampling.

71 The accuracy of the University's website is the responsibility of the Communications Office and is exercised through a web support officer. This officer works with a nominated web editor in each school who is able to update the school's pages. The heads of school are required to give an annual confirmation that the area for which the school is responsible is accurate.

72 The University considers that it meets the information requirements set out by the SFC, and is able to test the effectiveness of its publications through student evaluation. In recognising that its website will become an increasingly important source of information, and that the accuracy of its contents is a devolved responsibility, the University has indicated that it intends introduce a sample auditing process to monitor accuracy in the future.

73 Having sampled a series of University publications and reviewed the University website, and from its discussions with students who voiced general satisfaction with the accuracy and coverage of handbooks, guides

and prospectuses, the ELIR team was able to confirm the University's confidence in its arrangements for ensuring the accuracy of its public information.

### **Commentary on the institution's arrangements for ensuring that the information it publishes about the quality of provision is complete, accurate and fair**

74 The University has effective arrangements for ensuring that the information which it publishes about the quality of its academic provision is complete, accurate and fair. The approach used by the University is a combination of centralised oversight and local devolved responsibilities. Where responsibilities are devolved, there are appropriate monitoring mechanisms in place to ensure that information is consistent and accurate. Given the importance placed by the institution on the Course Information Database, the University is encouraged to bring its implementation to a timely conclusion.

## **The student experience**

### **Overview of the institution's approach to engaging students in the assurance and enhancement of the quality of teaching and learning**

75 The University uses both formal and informal mechanisms to engage students, and identifies effective student engagement as being central to the University's approach to the assurance and enhancement of the quality of teaching and learning. These forms of engagement include working with the Student Association; student representation at course, school and faculty levels; and feedback from individual students. The mechanisms for engagement differ across these groups and include representation on University committees, meetings with senior staff, representation on Internal Review panels, representation on working groups, and the extensive use of student questionnaires and external surveys.

### **Relationship with the Student Association**

76 The Student Association is represented on most of the University's senior committees, including the Board of Governors, the Academic Council, the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee, the Learning Infrastructure Subcommittee, the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Subcommittee, and the Staff and Student Affairs Committee. In recent years both the University and the Student Association have taken a number of steps to improve student engagement, so that a strong and effective relationship now exists between the institution and the Student Association. Of particular note is the recent appointment of a Dean of Students, whose remit includes a 'championing' role for the student experience and helps enable further dialogue between the University and the Student Association. Senior staff are aware of the value of this relationship for the University and of the challenge associated with maintaining this engagement as sabbatical officers change over time. The University anticipates that this relationship will be further strengthened through the recent appointment of a new Student Association General Manager. In addition, the Academic Affairs Department and the Student Association hold monthly meetings in order to coordinate the operation of student engagement within the University.

### **Engagement with students**

77 Students are represented on the University's Board of Governors, and student membership has been increased from one to two students (one undergraduate student and one postgraduate student), appointed through election.

78 The recent review of the University's 2010 Strategy (see above, paragraph 12) incorporated students' views obtained through a specific student focus group. The University indicated that student groups will have further input and opportunity to comment on the University's Strategy.

79 At course, school and faculty levels, students are represented on course staff/student liaison groups, school academic boards and on faculty quality enhancement subcommittees. School and faculty student representatives further sit on a number of University-level committees, including the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Subcommittee, the Learning Infrastructure Subcommittee, the Research Student/Staff Subcommittee, and the Research Committee. In discussions during ELIR, staff expressed the view that student representation on boards and committees had positively impacted on the work of these bodies by providing a more clearly student-focused emphasis and insight, and through students' abilities to 'truly represent the wider community'. Discussions with student representatives indicated that they valued their formal involvement in the quality assurance and enhancement work of committees; other students, not directly involved in student representation, indicated that many students are more likely to approach staff themselves, in preference to using formal representative processes, if they have a concern they wish to address.

80 The University makes provision for course representatives to meet with a range of senior staff. All course representatives are invited to a joint meeting with their dean of faculty and the Dean of Students in semester one, and to a meeting with the Principal in semester two. Notes of these meetings, including the University's response to matters raised, are posted on the Student Portal. In discussions during ELIR, staff reported that these meetings were found to be very useful and candid due to the 'open house' policy, and absence of a formal agenda. Staff emphasised that the meetings were not solely social, and that they produced action, for example, on timetabling (see below, paragraph 103).

81 From 2006-07, the University's Internal Review process has included a student member of the review panel (see above, paragraphs 38-43). Although, relatively few Internal Reviews had taken place since the decision to

include a student review panel member, both staff and student panel members regard this to be a very positive development. During ELIR, staff indicated that student panel members were appropriately critical and professional, and that students brought a different perspective to the reviews. Student panel members confirmed that they had received appropriate training (see below, paragraph 82) and that they felt free to be critical if necessary. Students suggested during ELIR that, when a review covers a number of programmes, it may be beneficial to have more than one student panel member in order to spread the workload.

82 The value placed by the University on the active engagement of students at course and school level is reflected in the significant development of a wide range of training and support for student representatives. The University describes as 'excellent' the support and interaction it enjoys with the national Student Participation in Quality Scotland service (sparqs) and this view was echoed by students during the ELIR. The University offers advanced training for experienced course representatives (those who undertake the role for more than one year). Specialised training is given to the Student Association President, and to student members of Internal Review panels. Training for student review panel members is supplemented by a briefing meeting, which includes an opportunity for the student to meet with key staff, including the review panel convener and the other internal panel members. An innovative approach is employed by the Aberdeen Business School which has created a student representatives' teamwork area on the University's Virtual Campus.

### **Student questionnaires and feedback arrangements**

83 The University has developed an extensive range of questionnaires as part of its engagement with the student body. Alongside the internally designed questionnaires, the University has made wide use of external surveys including one which involved a comprehensive evaluation of three aspects of the student experience: living environment; learning experience; and student support.

84 The University commissioned a consultancy company to undertake an extensive market research exercise, the report of which was received in 2002. The report reinforced the concept of the 'holistic student experience' and recommended that the University adopt a student satisfaction performance indicator based on the question 'Would you recommend this course to a friend?'. A significant majority of students completing questionnaires for each session from 2002-03 to 2004-05 indicated that they would recommend their course. The University has since revised its questionnaires to enable a more detailed analysis of the factors that students prioritise in responding to this performance indicator. The University's adoption and development of this performance indicator represents positive practice.

85 In 2001-02, the University established a working party to consider its approach to the use of student questionnaires, focusing on, in particular, the potential to move the questionnaire system to an electronic platform. This work has led to a significant number of enhancements to the University's approach to using questionnaires. In particular, the targeting of students has been introduced, so that undergraduates now receive University-wide questionnaires in their first and final years only in order to concentrate, respectively, on student transition to University, and students' experiences over their entire learning period. Most recently, new questionnaires have been developed and implemented for postgraduate and distance-learning students, and the module questionnaire has been revised and shortened. The development of an electronic platform for questionnaire delivery, analysis and feedback to students has delivered greater efficiency in processing feedback, amongst other benefits, and student response rates have risen significantly since the introduction of the revised questionnaires. While the relatively high response rates give the institution a measure of assurance about the validity of the information provided through questionnaires, the University continues to seek to improve response rates further. In discussions during ELIR, staff were open about the continuing challenges of

achieving higher response rates, and identified how the University is seeking to achieve this through, for example, the option of issuing questionnaires at the faculty level, and sending email reminders to students.

86 In addition to the University's use of questionnaires and students' membership of committees and working groups, student feedback is obtained through the use of focus groups. The University also recognises the importance of anecdotal feedback, for example, from students with disabilities, which can then be shared at student support services forums. During ELIR, students emphasised that the University was 'always willing to listen'.

87 It is clear that the University makes effective use of student questionnaires and other sources of feedback to inform itself of the holistic student experience, and that the analysis of these provide a valuable platform for evidence-based enhancement (see below, paragraphs 100-103).

88 The University seeks to inform its students of the outcomes resulting from the feedback they provide in a number of ways, including making available on the Student Portal the statistical results of module and course evaluation questionnaires, and posting the outcomes of meetings with students on the Student Involvement @ RGU website. During the ELIR, students reported that they did not make wide use of the Virtual Campus to learn what improvements the University was making. It also appeared that feedback from departmental/school staff on actions taken to address student concerns was variable across the University. The University is actively seeking to enhance its feedback to students, for example, through the use of posters and plasma screens, recognising that online feedback is not currently proving fully effective in ensuring wider student awareness of the University's response to issues raised by students. The University is encouraged to continue its work on improving the feedback it provides to students on their responses to questionnaires and other opinion gathering mechanisms.

## **Overview of the institution's approach to the promotion of effective student learning**

89 Since 2002, the University has adopted the term the 'holistic student experience' which it defines as all aspects of the student journey into and through the University. This wider view incorporates all the experiences of students, from their first connections with the University, their academic experience, co-curricular activities, their experience of all the University's support facilities, and their careers and status as alumni.

90 The University regards an effective student learning experience as one which motivates students to realise their academic potential, is valued by the students, and leads to relevant employment or career progression. The University identifies a number of components as contributing to the achievement of this: careful attention to course design to ensure fitness for purpose; the adoption of effective teaching, learning and assessment practices; the provision of high quality facilities and services; a comprehensive range of student support; and well qualified and motivated staff.

### **First-year experience**

91 The University has identified that low achievement and progression rates have tended to occur in students' first year of study, confirming wider sector feedback obtained through the national Enhancement Theme, 'Responding to Student Needs'. To help address this, the University has established a First Year Experience Working Group which has, to date, initiated the First Year website, and is coordinating the completion of a student transition and retention audit tool by all schools. In addition, the Working Group has identified a number of future strands of work including: evaluation of induction processes; a review of student handbooks; and a pilot of enhanced study skills for first-year students. The Working Group has also developed a First Year Experience questionnaire, in order to provide more detailed feedback from students, and to help identify the causes of low progression rates

on some courses. The University acknowledges that this questionnaire did not fully capture the experiences of those students who contribute to the low achievement rates, and the University has subsequently made use of more detailed student module evaluations to help identify potential problem areas.

### **Degree Link Programme**

92 Since 2001-02, the University has provided, in partnership with local further education colleges, its Degree Link Programme which seeks to offer students a seamless transition from Higher National Diploma programmes into relevant degrees at the University. The University has established partnerships with Aberdeen, Banff and Buchan, and Angus colleges of further education, and partnership agreements have more recently been extended to include Dundee College and UHI Millennium Institute. The implementation of the Degree Link Programme is overseen by the University's Centre for Student Access (see below, paragraph 106). In October 2006, 160 students entered the third year of a University degree, with a further 58 students entering the second year. The University has identified that the achievement rates of Degree Link students has improved significantly over time and considers that the success of these students has justified the institution's strategic decision to focus wider access initiatives through these articulation arrangements.

### **Professionalism and employability in the curriculum**

93 A major feature of the University's course portfolio is the high proportion of awards which carry professional, statutory or regulatory body approval (see above, paragraphs 59-60), and the extensive opportunities afforded to students for work experience through the provision of placements and/or work-based projects. These features reflect the University's Vision 'to be internationally recognised for excellence in professional education and applied research' (see above, paragraph 12).

94 Skills development has been more fully articulated recently in the module and course

outlines developed to meet the requirements of the University's Course Information Database (see above, paragraph 69). To support the development of professional skills within its graduates, the University has given emphasis to the provision of specialist learning facilities within schools and faculties, including in Health and Social Care; Life Sciences; Pharmacy; and the Aberdeen Business School.

95 One of the key components of the University's Employability Strategy (see below, paragraphs 109-113) is 'making extensive use of work-based learning opportunities and, in particular, placements most of which are credit-rated'. The University's requirements for placement provision are set out in its Academic Quality Handbook. These requirements make explicit students' rights and responsibilities, and provision of placement support. During the ELIR visit, the University provided information on innovative practice in placement support. For example, in the Faculty of Health and Social Care, web-based placement guides have been developed to help students derive maximum benefits from their placement, and for staff to help them enhance the placement experience. Good practice is shared through the recently established Placement Coordinators' Forum. In discussions during ELIR, students said that they valued their placements, and other-work based activities, as a significant part of their learning experience, and felt well-supported by their placement tutors and on-placement mentors. A substantial number of students obtain employment on graduating with the same organisation in which they completed their placement. This highlights the added-value of the placement, and the achievement of students during their placements.

### **Research students' experience**

96 From 2005-06, the University introduced revised procedures for the registration, induction and progression arrangements for postgraduate research students. These are set out in the Academic Quality Handbook. There are a number of means by which the University monitors the progress of research students, and evaluates the research environment: the

progress of individual research students is monitored by the student and her/his principal supervisor; and research students' views are sought through a number of questionnaires (see above, paragraph 45). The University is seeking to make the Postgraduate Certificate (PgCert) in Research Methods course as learner-centred as possible. So that it is relevant to each student, the course has been revised to balance the national requirements for more generic research skills, with applications to the current research of postgraduate students. Current research students commented positively on the balance between the generic and the particular within the PgCert. In 2006-07, the PgCert Coordinator, in liaison with the Research Degrees Office, organised a three-day conference on postgraduate research student employability skills and, in discussions, students indicated that this was a very useful supplement to their research programmes. The University has also made provision to enhance the training of research supervisors and for refreshing supervisory practice.

### **Information technology and the virtual learning environment**

97 The University's Teaching and Learning Strategy includes the aim to 'promote effective use of communication and information technology within teaching, learning and assessment practices'. Since 2001, a number of significant steps have been taken to improve information technology facilities, including the enhanced availability of PCs, on-campus wireless communication, wiring all student residences, and the provision of remote access to personal accounts.

98 The University identifies itself as an early adopter of a virtual learning environment (VLE) as a means of enhancing access to its provision. This early adoption preceded the development of a range of commercial VLE products within the UK, necessitating the development in-house of its VLE platform. The implementation of the VLE is seen to have been a catalyst for the development of a range of e-enabled facilities and services for both on-campus and distance-learning students, including applications,

enrolment and induction, library facilities and feedback to students.

99 The University recognises that concerns regarding the stability of its current VLE mean that it no longer provides a consistently reliable facility for students (including distance-learning students). Accordingly, the University is in the process of migrating its 'Virtual Campus' to a new open-source system, and is currently piloting this new VLE in schools across the three faculties. After evaluating these pilots, the University plans to train staff in its use during 2007-08, with a view to introducing the new VLE in the same academic session. The University believes that the new VLE will be a particular enhancement in the delivery of distance and blended learning courses. The Department for the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching and Assessment (DELTA) offers a range of support and training to staff engaged with courses delivered using the Virtual Campus and the University is encouraged to continue to provide support for staff engaged in the development and delivery of e-learning.

### **Facilities**

100 The University's Board of Governors has recently approved an Estates Masterplan which will result in moving all facilities to the Garthdee Campus by 2015. The Estate Masterplan intends to create four academic precincts (Creative Arts, Business, Health, and Technology), which will be interlinked by three support hubs (Learning Resource, Student Welfare, and Administration). This Masterplan is preceded by the construction of the Faculty of Health and Social Care building on the Garthdee Campus in 2003, and the development of a nursery facility, a community medical health centre, and a major new Sports Centre. Within the context of this longer-term consolidation and development, the University is taking a number of steps to maintain and enhance students' experience of the facilities currently available. Many of these developments are being undertaken in response to student feedback.

101 The University Library Service currently operates from the two existing campuses. A major redevelopment of the city centre St



Andrew Street Library is due to be completed for the start of 2007-08. It will incorporate a learning resource centre, and the range of electronic stock will be expanded to allow continuous access, including for distance-learning students. The incorporation of the learning resource centre is intended to act as a pilot for a planned development at the Garthdee site.

102 The priority given by the University to the construction of its new Sports Centre on the Garthdee Campus ('RGU: Sport') is an acknowledged response to past student feedback on the need to improve sporting facilities. RGU:Sport constitutes a significant development in sporting and related recreational facilities; the Sports Centre also provides the base for the Student Association Sports President, engendering a strong and positive relationship between RGU:Sport and the Student Association. In discussions during ELIR, students who have direct involvement with RGU:Sport endorsed the quality of the new sporting facilities (including the establishment of a number of sports scholarships) and highlighted the role of the Sports Centre as a community and social space. In addition, students identified the ways in which their roles in sports clubs, and related community group work, have helped them develop professional and transferable skills. It is clear that the new Sports Centre, and its associated activities, is making a positive contribution to the enhancement of the holistic student experience.

103 The University is aware that there are student concerns regarding the equality of experience on the two campuses. These concerns relate to a range of features, including student catering, timetabling and inter-campus transport. In relation to catering, the University has commissioned an extensive external review of catering, the report of which was awaited at the time of the ELIR. The University has established a working group on timetabling and has favoured a move towards a process which has a greater focus on students' experiences. As a result, the University plans to

establish a central team whose sole focus will be on the production of student, staff and facility timetables. Not all issues are directly within the control of the University, as is the case with the public transport provision between the two campuses. Despite the challenges involved, the University is striving to reach suitable solutions via negotiations with the transport company, and is considering other options including in-house bus services and shared park and ride facilities with other local organisations.

### **Student support**

104 The University seeks to provide an integrated and accessible system of academic and personal support to assist students in their transition to and from University and during their course of study. Over the recent period, the University has progressively developed and reorganised its student support services to make them more coherent and accessible. This has culminated in the recent regrouping of the services into three areas, under the leadership of a newly appointed Vice-Principal (Student Experience and External Relations): the Directorate of Student Recruitment, the Student Administration Department, and Student Services. Student Services incorporates the majority of frontline student-facing support services, and is headed by the recently appointed Dean of Students. The Services include the Centre for Student Access (CenSA); student counselling and well-being; the Careers Centre; the nursery; Chaplaincy; and Student Advice.

105 During ELIR, staff expressed the view that the development of student services had been informed by a recognition of the diversity of the student body, and the needs of different student groups. Staff further highlighted that the regrouped services had led to a 'joined up' approach, with the opportunity for more student referrals between services.

In discussions during ELIR, students were positive about the provision of support services, and the individual support they had received.

106 The Centre for Student Access (CenSA) is responsible for providing support to students who enter the University through non-standard

access routes, support for students with disabilities, and general student support. CenSA also supports and coordinates the University's Degree Link Programme (see above, paragraph 92). During ELIR, staff indicated some of the ways in which CenSA's work supports the Degree Link Programme including: working closely with staff in partner further education colleges; organising pre-entry events; and providing induction activities, including an orientation programme to specifically prepare students for advanced entry to the institution. Discussion with students during ELIR indicated that these arrangements were effective, and that Degree Link students felt well supported in their transition to higher education. Additionally, discussions with students identified the 'very helpful' support provided by CenSA to students with special needs.

107 The Careers Centre provides careers education, information and guidance to students on both campuses, and to distance learners through the provision of web-based materials. Student feedback to the University indicates that the Careers Centre is an area of 'measurable improvement', although further development is still required in relation to careers support for postgraduate students. In discussions during ELIR, students indicated that the Careers Centre offers good support and guidance, including through liaison with the departments and schools; joint events with external organisations; and help with curricula vitae design and preparation for job interviews. The integration of careers support within courses is valued by many students. For example, during ELIR, final year engineering students commented positively on a two-day residential programme to help them prepare for employment, and of the input of Careers Centre staff to this programme. The University is currently developing its careers support for postgraduate students including in response to findings from a survey of international students wishing to obtain employment in the United Kingdom.

108 All students are assigned a Personal Tutor from within the academic school to which they have enrolled. Personal Tutors provide support

and encouragement for students in their academic progress, and refer students to the appropriate support services. The University has recently undertaken a review of the Personal Tutor system. This review has led to a number of enhancements to the system, including a specified core level of contact with tutees; training for Personal Tutors; and the development of a Personal Tutor Handbook. During ELIR, students indicated that the Personal Tutor system was supportive and well-used by students. The University plans to evaluate the effectiveness of the new arrangements during 2006-07; the evaluation will be overseen by the Dean of Students and the Dean of DELTA. The University's intention is that the Personal Tutor system will be linked to further institutional level work on personal development plans (see below, paragraph 114). In addition to the support provided to students by Personal Tutors, individual members of staff contribute to providing a supportive environment. Feedback to the University indicates that this is consistently rated highly by students. During ELIR, students confirmed this view, and emphasised the approachability of staff, and their willingness to help, for example, by directing students to appropriate support services.

### **Overview of the institution's approach to the promotion of employability of its students**

109 The University's Employability Strategy is 'to embed employability as an integral part of the student experience within all taught and research degree provision'. This is implemented through curriculum development and delivery (see above, paragraphs 93-95); the active involvement of employers and PSRBs (see above, paragraphs 59-60); careers education and guidance (see above, paragraph 107); and support for co-curricular activity (see above, paragraph 102).

110 The University measures the effectiveness of the Employability Strategy through analysing the views of students, graduates and employers, and by graduate employment rates. The University's biennial survey of employers reports

positive outcomes. Graduate employment is a key performance indicator for the University, and it has performed above the national average in key surveys.

111 The Employability Strategy promotes the updating of the professional experience and practice of staff. That staff have such current experience and practice is likely to impact directly on the student experience, and in discussions during ELIR, students expressed the view that many staff demonstrated the applicability and relevance of their professional practice and research through their teaching, for example, in the use of case-studies.

112 Entrepreneurship is integrated into many courses, particularly in the Aberdeen Business School. The University has identified that students from across the institution have shown enthusiasm for participating in national enterprise competitions. Accordingly, the University intends to provide access to entrepreneurship development for students across the institution, initially through co-curricular activity. The University is encouraged in this proposed enhanced opportunity for students.

113 The University considers that research students' employability is enhanced through interaction with business, through the use of external advisers in addition to the academic supervisory team, and by developing research students' insight into the transferable nature of research skills through providing appropriate learning opportunities within the institution (see above, paragraph 96). The University is encouraged to continue in its efforts to facilitate and promote the consideration of employability as part of the research student experience.

### **Personal development planning**

114 The University recognises that it does not yet have an institution-wide approach for personal development planning (PDP) although there are local initiatives in some parts of the institution, including the introduction of e-portfolios. In March 2007, the Academic Council acknowledged that a more formal University policy and approach to PDP would be desirable and, in discussions during ELIR,

staff also described the development of PDP as a priority. The Department for the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching and Assessment has begun to develop such an approach. The University is encouraged to progress this recent initiative.

### **Commentary on the effectiveness of the institution's approach to promoting an effective learning experience for students**

115 The University views effective student engagement as being central to its approach to quality management, and utilises a range of mechanisms and approaches to encourage student representation and feedback. There is a strengthening relationship between the University and the Student Association, and a mutual commitment to promote the sustainability of the relationship. The University is committed to student representation on its committees at all levels of the institution, and this is supported by extensive training for students fulfilling a representative role.

116 The University places strong importance on internal and external performance indicators and feedback. The University makes effective use of questionnaires to inform itself of the student experience, and is actively reflecting on their optimal use, and how to further improve on the relatively high response rates. Overall, these approaches provide an effective platform for evidence-based enhancement. The University is encouraged to continue its work on improving communication to students on enhancements it makes as a result of their feedback.

117 The University's approach to providing an effective learning experience for students is grounded in the concept of the 'holistic student experience', which it defines as all aspects of the student journey into and through the University. Over the recent past, the University has progressively developed its support services to make them more coherent, interconnected and student facing. The student community, including students who enter through the University's Degree Link programme, are well-supported by the operation of these services, particularly the Centre for Student Access.

118 The University is currently based on two campuses, and has plans to migrate entirely to the Garthdee Campus by 2015. In the interim, the University is taking a number of steps to address the equity of the student experience between its two campuses. The University is in the process of migrating its 'Virtual Campus' to a new VLE; the University is encouraged to continue to provide support for staff engaged in the development and delivery of e-learning.

119 The University's commitment to the promotion of employability and professionalism is systematically embedded throughout its approaches to course design and delivery. There are a number of features of good practice including placement support for students and employer involvement. The University's approach to employability is a key strength of the institution. The University is encouraged to formalise its approach to PDP, in doing so capturing existing activity, and promoting further development across the institution.

## **Effectiveness of the institution's strategy for quality enhancement**

### **Overview of the institution's approach to managing improvement in the quality of teaching and learning**

120 The University has a long-standing commitment to the enhancement of the student experience. More recently, structural and senior management changes have been made to increase the focus on the student experience; these included the appointment of a Vice-Principal (Student Experience and External Relations), a Dean of Students (see above, paragraph 76) and a Dean of the Department for Enhancement of Learning, Teaching and Assessment (DELTA) (see above, paragraph 24) and a regrouping of central support facilities to make them more learner centred (see above, paragraph 104).

121 Changes to the subcommittee structure of the Academic Council also provided additional focus on the enhancement of the student

experience. The former Committee for Teaching, Learning and Assessment was renamed the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (QAEC) and its remit revised to include a strategic oversight of the development and implementation of the University's enhancement of the student learning experience. The remit of the Research Degrees Committee (RDC) was widened to include the support, development and enhancement of the University's provision of research degree programmes. Two of QAEC's subcommittees, the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Subcommittee (TLASC) and the Learning Infrastructure Subcommittee, have also been given specific roles in the enhancement of the student learning experience. In 2005-06, faculty quality enhancement subcommittees were introduced to identify, coordinate, promote and monitor quality enhancement activities at faculty and school levels. The remit of school academic boards include the identification, coordination, promotion and monitoring of quality enhancement activities. The Dean of DELTA has taken over the convenership of TLASC, and this has led to a reconsideration of TLASC's business and mode of operation, and its linkages with key committees for quality enhancement.

### **Quality enhancement planning**

122 The University's strategy for quality enhancement has involved the development of 'explicit, systematic and integrated' annual enhancement planning procedures. Initially, enhancement was made a more explicit outcome of internal quality assurance procedures and an institution-level annual Quality Enhancement Implementation Plan (QEIP) was introduced, and coordinated and monitored by QAEC.

123 In June 2005, in parallel with the introduction of the new committee structure, a revised version of the University's Teaching and Learning Strategy (TLS), which sought to articulate the University's vision for the student experience, was approved. The components of the TLS, which cover all aspects of the learning experience, have been used from session 2005-06 to form the planning template for an annual institutional-

level QEIP. In session 2006-07 the planning framework was extended to include school and departmental QEIPs. Detailed institutional, school and departmental QEIPs, incorporating enhancement activity arising from the Annual Appraisal process (see above, paragraphs 31-37), are produced by the end of March. School and departmental plans are then reviewed between April and June to identify which activities should be coordinated at faculty level and which should be incorporated in the institutional QEIP for the following session.

124 During the development of the QEIP process, fruitful discussion has taken place on the nature of enhancement and how to encourage wide ownership of the concept of enhancement activity and its implementation. Following an attempt during 2005-06 to introduce an element of 'bottom up' input into the QEIP which met with mixed success, guidance was provided to heads of school in identifying appropriate quality enhancement activity which could be mapped onto the components of the TLS. The process for developing school and departmental QEIPs draws on information provided in sections of a new planning pro forma. A procedure has also been developed to capture relevant quality enhancement activities for research degree provision in school and department QEIPs.

### **Department for the Enhancement of Learning Teaching and Assessment**

125 The creation of the Department for the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching and Assessment (DELTA) (see above, paragraph 24) is seen by the University as offering further potential for increased efficiency and effectiveness. With a mission to promote the enhancement of learning, teaching and assessment by providing developmental support in academic practice and educational technology to staff in faculties and schools, DELTA represents the integration of pedagogy and technology. In addition, the appointment of a Dean to head DELTA signalled the importance the University attaches to the enhancement of learning and teaching. The role is intended to work closely with the faculty

deans and the Dean of Students and, in doing so, the Dean is expected to be a 'key interface' between the Executive Group and the academic community.

126 DELTA and its Dean have lead responsibility in implementing several of the institution-level enhancement activities linked to the components of the Teaching and Learning Strategy identified in the 2006-07 QEIP, including the development of an institutional policy for personal development planning (see above, paragraph 114); establishing effective institutional linkages with appropriate external agencies, in particular, linking with the national Enhancement Themes and the Higher Education Academy (HEA); delivering staff development to support the effective use of technology in teaching, learning and assessment, including training staff in the implementation of the University's new VLE; and reviewing the role and operation of the Learning Enhancement Coordinators.

127 In addition, DELTA provides a range of staff development programmes, including a one-day induction for all new, inexperienced, full-time academic staff; a mandatory training programme for postgraduate students with responsibility for teaching and assessment; a PgCert in Higher Education Learning and Teaching; an HEA-accredited research supervisor training programme; and training and support for staff in the development and delivery of e-learning courses.

### **Learning Enhancement Coordinators**

128 In order to facilitate the planning and implementation of enhancement in teaching and learning at school, faculty and institutional levels, the role of Learning Enhancement Coordinator (LEC) was established in 2004 and an LEC was appointed in each school, initially for a period of two years. On the 'hub and spokes' model, the LECs were expected to act as a conduit for the dissemination of good practice between the (then) Centre for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching and the schools. In addition, the LECs are core members of the faculty quality enhancement subcommittees, one LEC from each faculty sits

on the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Subcommittee, and internal review panels include an LEC.

129 A review of the role of LECs, carried out at the end of the 2005-06 session found that, although there had been some positive benefits at school level in raising the profile of teaching, learning and assessment practices during the trial period, the experiment could be judged only a partial success. Heads of schools had adopted different approaches to the appointment and support of the LECs, and some of the LECs had not been given enough time to meet the obligations of their role. Links between the LECs at faculty level and with the Centre for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching had not been effectively developed. The University, however, remains committed to the 'hub and spokes' model as a significant contribution to enhancement activities across the University. One of the institutional-level enhancement activities in the 2006-07 QEIP is a review, to be conducted by the Dean of DELTA, of the role and operation of LECs and the connections between DELTA and the LECs.

### **National Enhancement Themes**

130 The University has engaged actively with the national Enhancement Themes, with particularly strong involvement in the 'Responding to Student Needs', 'Assessment' and 'Employability' Themes. University staff have been, or are currently, members of the steering groups for the 'Responding to Student Needs', 'Assessment', 'Flexible Delivery', 'Research-Teaching Linkages', and 'The First Year' experience themes. Both the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee and the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Subcommittee have the Enhancement Themes as standing items on their agendas; both committees receive reports on the Themes, and information on the progress of the Themes is disseminated through the minutes of the two committees. The faculty quality enhancement subcommittees receive reports from the LECs on their involvement with Enhancement Themes activities. The University recommends that reference should be made to the influence

of the Enhancement Themes on teaching, learning and assessment practice at subject level when composing an Analytical Account for internal review. Establishing effective engagement with the Enhancement Themes is an identified institutional-level enhancement activity in the 2006-07 QEIP, linked to a component of the TLS relating to the encouragement and facilitation of innovation in teaching, learning and assessment through the dissemination of national/international best practice. In the context of this active involvement, the University reported that it is finding it progressively more challenging to balance implementation of outcomes from the initial Enhancement Themes with ongoing engagement in the current Themes.

### **Overview of the linkage between the institution's arrangements for internal quality assurance and its enhancement activity**

131 All the University's quality assurance procedures now explicitly include quality enhancement as an outcome, and enhancement outcomes of quality assurance are addressed at both the local and institutional level. Coordination of institutional level enhancement arising through the outcomes of quality assurance procedures is undertaken by the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (QAEC) for taught programmes and by the Research Degrees Committee (RDC) for postgraduate research programmes.

132 Feedback obtained by means of student evaluation questionnaires and staff/student liaison groups as part of the Annual Appraisal process (see above, paragraphs 31-37) enables the identification of areas for further improvement. Module coordinators and course leaders are encouraged to upload information into the student portal about enhancements planned following feedback received from the questionnaires. Module and course/programme appraisal reports include sections requiring reflection on the outcomes of actions and enhancements proposed for the previous session and, in the case of course/programme

reports, a section summarising proposed actions and enhancements, indicating timescales and the level of responsibility: school, faculty or institution. Schools are required in their Annual Appraisal reports to indicate plans both to improve and enhance the quality of provision and practice, and the deans' reports to QAEC on the Annual Appraisal process are expected to make appropriate reference to quality enhancement issues. Research degree appraisal overview reports, requiring consideration of good practice and enhancement activities, are completed annually by schools and considered by faculty research degree subcommittees (see above, paragraphs 44-48). Central support departments contributing to the student learning experience are required to submit an annual report to the Learning Infrastructure Subcommittee on enhancement activities undertaken during the session in response to issues arising either from the previous session's report or from student feedback, and on enhancement activities planned for the following session.

133 The outcomes, both recommendations and commendations, arising from validation and internal review events (see above paragraphs 25-30; 38-43) are used to enhance provision and to formulate quality enhancement agendas. In addition, the inclusion of LECs and internal staff members on panels provides an opportunity to share good practice within and between faculties. The Analytical Accounts produced for internal reviews are expected to include critical evaluations of key developments and enhancements in the learning infrastructure and the mechanisms for collecting and responding to student feedback. From the start of session 2006-07, internal review panels have been asked to identify in their reports up to three areas of significant good practice for wider institutional enhancement.

134 Areas requiring enhancement or regarded as good practice reported by external examiners are formally considered during the Annual Appraisal of courses/programmes. An annual summary evaluation of issues raised in

external examiners' reports, including aspects of good practice and areas for further development, is prepared by the Academic Affairs Department for consideration by QAEC.

### **Overview of the institution's approach to recognising, rewarding and implementing good practice in the context of its strategy for quality enhancement**

135 One of the most important mechanisms identified by the University for the recognition of good practice is staff engagement in internal quality assurance and enhancement procedures. DELTA publications feature good and innovative practice in learning and teaching, and staff are encouraged to undertake study trips to benchmark institutional practice. As a means of raising awareness of good practice, staff have been actively engaged with a range of external initiatives including the national Enhancement Themes, the Higher Education Academy, the Teachability Initiative and Equality Forward.

136 One of the components of the Teaching and Learning Strategy is the provision of staff development, support and encouragement for staff to engage in pedagogic research and, as part of their personal and professional development, funding support is provided at school level for staff who wish to undertake higher degrees.

137 DELTA is allocated £20,000 a year to fund the John Gray Awards scheme for innovative projects in teaching, learning and assessment or the wider student experience, proposed either by individuals or small groups of staff. Recent examples of projects funded through the scheme include the application of personal response systems to encourage interaction in lectures; development of an e-portfolio tool; and a pilot project to evaluate peer tutoring. Successful applicants for awards are required to submit reports on their projects for publication in Learning Matters, a journal produced by DELTA.

138 The role of Teaching Fellow has been introduced as a promotion opportunity for staff who excel in innovation in teaching and learning, with the criteria for the award aligned to those for promotion to Reader. The University has expressed the view that the fact that only a few members of staff have been successful in becoming Teaching Fellows reflects the historic lack of explicit career progression for staff engaged in the enhancement of teaching and learning. The introduction of the role of the Learning Enhancement Coordinator (LEC) was partly intended to provide an opportunity for individuals to develop an evidence base to support an application for promotion to Teaching Fellow.

139 Once good practice has been identified and disseminated it is implemented in a variety of ways. At institutional level DELTA plays a key role in supporting staff, where relevant in conjunction with the LECs. A range of policies, guidance documents and handbooks have been developed at institutional level to support this; these include assessment practices, approaches to teaching and learning, and addressing equity and diversity. Before the wider adoption of good practice, initial pilot exercises are carried out, for example, on the application of plagiarism detection software; on the development of the new VLE; and on the use of computer-aided assessments.

140 'Away Days' at University, faculty and school levels are increasingly used as a vehicle for discussing the implementation of good practice in areas such as The First Year experience, assessment practice and student placements. Cross-institutional working groups, such as the First Year Experience Working Group (see above, paragraph 91) and the Student Placement Working Group, also facilitate the implementation of good practice.

### **Commentary on the combined effect of the institution's policies and practices for ensuring improvement in the quality of teaching and learning**

141 In line with the University's strategic commitment to the enhancement of the student experience, all quality assurance procedures explicitly include the enhancement of learning and teaching as an outcome. Outcomes arising from validation and internal review events are used to enhance provision and to formulate quality enhancement agendas. The Annual Appraisal of taught programmes encourages reflection on, and enables identification of, enhancement activities and the planning of improvements following feedback from students. The recent introduction of module-level appraisal has been particularly effective in ensuring improvement in the quality of learning and teaching. A similar system of annual appraisal of research degree programmes and of central support departments contributing to the student learning experience, requires the consideration and reporting of good practice and enhancement activities. The extension of the Quality Enhancement Implementation Plan (QEIP) process to school and departmental level and the linking of the QEIP process to the outcomes of Annual Appraisal have resulted in wider staff involvement in, and ownership of, the enhancement of learning and teaching.

142 The establishment of the Department for the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching and Assessment (DELTA), and the appointment of a Dean, focusing on support for staff in the enhancement of learning and teaching, has made possible the integration of pedagogy and technology, and has the potential to improve further the student learning experience. At institutional level, DELTA has a key role to play in the dissemination of good practice in learning and teaching identified through the internal quality management processes and by staff participation in external activities such as the national Enhancement Themes. Although the University recognises that, to date, the Learning Enhancement Coordinators (LECs) have had only limited success in raising the profile of teaching, learning and assessment and in disseminating good practice at faculty and school level, it remains committed to the



'hub and spokes' model as a significant means of promoting quality enhancement across the institution. In view of this commitment, the University is encouraged, in the interests of more effective dissemination of good practice, to strengthen the links between DELTA and the LECs.

143 The University has begun to introduce explicit career progression opportunities for staff engaged in the enhancement of learning and teaching. Staff who excel at innovation in teaching and learning can apply for promotion to the post of Teaching Fellow, although since the post's introduction, few staff have been successful. The University regarded the introduction of LEC posts as providing a professional development route to the Teaching Fellow position, and ultimately to that of professor. The LEC role has not yet, however, resulted in the position becoming the first step on a career path that emphasises pedagogy rather than research, partly because heads of schools have adopted different approaches to the appointment of LECs. The University is encouraged to continue in its attempt to develop a coherent career structure which recognises and rewards teaching excellence.

### **Commentary on the effectiveness of the institution's implementation of its strategy for quality enhancement**

144 The association of the University's strategy for quality enhancement with a direct focus on the holistic student experience has led to the careful development of explicit, systematic and integrated annual enhancement planning procedures. The components of the University's Teaching and Learning Strategy have been used to form the template for an annual institutional-level Quality Enhancement Implementation Plan (QEIP). The University has made significant progress in developing department and school QEIPs and in integrating elements from these into the institution-level QEIP. This planning framework also provides an effective vehicle for monitoring the implementation of the Teaching and Learning Strategy.

145 A series of committees at school, faculty and institutional level have been given specific roles in the implementation of the University's strategy for quality enhancement, including the consideration and integration of QEIPs. In the interest of the effective monitoring and evaluation of enhancement activity, the University is encouraged to continue to keep under review the remits of, and the relationship between, those committees at different levels of the institution which are concerned with enhancement.

146 The University has engaged actively with the national Enhancement Themes, and has taken significant steps to integrate and utilise the work of the Themes in its own enhancement activities.

## Summary

### Background to the institution and ELIR method

147 Robert Gordon's Technical College became a Scottish Central Institution in 1903, having had its origins in 1750 as the educational arm of the Robert Gordon's Hospital. In the nineteenth century, it incorporated the Aberdeen Mechanics Institute and the Aberdeen Pharmaceutical Society, and provided the site for Gray's School of Art. It changed its name to Robert Gordon's Institute of Technology in 1965, and in 1989 was accredited by the Council for National Academic Awards to confer its own awards. University status was awarded in 1992.

148 The University's mission, as set out in its Strategy 'The Robert Gordon University - Towards 2010' is to 'inspire and enable the transformation of individuals, economies and societies' and its vision is 'to be internationally recognised for excellence in professional education and applied research'. A review of the '2010' Strategy is currently underway, with a view to extending the strategic vision and aims to 2015 and beyond.

149 The academic activities of the University are divided into three faculties, each with constituent schools or cognate departments: the Faculty of Design and Technology; the Faculty of Health and Social Care; and the Aberdeen Business School. The University is based on two sites: the Schoolhill Campus, based in Aberdeen's city centre; and the Garthdee Campus, some four miles south-west of the city centre.

150 In line with the enhancement-led institutional review (ELIR) method, the institution submitted a Reflective Analysis (RA) in advance of the review. The RA set out the institution's strategy for quality enhancement, its approach to the management of quality and standards and its view of the effectiveness of its approach. The University submitted three case-studies with its RA. These were chosen by the University to illustrate three aspects which

define the University's view of an effective student learning experience: enhancing access to degree courses; the development of student questionnaires to evaluate the student learning experience; and enhancing student employability.

### Overview of the matters raised by the review

151 Since 2002, the University has made the 'holistic student experience' the focus of enhancement and the associated strategic approach has been to evolve 'explicit, systematic and integrated annual enhancement planning procedures, with the plans informed through a combination of internal appraisal and reflection on national and international good/effective practice'. The University's Teaching and Learning Strategy seeks to 'provide a learning experience...which supports, develops and inspires students to realise their potential and prepare them for the world of work, further study, lifelong learning and citizenship'.

152 The particular themes pursued in the review included internal monitoring and review of quality and academic standards; the characteristics of the 'holistic student experience'; student engagement, participation and representation; the development and implementation of the University's strategy for quality enhancement; and staff development, recognition and reward.

### Commentary on the ability of the institution's internal review systems to monitor and maintain quality and standards

153 The University's internal quality processes are well-established and regularly reviewed. They are supported by high quality documentation including a clear and comprehensive Academic Quality Handbook. The committee structure which has responsibility for, and oversight of, quality assurance and the monitoring of academic standards is generally effective, and recent changes to increase the involvement of schools

and staff from student-facing support departments have proved successful. The new executive responsibilities of the deans of faculty also appear to be operating effectively, and the monitoring of their individual decisions by the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee provides an appropriate balance.

154 Operational support for quality processes through the Academic Affairs Department is of a high professional standard. The detail of the role of the Department for the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching and Assessment (DELTA) is still to be confirmed; however, initial evidence would suggest that it has significant potential in further developing enhancement approaches in some of the major University quality processes.

155 The University's processes for the approval, monitoring and review of taught academic provision are robust, fit for purpose, and have a growing focus on quality enhancement. The approval of courses is undertaken through a well-tested and established process. There would be benefit in the University clarifying further the future role of DELTA in relation to the course validation process. The Annual Appraisal of the quality and academic standards of courses has recently been developed through the introduction of module level evaluation. This process, and the substantial use of student opinion to underpin the annual review of courses, are strengths. The deans' reports to the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee are appropriately reflective, self-critical and valuable in setting out future enhancement activities. The University undertakes comprehensive consideration of the outcomes of the Annual Appraisal process through the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee and the Academic Council. Periodic Internal Review is a comprehensive and well-organised process which is successfully achieving the University's stated aims. Its enhancement focus is being more clearly defined and promoted. Although only in the early stages of implementation, the involvement of student panel members, and the contribution which they are making to the process, is an evident strength.

156 The University makes appropriate use of external benchmarks and reference points. The system of external examining is robust and operating effectively. The use made of the Academic Infrastructure is effective and is the subject of continuous review by the University. The University is integrating professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, and employer, links successfully into its overall quality processes.

157 The arrangements for the quality assurance and enhancement of research degrees have recently undergone significant revision. The revised arrangements include aspects of good practice including the independent convenership arrangements for faculty research degrees subcommittees, the development of formal assessment criteria to assist examining teams, and the use of an independent internal convenor for the examination of theses. There would be benefit in the University considering revisions to its practice for the appointment of examiners, including offering further guidance on the issue of the independence of such examiners.

158 While the University's collaborative provision is not extensive, it has robust and thorough procedures for its management, underpinned by sound general principles of partnership. In some cases, it has adapted its procedures appropriately to meet the needs of particular academic and professional provision.

159 Overall, broad confidence can be placed in the University's current, and likely future, management of the quality of its provision and the academic standards of its awards.

**Commentary on the institution's arrangements for ensuring that the information it publishes about the quality of its provision is complete, accurate and fair**

160 The University has effective arrangements for ensuring that the information which it publishes about the quality of its academic provision is complete, accurate and fair. The approach used by the University is a

combination of centralised oversight and local devolved responsibilities. Where responsibilities are devolved, there are appropriate monitoring mechanisms in place to ensure that information is consistent and accurate. Given the importance placed by the institution on its Course Information Database as a repository for data which can then be used to provide a range of documents for different audiences, the University is encouraged to bring its implementation to a timely conclusion.

### **Commentary on the effectiveness of the institution's approach to promoting an effective learning experience for students**

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and student facing. The student community, including students who enter through the University's Degree Link programme, are well-supported by the operation of these services, particularly the Centre for Student Access.

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introduction of module-level appraisal has been particularly effective in ensuring improvement in the quality of learning and teaching.

A similar system of annual appraisal of research degree programmes, and of central support departments contributing to the student learning experience, requires the consideration and reporting of good practice and enhancement activities. The extension of the Quality Enhancement Implementation Plan (QEIP) process to school and departmental level and the linking of the QEIP process to the outcomes of Annual Appraisal has resulted in wider staff involvement in, and ownership of, the enhancement of learning and teaching.

167 The establishment of the Department for the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching and Assessment (DELTA), and the appointment of a Dean, focusing on support for staff in the enhancement of learning and teaching, has made possible the integration of pedagogy and technology, and has the potential to improve further the student learning experience. At institutional level, DELTA has a key role to play in the dissemination of good practice in learning and teaching identified through the internal quality management processes and by staff participation in external activities such as the national Enhancement Themes. Although the University recognises that, to date, the Learning Enhancement Coordinators (LECs) have had only limited success in raising the profile of teaching, learning and assessment and in disseminating good practice at faculty and school level, it remains committed to the 'hub and spokes' model as a significant means of promoting quality enhancement across the institution. In view of this commitment, the University is encouraged, in the interests of more effective dissemination of good practice, to strengthen the links between DELTA and the LECS.

168 The University has begun to introduce explicit career progression opportunities for staff engaged in the enhancement of learning and teaching. Staff who excel at innovation in teaching and learning can apply for promotion to the post of Teaching Fellow, although since the posts introduction, few staff have been

successful. The University regarded the introduction of LEC posts as providing a professional development route to the Teaching Fellow position, and ultimately to that of professor. The LEC role has not yet, however, resulted in the position becoming the first step on a career path that emphasises pedagogy rather than research, partly because heads of schools have adopted different approaches to the appointment of LECs. The University is encouraged to continue in its attempt to develop a coherent career structure which recognises and rewards teaching excellence.

### **Commentary on the effectiveness of the institution's implementation of its strategy for quality enhancement**

169 The association of the University's strategy for quality enhancement with a direct focus on the holistic student experience has led to the careful development of explicit, systematic and integrated annual enhancement planning procedures. The components of the University's Teaching and Learning Strategy have been used to form the template for an annual institutional-level QEIP. The University has made significant progress in developing department and school QEIPs and in integrating elements from these into the institution-level QEIP. This planning framework also provides an effective vehicle for monitoring the implementation of the Teaching and Learning Strategy.

170 A series of committees at school, faculty and institutional level have been given specific roles in the implementation of the University's strategy for quality enhancement, including the consideration and integration of QEIPs. In the interest of the effective monitoring and evaluation of enhancement activity, the University is encouraged to continue to keep under review the remit of, and the relationship between, those committees at different levels of the institution which are concerned with enhancement.

171 The University has engaged actively with the national Enhancement Themes, and has taken significant steps to integrate and utilise the work of the Themes in its own enhancement activities.

