

UHI Millennium Institute

MAY 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 UHI Millennium Institute (UHI) undertaken by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). QAA is grateful to UHI for the willing cooperation provided to the ELIR team.

2 The review followed a method agreed with Universities Scotland, student bodies and the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC), 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), published by QAA, 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 QAA's 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 the single, formal judgement included within ELIR reports on the level of confidence which can be placed in the institution's management of quality and standards. This 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 UHI 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 12 April 2007; UHI Academic Standards and Quality Regulations; UHI Learning and Teaching Strategy 2004-06; UHI Staff Guide; UHI Quality Enhancement Policy; the report of the post-designation quality audit undertaken by QAA in March 2003; the report of the Taught Degree Awarding Powers scrutiny carried out by QAA during 2005-06; and a set of QAA academic subject review reports relating to reviews conducted between 2001 and 2006. In addition, UHI provided a CD-ROM containing electronic versions of a range of internal committee papers and policy documents which had been referred to in the RA.

5 UHI submitted three case-studies with its RA:

- Easing transition: widening access and supporting students from non-traditional backgrounds - which explored a range of UHI's arrangements aimed at promoting lifelong learning.
- Sustainable Science Heritage and Development: development of a new model through the revalidation process - which set out UHI's approach to

redesigning its programmes in one subject network, utilising blended learning strategies and the revised modular structure.

- Managing and enhancing the student experience on networked programmes - which described arrangements for delivering teaching and student support on networked degrees in the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences.

6 In producing the RA, UHI indicated that it had involved a wide range of staff and students including UHI Students' Association, the deans of faculty, subject network and programme leaders, academic partner quality managers and members of key UHI committees and working groups. External views had also been sought during the RA production, in part through external membership of UHI committees. The final draft of the RA was scrutinised by all the UHI senior committees including the Board of Governors. While the ELIR team considered such wide involvement in the production of the RA to be good practice, the document itself was missing information about a number of key institutional developments and did not demonstrate a capacity for self-evaluation. This necessitated the team's consideration of a significant range of additional documentation before and during the Part 2 visit in order to understand UHI's policies and practices.

7 The ELIR team visited UHI on two occasions: the Part 1 visit took place on 18 and 19 April 2007 and the Part 2 visit took place in the week beginning 21 May 2007.

8 During the first morning of Part 1, there was a series of presentations beginning with the Principal and Deputy Principal and Secretary who provided a background to UHI and, importantly, set out a number of recent key developments including proposed changes to the senior management structure. The Academic Registrar and the principal of an academic partner college gave a presentation on the action UHI had taken and planned since receiving the final report of the application for taught degree awarding powers. The morning concluded with presentations from staff and the

President of the Students' Association on UHI's approach to enhancing the student experience.

9 The ELIR team had three further meetings during Part 1 with groups of senior staff, student representatives, and staff who had a close involvement with UHI's internal review processes. These meetings enabled the team to identify a number of topics for further development including: UHI's relationship with its validating institutions; the use of external advisers; the relationship between the executive office and the academic partners; academic leadership and authority; the impact of the new management structure; the strategic use of management information; student retention and progression; management of the assessment process; the nature of student representation and the attention paid to the student voice; mechanisms for analysing and managing the student experience; equivalence of learning opportunities; the strategic approach to quality enhancement; and staff development and support arrangements.

10 During the Part 1 visit, UHI made available a set of documentation which had been identified within the RA and a set of supplementary information identified during the course of the visit. This enabled the ELIR team to develop a programme of meetings and to identify documentation for the Part 2 visit in order to provide a representative view of UHI's approach to assuring and enhancing quality, and maintaining the academic standards of the awards it offers on behalf of its validating institutions.

11 The ELIR team comprised: Professor Bob Craik, Professor Diane Meehan, Dr Larry Roberts and Ms Claire Taylor (reviewers), and Ms Jackie Main (review secretary). The review was coordinated on behalf of QAA by Ms Ailsa Crum, Assistant Director, QAA Scotland.

Background information about the institution

12 UHI has its origins in 1991 when the then Highland Regional Council set up a steering group to explore the case for a university in the

Highlands and Islands. In 1998, the Open University approved UHI to offer its degrees through the Open University Validation Services. In 2001, following an audit conducted by QAA, UHI became designated as a higher education institution and the Privy Council approved the use of the title UHI Millennium Institute.

13 UHI is a partnership of 13 independent institutions known as academic partners: Argyll College; Inverness College; Lews Castle College; Lochaber College; Moray College; North Highland College; Orkney College; Perth College; Shetland College; Scottish Association for Marine Science; Sabhal Mòr Ostaig; Highland Theological College; and North Atlantic Fisheries. Seven of the academic partners are further and higher education colleges, four are specialist research and teaching institutions and the two smallest academic partners, Argyll and Lochaber Colleges, provide an infrastructure of academic support for students in rural areas studying further and higher education modules or programmes offered by the other partners. All of the academic partners have close links with their communities through a variety of arrangements including learning centres (see below, paragraphs 135-138). UHI also has two associate institutions: the Ness Foundation, a health research centre which has been associated with UHI since 1999; and, since 2005, the Sustainable Development Research Centre, a not-for-profit research body involved in supporting the monitoring and measuring of sustainable development.

14 An academic framework of faculties and subject networks provides the organising structure for curriculum planning and development. There are 15 subject networks mapping to four faculties:

- Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences: arts and social sciences; cultural and creative industries; education; Gaelic and other contemporary languages; and theology and religious studies

- Faculty of Business and Leisure: business and management; computing and ICT; leisure, tourism and sport
- Faculty of Health: beauty and associated therapies; and health and social care
- Faculty of Science and Technology: construction; engineering; land and sea-based industries; marine science; and sustainable science heritage and development.

15 The UHI Executive Office undertakes a range of duties to coordinate and support the activities of the academic partners, including: curriculum and staff development; quality assurance and enhancement; faculty administration; development of learning and information services; promotion of research; the provision of information for statutory and planning purposes; marketing and public relations; and administrative and financial services. It is located in Inverness but also employs a number of staff who are based in the academic partners.

16 UHI offers Higher National Certificates and Diplomas (HNCs and HNDs) validated by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), and continues to offer taught degrees validated by the Open University. It is able to offer research degrees through accreditation agreements with the Open University and the University of Aberdeen. In 2006-07, UHI offered a portfolio of 25 undergraduate programmes (11 at honours level) and nine taught postgraduate programmes. During 2006-07, five additional undergraduate programmes and two additional postgraduate programmes were proceeding through internal and the Open University Validation Services validation. In addition, honours years were being developed for five of the existing undergraduate programmes.

17 In 2005-06, UHI had a headcount of 6,748 students of whom 57 per cent were studying part-time giving a full-time equivalent (FTE) total of 3,856. There were 2,501 students studying towards HNCs, 1,057 studying towards HNDs, 1,242 students (963 FTE) studying on undergraduate degree

programmes, 213 students (81 FTE) studying on taught postgraduate programmes and 60 (49 FTE) research students. Of the total student population 54 per cent was aged 25 or over. The three largest academic partners: Inverness, Perth and Moray Colleges, accounted for 70 per cent of UHI students. The RA indicated that the student numbers for 2006-07 were expected to exceed those for the preceding year, citing the example of research student numbers which were expected to exceed 100 (headcount). At September 2006, there were 891 staff on the UHI staff register. Of the 624 individuals classed as academic staff, 312 were involved in teaching on degree programmes. There were 267 support staff.

Institution's strategy for quality enhancement

18 The RA indicated that UHI has set out to:

- extend higher education study opportunities across the highlands and islands
- offer flexible programmes to meet lifelong learning needs, including progression pathways from further education programmes, and from higher national programmes to degrees
- develop academic structures, systems and practices to support the planning and delivery of higher education to consistent standards
- develop an academic community with horizontal practitioner networks across the whole of UHI, using technology to overcome the barriers caused by distance
- develop an inclusive and effective model of governance and management.

19 The UHI Quality Enhancement Policy indicates that quality enhancement at UHI is driven by a commitment to its core principles of high quality learning and teaching, widening access and student support. The Policy also indicates that UHI is committed to supporting students on higher education pathways who are studying at different places and in different ways.

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

20 The RA described UHI as a learning institution which benefits from engagement with a range of internal and external quality processes. The RA also indicated that UHI, as a relatively young institution, is committed not only to providing clear, consistent quality assurance practices and procedures, but also to demonstrating that commitment. The RA highlighted UHI's progression from the designation audit in 1999 and the post-designation audit in 2003 (see above, paragraph 4) and the way in which the institution had developed action plans after each audit to learn from those exercises.

21 The RA indicated that UHI has been 'planning purposefully' to meet the criteria for university title since 2001. In 2005, UHI applied to the Privy Council for taught degree awarding powers (tDAP) and a scrutiny exercise, conducted by QAA assessors, took place during 2005-06. At the time of the ELIR, UHI had received the final report prepared by the QAA assessors and QAA had indicated that the key outcomes of the tDAP process were: the need for further evidence relating to the security and stability of UHI's governance, financial control and structural arrangements; the need for further development of academic leadership in the institution; and the need for significant development of staff expertise, including research and scholarship. It had been agreed by UHI and QAA that those matters outstanding from the tDAP process and which were within the remit of the ELIR method could be explored during the current ELIR. These are referred to in the text of the report sections that follow. Consistent with previous practice, UHI had prepared an action plan to address the outcomes of the tDAP report. The action plan

is a working document and was updated during the course of the ELIR.

22 UHI also applied for university title in 2006 and was sponsored in doing so by three universities: Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Strathclyde. The RA described these three universities as having a close role in UHI's development of research activities, and indicated that discussions were taking place with a view to them each providing representatives on key UHI committees during the progression towards achieving taught degree awarding powers and university title. A scrutiny process to determine university title has not yet been approved.

UHI committee structure

23 The RA stated that a federal and collegial academic institution needs a more extensive committee structure than a unified institution in order to ensure ownership of policies and procedures by staff throughout the organisation.

24 The UHI Foundation is described in the RA as demonstrating the inclusive character of the institution and the way in which UHI is rooted in communities. The RA indicated that the Foundation is 'mainly consultative' and meets three times a year to provide a two-way flow of information between UHI and its community stakeholders. The Foundation must be consulted formally before any change of the UHI constitution can take place but the RA described three committees as being central to the management and governance of UHI: the Board of Governors, the Executive Board and the Academic Council.

25 UHI describes its Board of Governors as ultimately responsible for the effective conduct of UHI's strategic direction, reputation, financial health, well-being of students and for establishing and maintaining high standards of academic conduct, probity and quality. The Board has 25 members including: the chairs of the governing bodies of half the academic partners (with the chairs of the remaining academic partners having the right to attend meetings as observers); two elected members of staff; the President of the UHI

Students' Association; the UHI Principal; and 12 independent members drawn from individuals co-opted by the Board and those nominated by the Foundation and Highlands and Islands Enterprise. The RA indicated that the Board meets at least three times a year and receives regular reports from the Executive Board and the Academic Council on matters including resources and resource distribution and all significant outcomes relating to quality and standards.

26 The Executive Board has executive responsibility for managing the resourcing, planning, development and operation of UHI, subject to the overall authority of the Board of Governors. The Executive Board is comprised of the principals and directors from each academic partner and the UHI Principal, with the UHI Secretary and deans of faculty in attendance. It meets monthly and has at least two meetings a year which are residential. In a change following UHI's receipt of the tDAP report, the Executive Board is chaired by the UHI Principal. It has a number of subcommittees including the Academic Planning Committee which reports to both the Executive Board and the Academic Council, with the purpose of ensuring a linkage between resource availability and academic aspirations.

27 The Board of Governors delegates oversight of academic affairs to the Academic Council, which the RA described as the highest academic authority in UHI. The Academic Council has responsibility for a range of matters including: overseeing the academic development of UHI; developing academic policy; developing the academic and research community of staff and students; and assuring academic standards and quality improvement. The Academic Council is chaired by the Principal, and its membership includes the academic partner principals, the deans of faculty, up to 10 representatives of academic staff, and up to five student representatives.

28 The Academic Council delegates responsibility for aspects of its work to subcommittees and to the four faculties. In addition to the Academic Planning Committee (see above, paragraph 26) the subcommittees

are: Academic Standards and Quality Committee; Learning and Teaching Committee; Research Committee; Staff Development Committee; Academic Titles Review Board; and the Quality Enhancement Committee. The RA indicated that the Academic Council subcommittees are chaired by a principal or senior manager from the academic partners to ensure that there is understanding of UHI's academic development in the academic partners and, in turn, understanding of the academic partners' development by UHI committees. In a more recent development, there are proposals for ensuring the committee chairs have a more active role in relation to UHI work to strengthen the partnership (see also below, paragraphs 32-36).

29 The RA stated that the Academic Standards and Quality Committee acts on behalf of the Academic Council in assuring standards and quality through oversight of the development and implementation of procedures and regulations. Each academic partner has an academic partner quality committee, the chair of which is a member of the UHI Academic Standards and Quality Committee. Membership of the Academic Standards and Quality Committee also includes the deans, staff and student representatives and members external to UHI drawn from the other Scottish higher education institutions. The RA emphasised that the membership of the Committee enabled it to make decisions based on a range of experience and expertise. It also has a number of subcommittees covering a range of areas including: regulations, external examining, SQA provision, and research degrees.

30 Since 2004, when the full-time deans were appointed and the faculty responsibilities were broadened, faculties and subject networks have played key roles in quality assurance. They report and make recommendations to the Academic Planning Committee and to the Academic Standards and Quality Committee on matters including planning, and programme approval and monitoring.

31 The ELIR team considered many examples of the work of the academic committees. The team noted the large membership of these committees and senior staff explained that this was to ensure the representation and involvement of key staff from the academic partners, while acknowledging that this could make the committees somewhat unwieldy. As a consequence, many of the committees have established working groups to progress important developments and detailed business more effectively. From discussions with a range of staff, it became clear to the team that the number of working groups has grown considerably and with some complexity in which subgroups have been established within some existing working groups. In consequence, there was a lack of clarity about the total number of working groups in operation at the time of the review and, at times, a lack of complete clarity about the required reporting lines to the formal committee structure. In discussion, senior staff acknowledged that the committee structure would benefit from review and the team would encourage UHI to progress this (see also below, paragraph 120).

Executive structure

32 The Principal is the chief executive officer of UHI and is responsible to the Board of Governors for the management and academic direction of the institution. The RA indicated that the Executive Board and the Board of Governors recently had approved a number of changes to the senior management structure involving the creation of new posts and a new title for the former UHI Secretary who now holds the title of Deputy Principal & Secretary. The new senior posts include a Vice-Principal (Learning and Teaching) and a Vice-Principal (Research and Commercialisation) who UHI intend will provide senior cross-institutional support and championing of institutional policies and practices, complementing the role of the deans. At the time of the ELIR, funding for these new posts had very recently been secured from Highlands and Islands Enterprise, and the posts had yet to be advertised. One of the deans was undertaking the Vice-Principal (Learning and Teaching) role on an acting basis.

33 During the ELIR visits, the ELIR team was provided with information about the roles and rationale for establishing, in February and March 2007, three new senior management groups: the Principal's Executive Group, the Senior Academic Group, and the Senior Management Group. Collectively the groups are intended to strengthen the executive and academic leadership of UHI. The Principal's Executive Group is intended to focus on significant strategic matters, such as the tDAP application. It is chaired by the Principal and comprises: the Deputy Principal and Secretary; the chairs of the Academic Standards and Quality Committee, the Regulations Sub-Committee, Research Committee, Learning and Teaching Committee, Marketing and Communications Committee, Information Systems Sub-Committee, Academic Planning Committee, and Staff Development Committee; and the deputy chair of the Executive Board. The Senior Academic Group has a focus on significant academic matters including academic and cross-faculty planning as well as operational matters relating to what UHI describes as its 'horizontal' structure. It is also chaired by the Principal and comprises: the deans, the Academic Registrar and the Director of Research, and will include the vice-principals once they are appointed. The Senior Management Group has an operational focus on the implementation of policy, and matters relating to the Executive Office and business processing. It is chaired by the Deputy Principal and Secretary and comprises: the Academic Registrar, Director of Finance, Director of Library and Information Services, Director of Marketing and Communications, and the Director of the Research Office. All three groups have reporting lines to each other and to the Executive Board and the Academic Council.

34 In his presentation at the Part 1 visit, the Deputy Principal acknowledged that the new structure was potentially complex but expressed the view that there was clarity within UHI about the distinctive roles of the three groups. He also indicated that the effectiveness of the new structure would be reviewed after a period of its operation in order to provide an

opportunity for streamlining the arrangements if it was thought to be beneficial at that time.

35 The Deputy Principal also set out a number of other developments which are intended to strengthen the UHI 'horizontal structure' of the faculties and subject networks. The deans are already permanent appointments reporting to the UHI Principal. The new developments, in which UHI intends to invest £2.3 million over three years, will involve a range of measures: experienced administrative staff appointed as faculty managers; full-time personal assistant support for the deans; faculty development funding being targeted on programme development and arrangements for strengthening the subject networks; the creation of a post to focus on modularisation; and six teaching leadership posts.

36 Senior staff consider that these developments should address the issues raised in the tDAP report relating to the need to strengthen governance and management (see above, paragraph 21). In discussion with the ELIR team, the senior staff emphasised that they were trying to ensure that, rather than having a model with the Executive Office in the centre and the academic partners involved only in delivery, they were seeking to ensure the academic partners would be in the centre, contributing to strategy and policy development. In the course of the ELIR visits, the ELIR team learnt that recognition of the need to establish the additional senior management posts and to strengthen the faculties had originated before UHI had received the tDAP report. Consideration had been given to these proposals some time earlier in order to prepare a bid for funding to Highlands and Islands Enterprise. The team considered this as important and positive evidence of critical self-evaluation and awareness within UHI, which had not been immediately evident from the RA and associated documentation. From discussions with groups of staff, it was clear that the proposals had been widely discussed within UHI including at An Comann, the biannual meeting of staff and governors from across the UHI

partnership. While the proposals were recent to the extent that some of the measures had not yet been implemented, the team concurred with the UHI view that the new arrangements were, at least in principle, likely to strengthen academic and executive leadership across UHI while retaining the involvement of all the academic partners.

Academic structure

37 The RA emphasised that UHI's academic partners are very different from each other in that for some partners most of their business is UHI related while in others UHI activity represents only a part of their wider business and mission. UHI described developing an effective partnership as a considerable achievement for the institution over the last eight years. The RA indicated that UHI's evolutionary approach to the development of faculties and subject networks had allowed staff in academic partners with diverse academic structures to align themselves with UHI-wide, discipline-based networks. UHI considers that its faculties and subject networks provide horizontal, cross-partner groupings that enable staff and students to contribute to the institution's planning and enhancement processes, and to take appropriate responsibility for academic standards and quality assurance.

38 Each of the four faculties is led by a dean who is employed by UHI but based in an academic partner. The RA indicated that the deans, who were recruited in 2004-05, provide academic leadership in UHI, work closely with the UHI Executive Office and represent their faculties on key academic and executive committees. Each faculty has a faculty board which includes staff and student representatives as well as external members. The boards report to the UHI Academic Council.

39 The RA stated that the subject networks were established in 2003 to provide horizontal academic groupings across UHI. Each programme is assigned to one of the 15 subject networks (see above, paragraph 14). Each subject network is led by an academic partner and the subject network leader is a member of staff of that partner. The subject network leader

chairs the subject network committee which comprises programme leaders from each academic partner involved in delivering the programmes within the subject network. Subject network committees meet three times a year and report to the relevant faculty board. The RA indicated that, in 2005, subject networks were reviewed by a working group established by the Academic Council which confirmed that they had been effective in promoting good practice. Following the review, the number of subject networks was reduced and their remit more tightly focused. The review also recommended the establishment of the Faculty of Health, the newest of the four faculties.

40 Every degree programme has a designated 'responsible' academic partner which appoints the programme leader who, in turn, chairs the programme committee and is responsible for completing the annual programme report (see below, paragraph 50). The responsibilities of the academic partners and the programme committees are set out in the UHI Academic Standards and Quality Regulations. The curriculum is modular in structure and a module leader is identified for each module to undertake a range of duties including coordinating assessment design and marking. The ELIR team noted that module leaders and teaching staff can be located in an academic partner other than the one leading the programme. In this way, individual programmes are able to draw upon the subject expertise available across the partnership.

Awarding bodies

41 At the time of the ELIR, UHI was working with three awarding bodies: the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), the Open University and the University of Aberdeen. UHI has centre approval from SQA. All the HNC/Ds offered by UHI are SQA awards. Where there is an appropriate subject and curricular match, the HNC/Ds provide a route to the final two years of the degree programmes offered by UHI. The ELIR team found clear evidence of UHI meeting SQA's expectations relating to the quality of the awards. The quality of the learning

opportunities in relation to UHI's Higher National provision has also been considered during a number of the QAA academic subject reviews (see below, paragraph 54) with positive outcomes.

42 The undergraduate degrees and taught postgraduate awards offered by UHI are validated by the Open University through an accreditation agreement which is overseen by the Open University Validation Services (OUVS). Within a framework of requirements, the Open University has delegated the design and operation of quality assurance procedures to UHI, with UHI providing a detailed annual report on its operations to OUVS. Feedback from the Open University on the UHI annual report has generally expressed confidence in UHI's operation of the delegated arrangements. Where the University has requested additional action, UHI has responded promptly.

43 The research degrees offered by UHI are awarded either by the Open University or, in selected validated areas, by the University of Aberdeen. The RA indicated that the accreditation procedure to offer University of Aberdeen research degrees, which took place in 2004, had involved a rigorous examination of UHI's processes and procedures for monitoring and supporting students and supervisory teams (see also below, paragraphs 83-87). The report of the exercise states that the accreditation panel was impressed with UHI's approach.

Internal approval, monitoring and review

44 The RA listed UHI's key quality assurance procedures as: approval procedures for new programmes; annual review of programmes; internal subject review; academic partner review; academic partner annual reports; the student experience survey (see below, paragraph 110); and external examiners and moderators reports (see below, paragraphs 79-82). The RA explained that the quality assurance processes are common to undergraduate and taught postgraduate awards with all of these processes being overseen by the Academic Standards and Quality Committee.

Programme development and validation

45 The Academic Standards and Quality Regulations set out the three stages of new degree programme development as: initiation and planning approval; programme development; and programme approval. The stages reflect the different areas of responsibility and involvement in the UHI structure, with the last stage currently being carried out through the OUVS.

46 The RA indicated that the academic development process had been reviewed and refined by a specially convened working group in 2005-06. The Academic Development Process Working Group had revised the academic planning documents to reduce duplication and to make the documents more useful in terms of their links to policies and the provision of guidance. New proposals are tested for alignment with the Strategic Plan before triggering the development of more detailed planning submissions. These are prepared by a programme development group and are considered in the lead academic partner, the subject network and the faculty before formal submission by the dean to the Academic Planning Committee. Standard forms are used to provide details of the curriculum, delivery and resource requirements of the proposed programme. Support service managers are involved in these stages so that the support needs can be evaluated. The ELIR team saw clear evidence of subject network and faculty proposals coming together with detailed market research information.

47 If the Academic Council approves the proposal, following a formal recommendation from the Academic Planning Committee, the new programme enters the development phase. RA indicated that, from the very early stages of this process, advice and guidance is also available from the deans, the subject network leaders and the UHI academic registry. As part of its work in 2005-06, the Academic Development Process Working Group revised the programme development stage arrangements, replacing the former internal validation stage with an advisory group process which was introduced in 2006-07 to aid

programme teams in the detailed development of the programme. The membership of advisory groups comprises representatives from the relevant faculty and lead academic partner, along with academic staff from outside the subject area and subject specialists external to UHI. The ELIR team noted that UHI has prepared written guidance for advisory group members as well as detailed templates and guidance notes for programme teams, which are available on the UHI virtual learning environment (VLE) and also from the Academic Registry. The team considered the revised stage in the process to be a positive development which is likely to lead to better quality programme proposals than the former internal validation event.

48 The third and final programme approval stage is Open University validation. The process itself is organised by staff in the UHI academic registry who arrange the events, produce the validation reports and monitor programme teams' responses to any conditions, following a protocol which was developed by UHI and approved by the Open University. Through OUVS, the Open University confirms the appointment of external members of the panel and any conditions imposed on the programme's validation. The validation documentation includes a comprehensive programme document, programme specification, student handbook and a complete set of module descriptors. The documentation is also intended to demonstrate how the programme maps to the relevant QAA subject benchmark statements and SCQF levels. UHI provides training for programme leaders and validation panel members including the chairs. Validation reports are considered by the Academic Standards and Quality Committee and the Open University, enabling generic matters arising from multiple validations to be identified. All provision is validated for a fixed period, normally three to five years. The RA stated the expectation that minor modifications would be made to modules and programmes during their validation period and procedures for that are set out in the Academic Standards and Quality Regulations. At the end of the

validation period, the programme goes through a formal revalidation which, since the introduction of UHI internal subject review in 2006-07, normally coincides with the subject review (see below, paragraphs 55, 56).

49 The ELIR team saw examples of validation documents and can confirm their suitability for the exercise. Clear reference is made to external reference points as well as the relevant UHI policies including the Equivalence Policy (see below, paragraph 115). Particular attention is paid to the requirements of different modes of study and where flexible and distributed learning is planned. Overall, the team considered that the process is securely managed.

Annual programme monitoring

50 The programme committee, comprising all staff who teach on the programme and chaired by the programme leader, is responsible for producing an annual monitoring report to a standard template set out in the Academic Standards and Quality Regulations. The reports include an action plan for improvement based on reflection and comment on the student progression statistics and feedback from students, external examiners and teaching staff. Annual monitoring reports are submitted by programme committees to the relevant academic partner quality committee and, from there, to a subcommittee of the relevant faculty board, with feedback being provided at each stage to the programme teams. The faculty subcommittee produces an overview report of all the annual monitoring reports for the faculty together with an action plan and submits that to the Academic Standards and Quality Committee. The faculty reports form the basis for the UHI annual report to OUVS. The RA highlighted that the annual monitoring process is refined annually based on the experience of each monitoring cycle.

51 The RA acknowledged that, while the process continues to improve, some difficulties remain, for example, in relation to the timeliness of report submission by programme committees and in the extent of critical reflection demonstrated by the annual reports themselves. This led the Academic Standards and Quality

Committee to require a review of the process to be carried out by a group led by the Academic Registrar, with a view to implementing changes in 2007-08. Following criticisms of the annual monitoring process outlined in the tDAP report, the review group will now take a more radical view so that, in addition to seeking improvements in the efficiency of the process, the group will seek to identify ways to promote better engagement with the process by programme leaders and ways of ensuring that a range of features are incorporated with the process: quality enhancement, benchmarking of standards of delivery, equivalence of student experience across UHI, and reflection on grade distributions and completion rates within programmes.

52 The RA recognised that the annual monitoring process needs to generate, and make better use of, student data, and this matter was raised in discussion with groups of staff during the ELIR. The ELIR team learnt that the variable use of data in annual monitoring stemmed from the fact that the data itself was generated locally by programme teams to different specifications and analysed in different ways. The Academic Standards and Quality Committee had noted in 2005 that improvements were needed in the production of data for annual monitoring and has promoted a project aimed at producing standard data from the UHI student information system. At the time of the ELIR, new data templates were available and UHI was in a position to provide programme teams with centrally produced data in a standard form for the next annual monitoring round. The team considered this was a significant advance and that the next step of producing performance indicators for use with the data should be encouraged.

53 The ELIR team was told of a range of measures that UHI was taking to improve the annual monitoring process including: staff development which was being provided to programme teams to improve the quality and consistency of the annual reports; a revised annual monitoring template was being introduced with the aim of strengthening the

action planning element of the programme reports; and the role of the faculties had also been strengthened in relation to overseeing and managing the process. The team considered that the proposals for improving the annual monitoring process were positive and would encourage UHI to progress their full implementation.

Subject review

54 Between 2001 and 2006 when the cycle ended, UHI engaged in QAA academic subject review, participating in a total of 18 reviews. The outcomes were positive with confidence being expressed in academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities being identified as commendable or approved in all cases. The RA identified a number of benefits to UHI from its engagement with QAA academic subject review including bringing staff from different academic partners together which the institution identified as having been a motivating factor in the creation of subject networks. The peer review element of subject review was also highlighted as positive; staff had welcomed the opportunity to discuss discipline-related matters with peers from other institutions, together with the opportunity to engage with the Academic Infrastructure. The RA indicated that UHI gained confidence from the positive outcomes of subject review and had appreciated the style of the reports which identify strengths as well as areas for development.

55 In developing an internal method of subject review for implementation during 2006-07, the RA emphasised that UHI had sought to learn from the best of its experiences with QAA academic subject review and also drew on the experiences of other institutions. UHI subject review operates on a five-year cycle with, normally, three reviews taking place each year. The scope of a subject review is all higher education provision within a subject network, and the RA explained that the method is designed to complement programme-based quality processes, such as annual monitoring, programme approval and external examining. Subject reviews also examine areas that have specific relevance to UHI, such as the implementation of HNC/D programmes in

the subject network, programmes' articulation arrangements, and the management of student learning wherever the student is based.

56 At the time of the ELIR, two internal subject reviews had been conducted and the reports were available in draft form. It was clear to the ELIR team that SHEFC criteria for internal subject review had been met with the involvement of external peers and the use of external reference points. In common with a number of Scottish higher education institutions, UHI involves students as review team members. The team considered that the internal subject review process had been designed thoughtfully to meet national and institutional needs. The documentation for the reviews carried out at the time of the ELIR was in accord with the guidelines approved by the Academic Standards and Quality Committee and appeared to be constructively critical with appropriate references to elements of the Academic Infrastructure. UHI has a commitment to evaluate the operation of the subject review process each year, as it did for QAA subject review, and the team considered that to be a constructive approach.

Academic partner review

57 Academic partner review is a long-standing process at UHI which runs on a five-year cycle. It is applied to each academic partner that delivers higher education programmes, supervises research students, or makes learning resources available to support such provision. It has also been applied to the Executive Office. The RA indicated that the purpose of academic partner review is to provide assurance to UHI about the overall quality of the learning infrastructure for higher education through examining the significant factors which impact upon quality within each academic partner and to support the development and enhancement of effective quality assurance processes within the academic partners. It was emphasised that it also contributes to the identification of good practice in partners as a basis for dissemination and enhancement throughout UHI. Each academic partner review reports on seven

themes: the strategic mission of the partner and its role in higher education; academic organisation; quality assurance strategy and processes; staff resources; learning and research environments; student support; and feedback on UHI policies and procedures.

58 The process is based on self-evaluation and peer review. Academic partner review teams comprise a reviewer external to UHI, an officer from the Academic Registry, a student reviewer, and two academic managers from other academic partners one of whom acts as the chair. The resulting reports are discussed at the Academic Standards and Quality Committee with summary reports also being presented to the Academic Council and the Board of Governors. The RA highlighted as a positive feature of the process that it ensures the needs and strengths of each type of partner are recognised across UHI through the Academic Standards and Quality Committee. Academic partners produce action plans following their reviews and there is a one-year follow up overseen by the Academic Standards and Quality Committee.

59 The ELIR team considered reports and committee papers relating to the academic partner review process all of which indicated it was being operated in accordance with the guidance set out in the Academic Standards and Quality Regulations. It was evident to the team that the process makes a positive contribution to quality assurance and academic planning. The team explored with UHI the rationale for retaining academic partner review after the introduction of internal subject review, and learnt that there had been debate around this issue within UHI. The decision had been taken to retain both processes for the duration of one full cycle of internal subject review, after which the approach would be reconsidered. Senior staff had concluded that the different focuses of the two exercises would ensure the avoidance of potential duplication and also considered that there were significant benefits in retaining academic partner review, which is a well understood and established process, while internal subject review was still being

embedded. In its discussions with wider groups of staff, it was clear to the team that the different purposes of the two processes were understood and valued by staff. The team, therefore, supported UHI's intention to review the operation of both processes after one cycle of subject review.

Academic partner quality committee annual reports

60 In addition to their involvement in the annual programme monitoring cycle, academic partner quality committees are required to make an annual report to the Academic Standards and Quality Committee. A template for the report, to which the committees may append additional information, is set out in the Academic Standards and Quality Regulations. The RA described the purpose of the annual reports as enabling UHI to evaluate the effectiveness of the quality committees and to share any good practice as well as resolving any issues. Through these annual reports, academic partner quality committees are also able to confirm the adequacy of internal moderation for Higher National awards.

61 The ELIR team saw examples of these annual reports and noted that the Academic Registrar chairs a group of UHI staff who review the individual reports and present an overview to the Academic Standards and Quality Committee. The overview report highlights matters for further discussion at the Academic Standards and Quality Committee, for example, student representation and anonymous marking, and also highlights areas of good practice identified in the individual reports. It was clear that the review group had interacted with the academic partner quality committees, for example, to chase the late submission of reports and to request further information in some cases. The team noted that most of the individual reports followed the UHI template and picked up matters from the previous year and from the academic partner review process. The team also noted that the Academic Standards and Quality Committee was reflecting on the nature of the template, based upon the experience of operating the process,

for example, consideration was being given to explicitly including a question about student representation at academic partner quality committees. Overall, the team concluded that the annual reporting process complemented academic partner review and provided a useful basis on which UHI could oversee the work of the academic partner quality committees.

Audit and review as development tools

62 The RA stated that UHI tries to maximise the benefit of its multi-layered audit and review regime, both internal and external, by using the processes, and the related training provided, to develop staff understanding of the principles underpinning the processes. The example was cited of programme leaders whose programmes are due to be reviewed in the following year being asked to sit on a validation panel. The RA emphasised the extent to which senior managers in academic partners and Executive Office staff have attended and participated in validations and other quality assurance processes, and the extent to which these staff have gained from their involvement. From its discussions with groups of staff, the ELIR team noted the extent to which staff were familiar with the processes in operation and demonstrated a sense of ownership of them; this was especially true of the academic partner review process.

Risk management

63 The RA highlighted that, while UHI operates centralised responsibility for higher education activity across its academic partners, all the partners maintain autonomy over their further education provision and the employment of staff. UHI's risk management arrangements are founded on agreements between UHI and the academic partners and on an accountability mechanism that was established at the instigation of SHEFC. The RA indicated that risk relating directly to higher education activity is identified and acted upon through the key quality assurance mechanisms for which the Academic Standards and Quality Committee has oversight. The Committee has a remit for taking action to address matters arising or to

refer matters as appropriate to the other key committees, such as the Academic Planning Committee and the Academic Council. UHI considers that, in this way, problems are made visible both to the Executive Board and to the Board of Governors.

64 In discussion with the ELIR team, senior staff emphasised that the academic partners are obliged to alert UHI to any matters that might affect the student experience or business continuity as part of their formal partner agreements. The team also learnt that UHI had recently introduced a mechanism to involve deans directly in risk management through the deans maintaining a formal risk register for all programmes. This arrangement is intended to facilitate deans identifying and resolving matters within the faculty at an early stage. The team's discussions with groups of staff demonstrated that staff were familiar with these arrangements and considered that they had been a positive development.

65 In a further development, at the time of the ELIR, UHI was operating a pilot scheme to embed an academic partner accountability audit with the academic partner review process. UHI intended that the alignment of these exercises would result in academic partner governance and organisation, finance and risk management being more clearly defined within the overall review process than they are at present.

66 The ELIR team was aware that matters relating to risk management and sustainability had been raised in the tDAP report and considered that UHI was responding to those concerns constructively.

Management of information

67 The RA stated that UHI's current student information system had been implemented in 2003-04 at short notice following difficulties with the previous software supplier. The RA acknowledged that embedding of the current system had been challenging because of the need for common business processes across all of the academic partners' sites. The RA highlighted a range of actions that had been

taken and indicated that staff confidence continues to build in the system as additional functions are added.

68 Student information is collected by the academic partners and entered into the UHI student records system. All data is visible to all partners and students' data can be entered and modified by relevant parties, for example by the Student Records Office in the Executive Office or, where appropriate, in the academic partners. Information from the system is used to generate the statutory returns required by SHEFC and the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and to meet the requirements of UHI's awarding bodies, SQA and the Open University.

69 The ELIR team noted the recent actions taken to improve the student information system, such as the establishment of a Student Records Management Committee reporting directly to the Executive Board, restructuring the Academic Registry and introducing standard data entry protocols and timescales across the partnership. The team noted that these various measures had led to improvements in data production and management, but was also aware that a number of difficulties persisted. Furthermore, a number of the changes were only in the process of being introduced and the team recognised that there would, therefore, be a time lag before their impact could be identified. Nonetheless, the team considered that the action taken had been positive and would encourage UHI to progress with its work in this area as a matter of priority.

70 The ELIR team explored UHI's use of data for the strategic management of quality and standards. Although it became clear to the team that HESA data is used in the planning and allocation of resources, limited evidence was provided that UHI uses any strategic data analysis for the maintenance and monitoring of quality and standards. In its feedback on the UHI annual report, the Open University had highlighted a similar point, identifying the absence of student statistics at the institutional level. The Open University further noted that while more detailed programme statistics had

been provided, this had not been accompanied by an institutional commentary. There had also been a number of inaccuracies in the programme statistics, although the ELIR team considered that these would be addressed by the measures UHI had subsequently taken to improve its student information system.

71 The tDAP report had highlighted the apparently anomalous level of student non-progression recorded in the HESA data which, in turn, was based on information provided by UHI. The ELIR team made a number of requests for further information in an attempt to gain an understanding of student progression and the mechanisms used by UHI for recording it. UHI staff indicated that the figure had resulted from an anomaly in the system of collecting student data whereby students who had been awarded an HNC or HND were routinely recorded as not progressing if they did not continue to the degree stage, despite their having left with an academic award and irrespective of whether they had initially intended to continue to degree level. While the team recognised that this was one explanation for some 'non-progression', it was clear that there were other reasons for students not progressing, such as withdrawal or failure. UHI was not able to provide overview information to the team to fully explain these patterns within its student population. The team learned that, during 2006-07, UHI had revised its process for recording student withdrawal, such that a clear distinction will be made between those students requesting temporary withdrawal and those who do not intend to return. The revised arrangements will be coordinated by the Academic Registry through clear communication links to staff in the academic partners. The team concurred with UHI that the new system was likely to represent a significant improvement.

72 Overall, the ELIR team concluded that UHI should, as a matter of priority, undertake work to specify and utilise key performance indicators to help inform its management of quality and academic standards.

Assessment

73 UHI's principles for assessment are set out in its Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy. The RA stated that the regulatory framework and procedures for assessment are well established and are outlined in the Academic Standards and Quality Regulations, to which all programmes must adhere. These include regulations on second-marking, penalties for late submission of work and procedures for adjusting assessments for students with disabilities. Student handbooks contain information on how programmes are assessed and the regulations require that students are provided with the grade criteria, and that the assessment feedback they are given should adhere to these criteria (see below, paragraph 127).

74 The RA described how UHI maintains an overview of assessment practice through monitoring annual programme and external examiner reports, and by considering feedback from validation events and from students. In order to address the matters raised through this monitoring of assessment practice, which include the identification of a tendency towards over-assessment, UHI has established a working party to revise the assessment guidelines. Through its annual review of the Academic Standards and Quality Regulations, UHI has previously considered the use of anonymous marking, which is now applied widely, and taken the decision to discontinue the use of compensation in assessment.

75 The ELIR team noted that validation documents are required to contain an assessment strategy and a mapping of how learning outcomes are assessed. External examiners approve examination papers before they are issued to students and the team noted that, while in a small number of cases the examiners had highlighted a need to improve the nature of the assessment tasks, in general the examiners had expressed satisfaction that the assessments matched the stated learning outcomes. The team also noted that level descriptors in programme documentation related to external reference points including the SCQF.

76 From the ELIR team's discussions it was evident that staff were familiar with the Academic Standards and Quality Regulations which were well-regarded and routinely used as a point of reference. The team heard that arrangements are put in place to mentor staff who are new to higher education assessment practice. The team heard from groups of students that they were familiar with the assessment arrangements for their programmes and had been informed about aspects of academic conduct, particularly plagiarism, and its consequences. Overall, the team considered that the arrangements for managing the assessment process were secure.

Examination boards

77 The RA indicated that the Student Records Office runs regular training events for examination board members and an annual External Examiners Forum is held to provide an opportunity for UHI staff and academic partner staff to discuss a range of matters with external examiners including the operation of examination boards. The tDAP report highlighted difficulties associated with the consistency of data considered at examination boards and the RA acknowledged that UHI remains vigilant in relation to the equivalence of practice at examination boards largely because the boards are conducted at programme rather than module level, and students and modules may be considered at a number of different boards. UHI has taken a number of steps to tighten the operation of examination boards including: using one academic partner as an examinations centre for all higher education programmes; improving the management of student data (see above, paragraph 69); and, through the Regulations Sub-committee, issuing detailed guidance notes to all examination boards on dealing with students with mitigating circumstances.

78 From its exploration of this matter including discussions with staff, the ELIR team formed the view that the difficulties encountered did not represent a threat to academic standards, rather that the management of the procedures and generation

of accurate data was complex. The team considered that improved availability of data would undoubtedly enhance the operation of examination boards and this added a further imperative for UHI to progress its work in relation to the student information system (see above, paragraphs 69, 71 and 72).

External examining

79 The Academic Standards and Quality Regulations provide detailed guidance on the responsibilities of external examiners. Matters concerning external examiners are overseen by a subcommittee of the Academic Standards and Quality Committee whose membership includes the deans of faculty. The subcommittee has reviewed UHI's external examiner arrangements to ensure it adheres to the *Code of practice, Section 4: External examining*.

80 Recommendations to the Open University for the appointment of external examiners are made by the UHI External Examiners Subcommittee, following advice from the faculties and programme leaders. UHI provides induction materials to new examiners, and an annual induction event for examiners is held in September as part of the External Examiners' Forum (see above, paragraph 77).

81 External examiners' reports are submitted on a standard form to the Principal, although the process is coordinated by the Academic Registry who acknowledge their receipt and copy them to the Academic Registrar, programme leader, dean and chair of the relevant examination board, in addition to the External Examiners Subcommittee and the Open University. The RA indicated that external examiner reports receive consideration by programme leaders, the academic partner quality committees, faculty boards and the External Examiners Subcommittee which, it was stated, allows for substantial reflection and monitoring of responses within the academic partners and the relevant UHI committees. Since 2003, the reports have been completed and submitted electronically to facilitate their distribution and analysis.

82 Programme-related matters are analysed and responded to specifically and through the annual programme monitoring process (see above, paragraphs 50-53). In addition to dealing with specific programme-related matters, the involvement of the External Examiners Subcommittee enables UHI to identify and address strategic and generic matters arising from external examiners' reports. The RA explained that matters which cannot be resolved by the Committee itself are referred to the appropriate part of the UHI committee structure for progressing and tracking. This process was commended by the Open University in 2004 which subsequently asked all its validated institutions to adopt it. The ELIR team considered that UHI has secure arrangements in place for managing the external examining process.

Research students

83 The RA stated that UHI has clear quality assurance arrangements for its research programmes which are overseen by the Research Degrees Subcommittee. UHI's Postgraduate Structured Management Framework outlines the requirements in terms of application, admission, induction and monitoring of postgraduate research students. Individual students and supervisors carry out an analysis of student training needs, which might include in-house training, visits to other institutions or attending external training programmes or conferences.

84 The ELIR team learnt that the University of Edinburgh provides research skills training for UHI students as part of its strategic relationship with the Institute (see above, paragraph 22). Tailored sessions are held at UHI and students can also attend sessions in Edinburgh throughout the year. A record is kept of student attendance at these sessions by research supervisors and the UHI Research Office.

85 The RA highlighted that UHI had taken measures to ensure that students could interact with their peers and develop a meaningful research student community. A two-day research students' induction event and conference is held annually, providing an

opportunity for all UHI research students to meet. UHI is also trialling a software application produced by the UHI Learning and Information Systems Department aimed at supporting the research student community by providing an electronic 'social networking' facility.

86 In discussion with the ELIR team, research students expressed general satisfaction with their experience both in relation to the support from their supervisors and the wider support offered by UHI. A small number of students commented that they would like to have more contact with other research students. The team considered that UHI was responding positively to the challenge of developing a research community.

87 Overall, the ELIR team considered that UHI has appropriate learning and support measures in place for postgraduate research students.

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

Use made of external reference points for assuring quality and standards

88 The RA stated that UHI makes extensive use of the QAA subject benchmark statements, the *Code of practice* and the SCQF as reference points in its quality processes. The ELIR team saw ample evidence that programmes are in line with the SCQF, which is considered when programmes are approved and reference is made to the SCQF in a wide range of documentation, including programme descriptors. Subject benchmark statements are routinely used in curriculum development, validation and internal subject review. The team noted that the Academic Standards and Quality Committee had overseen detailed reviews of every section of the *Code*, including recently revised sections, to ensure that every precept had been addressed. Where required, practices at UHI have been adjusted to ensure they are in line with the precepts of the *Code*. UHI also draws on other institutions' experience and makes extensive use of external advisers in a range of capacities to inform its practice and quality management processes (see below, paragraphs 165 and 166).

89 The ELIR team concurred with the institution's view that it makes extensive and appropriate use of the Academic Infrastructure.

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

90 In 2005, UHI applied to the Privy Council for taught degree awarding powers (tDAP) and a scrutiny exercise took place during 2005-06. The resulting report indicated that UHI should take action in a number of areas including: providing further evidence relating to the security and stability of UHI's governance, financial control and structural arrangements; developing further its academic leadership; and developing significantly staff expertise, including in research and scholarship. It had been agreed by UHI and QAA that those matters outstanding from the tDAP process, and which were within the remit of the ELIR method, could be explored during the current ELIR. The evidence of the ELIR indicates that UHI has taken a number of steps to secure the relationship between the Executive Office and the academic partners including: developing the role of senior academic partner staff in relation to the UHI key committees in an effort to ensure their direct involvement in policy development; revising the executive structure and establishing three new senior management groups; creating a number of senior posts including a Vice-Principal (Learning and Teaching) and a Vice-Principal (Research and Commercialisation) who UHI intend will provide senior cross-institutional support for policies and practices, complementing the role of the deans; and strengthening the role of the faculties through a range of measures such as providing added administrative support for the deans and targeting faculty development funding on programme development. While a number of these developments are very recent, the evidence of the ELIR indicates that, at least in principle, they are likely to strengthen academic and executive leadership across UHI and to provide greater integration between the parties within UHI.

91 Senior staff are aware that the UHI committee structure is complex and is characterised by its key committees having large memberships with business being progressed by a significant number of working groups. UHI has expressed a willingness to review the effectiveness of its committee structure and is encouraged to progress this review.

92 The undergraduate degrees and taught postgraduate awards offered by UHI are validated by the Open University through an accreditation agreement. UHI has a generally satisfactory relationship with the Open University in which UHI responds on a regular basis to the University's requirements. Research degrees offered by UHI are awarded either by the Open University or, in selected validated areas, by the University of Aberdeen. The University of Aberdeen has carried out an accreditation exercise involving scrutiny of UHI's processes and procedures, concluding that the accreditation panel was impressed with UHI's approach.

93 UHI has systematic processes in place for assuring quality and securing academic standards including validation, internal subject review and academic partner review. The arrangements for managing the assessment process are generally secure and the quality assurance processes are underpinned by the academic planning arrangements, particularly in relation to the identification of resources required to deliver programmes. In relation to annual monitoring, UHI has identified a number of measures which are likely to strengthen that process including: undertaking staff development aimed at improving the quality and consistency of the annual reports; strengthening the action planning element of the programme reports; and strengthening the role of the faculties in relation to overseeing the process. UHI is encouraged to progress with the full implementation of these measures. In support of its management of quality and academic standards, UHI makes extensive and appropriate use of external reference points including the *Code of practice*, subject benchmark statements and the SCQF.

94 There is evidence of UHI evaluating the effectiveness of its internal processes, such as the current review of annual monitoring and the consideration being given to the future of academic partner review following the introduction of internal subject review. UHI is encouraged to continue and extend this evaluative approach.

95 UHI is becoming aware of the need to gather more detailed information on student progression and retention and further progress with this is strongly encouraged. UHI does not currently specify or use key performance indicators to help inform its academic development or its management of provision. Progress with the identification and analysis of this data will be necessary in order to secure broad confidence in UHI's likely future management of quality and standards.

96 Based upon its implementation of systematic processes for the assurance of quality and the maintenance of academic standards, broad confidence can be placed in UHI's current management of the quality of its provision and the academic standards of the awards it offers on behalf of its validating institutions. Taking into account the continuing development of the relationship between the Executive Office and the Academic Partners, broad confidence can be placed in UHI's likely future management of quality and academic standards provided that it takes action to identify and analyse management data relating to quality assurance and the maintenance of standards.

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

97 UHI produces a wide range of literature which is made public, including the prospectus which is produced annually using information from the student information system. Material is distributed to relevant staff in the academic partners and to the deans to verify its accuracy before publication. The RA stated that the officer for the Academic Planning Committee also checks the curriculum to ensure that any

unapproved programmes are clearly identified as being 'subject to validation'. A number of individual programme leaflets are produced, based on the prospectus material. The academic partner marketing departments liaise closely with the Executive Office to ensure that materials produced locally by the academic partners are accurate and in accord with the UHI corporate identity.

98 At the time of the ELIR, the content and design of the UHI website were being reviewed. The ELIR team noted that there were clear proposals to ensure the accuracy of content with single source documentation and version control.

99 In discussion with the ELIR team, students expressed general satisfaction with the information they had received from UHI.

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

100 UHI has adequate mechanisms in place for ensuring the information it publishes about the quality of its provision is complete, accurate and fair.

The student experience

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

Student representation

101 One of the key purposes of the UHI Quality Enhancement Policy is to ensure that student representation is centrally placed within all teaching quality processes and that student opinion is appropriately monitored across all sectors of the student population. UHI described as central to its active involvement of students, the UHI Students Association (UHISA) and the student representatives based in the academic partner colleges.

102 UHISA is the representative and social body for all UHI students and has an elected, funded sabbatical president, who is supported by the UHISA executive that includes a Vice President and a Students with Disabilities Officer. Other student representatives on the UHISA Executive are elected from the academic partners, the aim being to have one representative for each academic partner. At the time of the ELIR, eight of the 13 academic partners had local representatives serving on the UHISA executive. Academic partners have their own student representative systems which vary from partner to partner. UHI has appointed a Student Development Officer to assist UHISA with its development and there is a proposal which, at the time of the ELIR, was to be considered by the UHI Board of Governors, to fund an additional full-time sabbatical post from 2007-08. The Student Development Officer has responsibility for student representative training which, during 2006-07, took the form of a three-day residential course.

103 Students are represented by the UHISA President and/or members of the UHISA Executive on a wide range of UHI committees including the Foundation, the Board of Governors and a number of its committees, Executive Board committees and a variety of the committees reporting to the Academic Council. Students also contribute to a number of working groups, for example, the UHISA President is involved in the On-Line Induction Working Group. UHI considers that, through this representation, students are involved in the drafting and implementation of all major policies affecting students' interests. UHI recognises that student attendance at committee meetings is variable and it is working to fill a number of vacancies which existed at the time of the ELIR. In discussions, staff emphasised that students tend to engage informally and at course level, rather than with institutional committees, and this view was confirmed by groups of students. UHI is taking a number of steps to promote student engagement with the committees, such as refocusing the agendas to emphasise the role of student feedback. Student, and indeed staff, attendance is also facilitated by the use of video-conferencing.

104 There is a network of class representatives, in support of whom UHI has engaged the national student information and training body, Student Participation in Quality Scotland (sparqs) to pilot peer-led training. Despite the relatively recent introduction of sparqs training, in discussion during the ELIR, staff expressed the view that it had helped to empower the students. UHI is aware that the role and election arrangements for class representatives varies across academic partners and is seeking to address this in a range of ways, for example, the Academic Registrar and Student Development Officer are working with sparqs to identify ways of improving class representation on a site by site basis and the Student Journey Working Group (see below, paragraph 119) is also considering ways of supporting student representatives in the academic partners. In a further effort to support and promote student representation, from 2007-8, the Student Development Officer will facilitate the election of subject network representatives who will be invited to attend subject network committee meetings.

105 In addition to their involvement on committees and associated groups, students are also involved in the key quality assurance processes, for example, as members of academic partner review and internal subject review panels.

106 In discussion during the ELIR, students highlighted that UHI staff are very keen to hear student views and the students were aware of some of the steps UHI has taken to facilitate this. A number of student representatives echoed the institution's view that too few students get involved in the formal processes, including with UHISA, and it was clear that UHISA and UHI are working together to try to address this. UHI considers that a key challenge has been to strengthen the sense of UHI identity among its student body and UHISA is widely recognised by staff and students as being a key mechanism for addressing this. In discussion during the ELIR visit, students emphasised the important role UHISA could play in providing cohesive student support across a diverse set of students in distributed locations. The relationship between UHISA and UHI, and that with the

academic partner management teams, was described by staff and UHISA representatives as positive. In discussions with a range of students, including those who do not hold representative roles, students were able to identify a range of matters that had been addressed through the student representative system.

107 UHI has placed an appropriate emphasis on improving student engagement and representation, and on the associated development of UHISA. UHI has identified a number of areas for improving the representative system and is encouraged to retain its focus on this activity in order to secure the level of student engagement to which it aspires.

Student feedback

108 UHI considers that regular and ongoing feedback from students is a critical part of quality systems and plays a vital role in institutional planning and development. UHI's student survey policy aims to ensure that all students have an opportunity to provide feedback on their experiences and to ensure that action is taken. The policy also states that modules should be evaluated by means of a module questionnaire each time they are offered which, as well as providing individual feedback to module leaders, allows UHI to obtain an overview of the equivalence of student experience where modules are taught across the academic partner network. Programme leaders comment on module feedback as part of the annual programme monitoring process.

109 In discussions during the ELIR visit, students indicated that, while they did complete the module questionnaires, many issues were raised and addressed by academic staff at the time of their occurrence, and gave examples of action that had been taken as a result of their feedback. It was also highlighted that, in one academic partner, student module questionnaire responses are collated into a booklet and distributed to the students. In discussions, staff emphasised the importance of informal links with the student body, particularly in the context of the class sizes often being small. Staff indicated that this

facilitates the identification and early resolution of matters affecting students and helps the institution to promote a student centred approach. Staff also highlighted the role of faculty and subject network development days (see below, paragraph 177) in providing an opportunity for the discussion of matters that students had raised and to share good practice in identifying and addressing them.

110 UHI operates a student experience survey which is conducted annually online and involves all UHI students across all academic partners. UHI regards the annual student experience survey as providing a consistent means of collecting and analysing responses from across the academic partners and, in particular, as providing an opportunity for students to give feedback in a standardised way. This provides quantitative and qualitative data to inform action planning by the academic partners, subject networks and individual programmes. The outcomes of the survey are considered by the Academic Standards and Quality Committee and a summary is disseminated to a number of other UHI and academic partner committees.

111 Despite highlighting the importance of the annual student experience survey, UHI is not content with the response rate, although this had improved between 2005-06 and 2006-07. In discussion during the ELIR visit, students were aware of the survey but considered the timing of it was poor because it was distributed during an examination week. In drafting its new Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy (see below, paragraph 161), UHI has expressed the intention to make further improvements in its arrangements for gathering student feedback in the future, including liaising with student representatives to achieve this aim.

112 It is clear that the close links between academic staff and students are a particular strength at UHI. The institution has recognised the merits of seeking to improve the response rates to its formal feedback mechanisms which supplement the established and highly valued informal opportunities.

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

113 UHI highlights that many of its degree programmes have students studying at a number of locations, with students being taught by staff teams drawn from more than one academic partner. Of the UHI students, 54 per cent are aged 25 or over at registration and 57 per cent of the total student population study part-time. UHI also highlights that 44 per cent of its students live in the most geographically deprived postcodes in Scotland, in terms of access to services, stressing that this has particular implications for the types of support, advice and learning resources that UHI delivers.

114 UHI has expressed its intention to be a student-centred institution and the 2004-06 Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy describes UHI as a dynamic learning organisation committed to providing inclusive opportunities for higher education to students across the Highlands and Islands with equivalence of experience across the wide range of contexts in which they are studying.

115 UHI's Equivalence Policy describes the arrangements that should be in place to assure the quality and standards of programmes wherever and however they are delivered and defines the ways in which it is ensured that the learning opportunities provided to students are equivalent. It also recognises that students studying a programme at different locations and through different modes of study may be supported and taught in different ways, with an expectation that these are fit for purpose and meet student needs. Notwithstanding this, the Strategic Plan 2006-08 states that there is a need for better coordination and equivalence of these arrangements. The tDAP report had also highlighted the need for greater equivalence in student support. In discussion during the ELIR visit, senior staff outlined the range of work which is being carried out to ensure equivalence across the partnership including: the arrangements being put in place to strengthen academic leadership and oversight of central processes (see above, paragraphs 32 to 36); the

focus being placed on existing good practice and expertise in the partnership (see below, paragraphs 177 and 178); and the further development of policies, procedures and support tools. Senior staff acknowledged that changes in student support, library provision and the Registry present specific challenges in terms of achieving shared processes, or equivalence, and central oversight.

Framework for student support

116 UHI is aiming to build on what it describes as the 'strong tradition' of student support that already exists within its academic partners. Support services are provided in different ways at different academic partners and cover a range of services including pre-entry information and advice, student induction, finance, childcare and other personal support, counselling and careers advice, as well as support for particular groups of students including those with disabilities and international students. Links are also made with UHISA in relation to student welfare, health and social and cultural issues.

117 UHI monitors the quality of the student support services provided to students in a number of ways including through academic partner review and the annual student survey (see above, paragraphs 57 and 110). In 2005 and 2006, UHI undertook surveys of the student support services provided by the academic partners to monitor the standards of support and student satisfaction with the services offered. In preparation for the ELIR, UHI highlighted the positive comments that have been made about its student support systems in the QAA 2003 quality audit and in the SQA audits conducted in 2003 and 2004. The 2006 annual student survey results show that students rate the current support services as satisfactory. In discussion during the ELIR visit, students identified a key challenge for UHI to be the provision of additional social activities.

118 One of the aims set out in the Student Support Services Strategy is to develop equivalent support facilities and access to information for all students in relation to disability issues, student finance, careers guidance and general induction to UHI. The

Strategy identifies action taken in 2004-05 and 2005-06 to assess the existing student support provision across the partnership, and to identify elements requiring development. A central student services support team was formed to work with staff in academic partners. The remit of the existing Head of Lifelong Learning was extended to include the student services support function, and a number of other posts were established including a full-time Student Support Services Assistant, a part-time Student Support Services Coordinator and a part-time Student Disabilities Coordinator, who also work with the existing Student Induction Coordinator (a fixed term post).

119 The Student Support Services Committee was established, reporting to the Executive Board, with the remit of enhancing the quality and effectiveness of student services for all UHI students. It has a number of working groups which have worked or are working on specific issues such as student disability, student finance, the development of a graduate careers service, and revision of the Student Charter (which was first developed in 1999). There is also a Student Journey Working Group, reporting to the Academic Planning Committee, which is intended to act as a strategic group working with existing operational groups, the academic partners and programme leaders to consider aspects of the student journey. A significant focus for the Student Journey Working Group has been induction (see below, paragraphs 123 to 126).

120 The Student Affairs Committee reports to the Board of Governors with a remit to formulate advice on policy and strategic matters relating to the provision of student services. There is cross-representation between the Student Affairs Committee and the Student Support Services Committee, and the two groups exchange minutes. UHI has been considering the overlap between the committees' roles and remits which it is encouraged to resolve (see above, paragraph 31).

Student advisers

121 UHI considers that the front line service for student support rests largely on the student

adviser system, particularly from the time of registration onwards. All students have access to a student adviser. For postgraduate research students, the adviser role is normally carried out by the student's supervisor. UHI has developed a formal remit for the role, which indicates the breadth of areas of the student experience that link to the student adviser function including student support and welfare, personal development planning, employability and careers education, information and guidance, in addition to academic advice and support. A comprehensive resource pack for staff undertaking the role is available on the UHI website and, in most academic partners, specialist support and advice is available for student advisers through a central student support services unit. In discussions during the ELIR visit, staff expressed the view that these were useful resources, and students highlighted the importance of the student advisers in supporting them through their programmes of study, speaking positively of their experiences.

122 UHI acknowledges that the provision made by student advisers varies because student advising is normally undertaken by academic staff who are subject to local academic partner terms and conditions which make it difficult to achieve an identical approach for all students. Following comments made in the tDAP report that, despite positive feedback from students regarding the role of the student adviser, there was a lack of common understanding of their precise roles and responsibilities, UHI is seeking to clarify where in the Executive Office responsibility for student advising lies. A Student Support Services Team project, being undertaken in 2006-07, is attempting to establish baseline information about student advising in UHI.

Induction

123 In a case-study submitted for the ELIR, UHI set out its arrangements for widening access and supporting students from non-traditional backgrounds. The case-study included information on work that had been undertaken to enhance UHI's induction arrangements, building on elements of existing good practice,

such as the development of a CD-ROM containing induction material that was distributed to students following their registration. Since January 2006, UHI has been running a project aimed at improving induction for non-traditional entrants through which a member of staff from one of the academic partners was seconded to undertake a range of tasks including: reviewing national and international literature on induction practice; reviewing current practice across UHI; and sharing and developing good practice.

124 Through the Student Journey Working Group, an On-Line Induction Working Group was established with the aim of designing and creating an online induction site, which would make a consistent set of information available for all students, with the emphasis on longitudinal induction rather than a one-off event. Based upon a review of current literature, UHI considers that this longitudinal approach provides more support for the social, personal and academic process of transition, better preparing the students to meet the challenge of higher education and enhancing the first-year experience.

125 A pilot of the online induction is being planned for 2007-08 when material will be available on a range of topics including facilities and resources, study skills, referencing and academic regulations. It is intended that further materials, such as information for students with disabilities and specific information relating to academic partners and individual programmes will be added subsequently. UHI intends that online induction materials will complement, but not replace, traditional induction which is offered locally by the academic partners. It is hoped that a positive additional benefit of having material available online will be that more time could be devoted to social activity during the traditional induction period.

126 It was clear that a number of positive benefits had arisen from the focus UHI has placed on its induction arrangements.

Student feedback on assessment

127 The tDAP report had noted that there had been some issues raised by students in relation to assessment. For example, there had been comments in the 2005-06 annual student survey concerning the late return of assessment marks, although the survey also recorded 80 per cent of students being satisfied with the feedback they had received regarding their assessment performance. The revised Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy, which was in draft form at the time of the ELIR, identified one of its goals as being to develop a UHI assessment framework to guide programme teams in their choice of assessment approaches and instruments and to provide more structured and uniform approaches to giving students feedback on assessment. In discussions during the ELIR visit, students expressed general satisfaction with the timeliness and helpfulness of the assessment feedback they had received, commenting that feedback is normally provided within the three-week time period stated by UHI. The students also expressed the view that this was an example of UHI having responded to student opinion.

Students with disabilities

128 UHI publishes a Disability Equality Scheme and an Equal Opportunities Policy both of which set out a wide range of information and policy relating to disability. A disability action plan is monitored through the Equal Opportunities Committee, which reports to the Board of Governors, with the Student Support Services Committee also overseeing matters relating to student disability through its working groups, including monitoring the accessibility of the UHI website. The recent appointment of a part-time Student Disabilities Coordinator provides a focus for the coordination and development of information and support across the partnership.

129 UHI produces a comprehensive booklet, 'Accessing Learning Support at UHI' specifically for students with disabilities or other additional support needs which is distributed to academic partners and is also available on the UHI website. The information provided to student

advisers (see above, paragraph 121) includes guidance on disability. Academic partners provide a variety of support for students with specific needs, such as dyslexia testing, additional study skills support and access to assistive technology. An accessibility module has been developed in UHI's student information system to allow easier recording, support and tracking of information for students with disabilities, and a focus for the Student Disabilities Coordinator is to ensure that students studying at different academic partners have equivalent access to appropriate support. In discussion during the ELIR visit, students highlighted that the UHISA executive includes a Students' Disabilities Officer.

International students

130 Currently, the number of international students studying with UHI is small, but the Strategic Plan identifies the international market as a future growth area. The support available to international students varies between academic partners but normally includes English language support and, in most cases, assistance in finding accommodation. The UHI website also contains some information for international students including, for a small number of academic partners, information about available accommodation. In discussion during the ELIR visit, staff explained that it is standard practice for UHI to provide extra support to international students in their first two years of study.

131 From the outcomes of the UHI annual student survey, and from discussions with students during the ELIR visit, it became apparent that some students on ERASMUS programmes felt isolated, commenting that their pre-arrival support was good but that they needed better support on arrival, including better information about module choices. Some students confirmed that they had been given support to find accommodation but that the accommodation options were limited to sharing with families. Other students indicated that they had only been able to find accommodation once they had arrived in the region and this had taken several days. Senior

staff expressed the intention to monitor the adequacy of support offered to students as the student profile changed through expansion. An Estates Advisory Group has been established to consider current and future student accommodation requirements. UHI is encouraged to ensure that the specific needs of international students are included within its increasingly strategic approach to the provision of student support.

Careers support

132 The provision of careers guidance across UHI is currently largely dependent on Careers Scotland services which are available to all academic partners. In addition, some academic partners employ their own careers guidance staff and several of the learning resources centres provide access to careers guidance and Careers Scotland services. In some instances, notably on certain vocational programmes, good careers guidance and support is provided but this provision is not consistent across UHI.

133 UHI has recognised the need to develop its careers support, and the aim of designing and implementing a graduate career development service is one of the main targets identified in the 2007-2010 Student Support Strategy action plan. UHI is exploring the models adopted by other higher education institutions and the Graduate Careers Development Officer post has been established to assist in the development of a more streamlined careers service. UHI has identified a number of goals to be completed by late 2008 including: achieving affiliated membership of the Higher Education Careers Services Unit, piloting the use of online careers advice and guidance, working towards a Matrix Standard Award and achieving institutional membership of the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services.

134 The intention of piloting online careers support by late 2008 should have a direct impact on students, providing them with easy access to electronic careers guidance, and should help to meet UHI's strategic aim of providing equivalent careers support to students studying in more remote areas. Overall, UHI has plans in place to develop a

more systematic approach to providing careers support for students studying at UHI, and is encouraged to continue to progress these.

Learning centres

135 The Strategic Plan 2006-08 indicates that learning centres are central to the fulfilment of UHI's mission to deliver into geographically disadvantaged areas and to enable the scaling up of student numbers in subjects that would not be viable in a single geographical location or restricted range of locations. UHI intends to extend the range of courses available for study through learning centres and improve the access to learning resources and support for students studying in the centres. UHI is part of the multi-agency Highlands and Islands Learning Centre Strategy Group which has formulated a strategy to enable learning centre practitioners and agencies to work together towards the creation of a sustainable network of learning centres in the region.

136 There are currently 113 learning centres in the Highlands and Islands, and they vary in their management, ownership, provision and resources. The UHI academic partners own and manage 55 and the remainder include those owned by local authorities, community groups and private training providers. The centres are equipped to offer pastoral support to students and provide access to the same online provision as any student based in an academic partner would receive. In 2006-07, over 300 students studied through a UHI learning centre; no UHI students were studying at learning centres that were not connected directly to UHI.

137 During the ELIR, UHI provided information about the steps it has taken to provide a more strategic and coordinated approach to the management of the learning centres. The Widening Access Group, which reports to the Academic Planning Committee, has primary responsibility for monitoring matters relating to the quality of delivery and student support at the learning centres. The UHI Learning Centre Unit, which is part of the Lifelong Learning Team, aims to support and develop UHI's provision of community based learning and promote the sustainability of learning centres in

the region. UHI produces a range of resources including the Learning Centre Guide, which includes information on courses and the resources required for their delivery; a Best Practice Handbook for learning centre managers; dedicated pages on the UHI website; and electronic newsletters which are made available to support learning centre staff. The Learning Centre Development Coordinator provides personal support, including making visits to the centres. A number of special events are provided for students, for example, learning centre open days, and information about learning centres is disseminated to UHI staff through regular meetings, such as An Comann.

138 In discussion during the ELIR visit, students who were studying via learning centres spoke positively about the experience, emphasising that the learning centres had made opportunities available to them which would not otherwise have been possible.

Learning resources support

139 The appropriateness of the learning resources support made available to students across the academic partners is scrutinised at validation and monitored through the regular quality assurance processes including academic partner review, internal subject review, annual monitoring and the annual student survey.

Library and computing services

140 The Strategic Plan states that UHI needs to provide services, including IT and library services, that are appropriate to 'a modern university' and which support students equitably across a variety of contexts.

141 Front-line library services are provided and managed by the academic partners. The library team comprises the UHI librarian, the E-resources manager (who is charged with the further development of the portfolio of electronic learning resources), the Library Systems Manager, and the academic partner librarians. The UHI library policy, approved by the Academic Council in December 2005, has the overarching aim of providing equivalence of access to information resources across the partners for all members of the academic

community. The associated UHI Library Service Subject Network Policy assigns a member of the UHI library team to each subject network as a subject network support librarian with the aim of providing staff development to members of that subject network. In discussion during the ELIR visit, staff indicated that the library strategy would be updated and aligned to the revised Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy.

142 UHI has commented that the individual libraries across the partnership are generally mature and fit for purpose but need to be further developed to form a distributed library service. There has been some mixed student feedback on the library service in the QAA academic subject reviews, and the 2006 annual student survey indicated that 67 per cent of students expressed satisfaction with access to books and journals, an increase on the previous year. In discussion during the ELIR visit, students expressed general satisfaction with the library services offered, including the inter-site loan agreement whereby a student in one academic partner can request books and journals from any other to be sent in the post.

143 The 2006-08 Strategic Plan highlights the importance of online materials, common core electronic services and the managed learning environment to the delivery of the UHI networked learning model. UHI has a common information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure across the partnership. Central support is provided by UHI's Learning and Information Services, and overseen by the Information Services Subcommittee which reports to the Executive Board. UHI has commented that the environment and ICT infrastructure is complex, with multiple chains of ownership and responsibility, requiring ongoing work to map and delineate service provision and to identify areas of overlap or non-alignment.

144 In discussion during the ELIR visit, students were generally satisfied that they had sufficient access to IT resources. In the 2006 annual student survey, 80 per cent of students expressed satisfaction with computing resources.

E-learning

145 UHI has commented that, as a developing institution, it has been willing to embrace new technologies and new ways of working where these will enhance learning and teaching. Considering the geographic disparity of UHI students and the wide use of video-conferencing, this objective has particular relevance to the UHI mission which embraces widening access to higher education for the people of the Highlands and Islands. Some of UHI's programmes are delivered entirely on line while others make use of the learning environments to support face-to-face teaching and video-conferencing.

146 The 2004-06 Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy identified a target of making better use and smarter scheduling of video-conferencing technology. Video-conferencing makes a positive contribution in enabling student and staff participation in meetings. Discussion with students during the ELIR visit about the existing video-conferencing facilities elicited some negative responses in relation to technical difficulties and lecturers' poor use of the communication tool. Similar comments were made in the 2006 annual student survey. UHI plans to enhance its video-conferencing facilities as part of the wider development of an e-campus environment, which will include social as well as academic communication tools, virtual lecture theatres and field trips and online access to student records.

147 The 2007-12 Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy indicates that the virtual learning environments (VLEs) used in UHI have been important tools in developing the online components of blended learning. UHI is now taking steps to replace its current VLE with a widely accepted vehicle for future online development, the priority being to adopt a stable and usable VLE recognised throughout UHI as the main online tool. The Executive Board commissioned a strategic review of UHI's learning environment, and the resulting report noted inadequacies in resourcing and in the direction of training and support for current and potential users of the VLE. In discussions during

the ELIR visit, while students were generally positive about the online learning facilities available to them, teaching staff expressed difficulty in finding time to keep up with new technological developments, such as the latest online teaching practices. The staff also suggested that some students are reluctant to engage in activities like the VLE discussion boards.

148 Considering the institutional mission and approach to educational delivery, UHI is encouraged to give a higher priority to developing its VLE.

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

Employability

149 UHI describes its Employability Strategy as 'comprehensive', with the aim of ensuring that all students have a range of opportunities to develop their employability skills and attributes through their programme of study at UHI. It is accompanied by an Employability Plan, drafted in 2007, which identifies as a key objective the appointment of an Employability Officer to support the development of employability and personal development planning (PDP) profiles for programme teams. The revised Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy, 2007-12, identifies the intention of embedding employability and PDP with the curriculum.

150 The Employability Strategy requires all programme teams to consider the employability profile of their programmes at the time of validation, and to work to enhance the employability opportunities for students on an ongoing basis. In discussion during the ELIR visit, senior staff indicated that employer engagement is crucial to the validation and revalidation of programmes, and industry representatives often become involved through an advisory panel. The vocational nature of many of UHI's programmes provides a positive basis for the future enhancement of employability in the curriculum. Overall, UHI's formulation of an Employability Strategy with its associated Employability Plan, which sets out both short and long term actions, is a positive development.

Personal development planning

151 The revised Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy includes the adoption of personal development planning (PDP) for students. UHI states that it has been committed to the principles of PDP for several years, having used previously a system of recording personal and professional capabilities which was included in module descriptors as a student reflection exercise. UHI also recognises that PDP is not yet offered consistently in all programmes or levels. In discussion during the ELIR visit, students described a variable experience of PDP; for some it appeared to be a core requirement while others felt that their knowledge of it depended on the enthusiasm of their student adviser.

152 The PDP system has recently undergone review and a revised PDP policy has been put in place. A PDP Working Group, reporting to the Learning and Teaching Committee, is carrying out scoping work for the personal development tool. UHI is making progress towards implementation, as suggested by the inclusion of the PDP Policy in new programme validations, but is still at an early stage. Given its stated long standing commitment to PDP, UHI is encouraged to make quicker progress towards embedding a consistent approach to PDP across the academic partner network. Given that student advisers are expected to play a key role in promoting and supporting PDP, there would be value in UHI considering the ways in which it might seek to engage all advisers consistently.

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

153 The evidence of this ELIR indicates that UHI is a student-focused institution in which staff are committed to resolving the matters that students raise through the student representative structures and through the formal and informal feedback routes. UHI is seeking to engage its students in a range of activities including committee membership and involvement in the institution's key quality assurance processes. Student involvement has been a challenge and UHI is placing a strong

emphasis on improving student engagement and representation, including investing in the development and support of the UHI Students' Association (UHISA) and working with the national body student participation in quality Scotland (sparqs) to support and promote the role of student representatives. In relation to gathering and analysing students' views, UHI has a number of formal feedback mechanisms which are being developed further and are supplemented by the informal arrangements which arise from the small class sizes and the close professional relationships students have with academic staff; a feature that UHI emphasises as a particular strength.

154 In relation to the equivalence of student experience, UHI has an Equivalence Policy and has been engaged in a variety of positive work to promote equivalence of practice across the partnership, for example, in relation to student induction and the greater coordination of the support available to students with disabilities. The positive role fulfilled by student advisers in providing support for students was highlighted consistently during the ELIR by staff and students.

155 UHI is committed to providing support for students that is appropriate to their needs and their place and mode of study. A clear Student Support Services Strategy and the establishment of a small central team have provided a framework for the development of institution-wide policies and the provision of student support services across the partnership. UHI is encouraged to continue the development of its increasingly coordinated approach in this area. UHI has a small number of international students and has plans to expand this in the future. The current level of support available for international students is adequate, including English language support and some assistance with finding accommodation. A more strategic approach would need to be developed to meet the needs of a larger, more diverse student population.

156 Learning centres fulfil an important role in supporting students who are studying in more isolated communities and in helping UHI meet its strategic aims in relation to widening

participation. UHI is adopting a more strategic and coordinated approach to their management which is positive and appropriate to the emphasis placed on their importance to the institution.

157 Learning support resources, including library and IT services, are provided by the academic partners and coordinated from the UHI Executive Office. In general, these lend positive support to the student experience. As the library and IT strategies are revised, UHI is encouraged to link those strategic aims to the revised Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy which was available in draft form at the time of the ELIR. In addition, given UHI's strategic mission which embraces widening access to higher education for the people of the Highlands and Islands, the development of the VLE, including the provision of support for pedagogic training, should be given a higher priority by the institution.

158 UHI's formulation of an Employability Strategy with its associated Employability Plan, which sets out both short and long-term actions, is a positive development. UHI has recognised the need to develop a graduate careers service and has plans in place to develop a more systematic approach to providing careers support for students studying across the partnership, which it is encouraged to pursue. UHI is also aware of the need to take a more coordinated approach to the implementation of personal development planning and is encouraged to progress this more promptly.

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

159 UHI describes itself as being constantly engaged in quality enhancement as it seeks to develop programmes and refine modes of delivery which meet the needs of the local communities and applicants it serves whilst also developing systems to manage and

support an increasing number of higher education students.

160 The approach adopted by UHI to managing improvement in teaching and learning has evolved over the years and is continuing to develop as the academic structures are embedded and senior management posts are introduced (see above, paragraphs 32-36).

Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy

161 The transition to a more managed environment can clearly be seen in the development of UHI's Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy. The original Strategy, which covered the period 2004-06, identified a number of objectives but did not identify specific projects intended to deliver the objectives, nor any additional resources that might be required. It did, however, identify the institutional priorities of employability and lifelong learning, network delivery, and supporting links between teaching and research. Since the original Strategy was produced, UHI has developed more formal structures to integrate activities across the academic partners in the shape of the faculties led by the deans and supported by the subject network leaders. This has facilitated the development of a revised Strategy which is intended to enable the institution to set specific objectives and to oversee the Strategy's implementation in a managed way.

162 The revised Strategy, which is intended to cover the period 2007-2012, was in the process of being approved at the time of the ELIR. It was, nonetheless, clear that the new Strategy is more suited to the new environment, with clearer strategic objectives and links to the UHI Strategic Plan. The Strategy has specific goals linked to the strategic objectives and senior staff indicated that further consultation is intended to identify SMART [Specific, Measurable, Agreed upon, Realistic, Time-based] targets to assist with the management of its implementation.

Quality Enhancement Group

163 UHI states that overall responsibility for formulating its approach to quality enhancement and for monitoring its impact lies with the Quality Enhancement Group, which reports to the Academic Council. The Group first met in February 2004 and meets twice a year. Its membership includes the President of UHI SA, the UHI Principal, the Academic Registrar, the chairs of the Academic Standards and Quality and the Learning and Teaching Committees, and a number of senior administrative staff based in the Executive Office. It has an external chair.

164 The Group produced a Quality Enhancement Policy which was approved by the Academic Council in December 2006. The main aims of the Policy are to emphasise the importance of quality enhancement of the student experience, and how UHI structures and processes are used to ensure that quality enhancement is embedded within the institution's activities. The Policy does not identify specific activities linked to responsibilities, targets or a monitoring process. In discussions during the ELIR visit, senior staff expressed their awareness that the Policy requires development to assist with the management of enhancement. There would also be benefit in UHI considering where in the committee structure responsibility for quality enhancement could best be located.

External involvement

165 UHI involves staff from other higher education institutions and professional bodies in advisory roles as members of a wide range of committees and working groups. In 2006-07, 19 academic and senior administrative staff from eight universities were involved in this way. UHI considers that this involvement is of direct benefit to the institution in developing its processes, and provides another mechanism for ensuring there is equivalence of practice between UHI and other institutions.

166 The evidence from the ELIR indicates that, while there are clear benefits from the involvement of peers in UHI's committees and other deliberative structures, there would be significant advantage in UHI reflecting on the precise way in which it makes use of the external advice and opinion it receives. There is evidence that UHI is beginning to take a more critical view but there are also examples of UHI being heavily influenced by the views of external peers, such as having an external chair of the Quality Enhancement Group (see above, paragraph 163). In discussion during the ELIR visit, senior staff expressed their awareness that UHI did need to develop a greater sense of self-reliance and also to have more confidence in the skills and knowledge of its own staff. UHI is encouraged to review the effectiveness of the manner in which it engages external advice, without losing the potential positive benefits of gaining an external perspective to inform decision making.

National Enhancement Themes

167 The Quality Enhancement Group considers how UHI is addressing the national Enhancement Themes. In preparation for the ELIR, UHI submitted material detailing the ways in which it engages with the national themes and the ways in which the outcomes of the themes are used to inform academic development across UHI. Several detailed examples were set out including: the extent to which the process of revising the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy had benefited from staff awareness of the national themes and e-transformation projects; the way in which the revision of the UHI academic planning process had been informed by the outcomes of one of the projects associated with the national theme on Flexible Delivery; and how the national themes on Flexible Delivery and Employability had informed the development of a network learning audit and planning guide which was created at UHI to support effective planning and development across academic and support areas.

168 It is clear that the national themes have provided a key driver both for the range of activities to be considered within UHI and as

an external resource to complement internal development. A number of the national themes have matched well with UHI priorities, for example there are clear links with The First Year experience and UHI's work on induction; similarly the national theme on Employability links with UHI progress in that area (see above, paragraphs 149 and 150). There is likely to be benefit in UHI considering prioritising its involvement with the national themes in order to target support for institutional priorities.

Subject networks

169 The case-studies submitted for the ELIR demonstrated the ways in which the subject networks were engaging in enhancement activity with particular reference to the UHI priorities set out in the 2004-06 Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy. What emerges from these case-studies is a strong sense of subject communities forming links and enhancing learning through reflection and incremental change. There is a much less clear sense of this activity being managed by UHI or of resources being strategically allocated to achieve the institutional objectives.

Staff development

170 UHI considers that the development of its revised Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy and, in particular, the development of specific objectives within the Strategy, will provide an opportunity for a more strategic approach to staff development. In discussion during the ELIR visit, senior staff indicated that the institution-wide staff development priorities would be identified by the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy. It is intended that the UHI Staff Development Committee will identify ways of achieving the objectives at an institutional level. The academic partner staff development committees will continue to identify and monitor the staff development needs of individual members of staff.

171 In response to comments made in the tDAP report, UHI is putting in place arrangements to review its staff database and the systems used to update it. UHI has expressed its commitment to ensuring that

programmes are supported by teaching staff who are appropriately qualified and experienced for the level of delivery in which they are engaged. UHI's expectations of staff in this regard are set out in its Staff Scholarship and Research Policy. Although information regarding staff qualifications and experience already informs programme development and validation and is considered during staff appraisals, UHI has recognised that such information is not collected in such a way that development of defined groups of staff could be monitored or analysed readily to inform staff development strategies and quality assurance processes across the partnership. The Academic Registry and the Human Resources units of the Executive Office are now planning the development of an improved staff database system which all staff will be required to update on an annual basis. The intention is to have a complete and current database in place by the end of 2006-07.

172 It is evident that UHI is putting plans in place which will enable it to have a greater strategic view of the ways in which staff are encouraged to work together to develop their skills, share knowledge and thereby develop the institution. Currently, many of the formal processes are overseen by the academic partners who are making progress at different rates. Similarly, there is positive work being carried out within subject networks. The steps UHI is now taking should enable it to form a strategic view and to coordinate activity in line with key institutional priorities, as set out in the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy.

Modularisation

173 The curriculum structure of UHI is modular and the regulations and general quality assurance procedures are designed to support the modular framework. UHI, however, considers that the advantages gained by other higher education institutions from providing academic programmes with a modular structure have yet to be fully realised across the partnership. A significant area of current planning is, therefore, aimed at realising this potential by establishing systems and

procedures which will allow modules to develop and be offered in a range of contexts including: continuing professional development units, integral parts of academic programmes, and as parts of a fully networked curriculum. UHI considers that the benefits of the wider implementation of networked modules will be two fold: first, it will make more efficient use of resources in each academic partner; and second, it will have academic benefits in that students will be able to access the best teachers across the network, work in larger cohorts with a greater sense of academic community, and enjoy increased module choice. Two of the case-studies submitted for the ELIR demonstrated the detailed development and benefits of using the network model.

174 The tDAP report had noted that the development of the potential benefits of modularity had been relatively slow. In autumn 2006, UHI seconded two subject network leaders to fulfil the role of modularisation managers for a period of 18 months. These individuals are working to implement the modularisation plan which was approved by the Executive Board and the Academic Standards and Quality Committee. They are based within the Academic Registry Faculties and Subject Network team and report to the Academic Registrar. The evidence from the ELIR suggests that this project is being clearly managed with appropriate executive and academic authority while retaining the involvement of the academic partners.

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

175 UHI identified a key feature of its quality assurance processes as strengthening and developing the professional expertise of the academic community in a number of ways: the use of peer review in quality assurance processes; the involvement of a wide range of staff in quality review activity and in the development of systems and regulations; the involvement of students in contributing to

quality review and development activity; and the involvement of external expertise to widen debates and reference external agendas.

176 The key quality assurance processes (see above, paragraph 44) provide opportunities for good practice to be identified and reported within the institution including: annual programme monitoring, internal subject review, academic partner review and the annual reports provided by academic partner quality committees to the Academic Standards and Quality Committee. There is evidence of good practice being identified, notably at subject network level, but there is limited evidence of this being picked up systematically at institution level. One faculty overview report highlighted that several instances of good practice had been identified through annual programme monitoring but it was not clear how these could best be disseminated across UHI. Faculty reports also repeatedly identify weaknesses in the annual programme monitoring reports associated with their relatively limited critical review and inconsistencies in the use and analysis of data. These features are likely to militate against the widespread dissemination of good practice from the subject networks. The work underway at the time of the ELIR to improve the annual programme monitoring process and the associated data collection and analysis (see above, paragraphs 53, 69 and 71) is likely to have a positive impact on the extent to which good practice can be systematically identified and shared.

177 UHI holds a number of events and forums through which good practice can be discussed. Subject networks and faculties have development days to promote discussion of matters relating to both assurance and enhancement. There is a subject network leaders forum and the quality managers based in the individual academic partners also meet on a regular basis. UHI holds an annual staff conference which provides an opportunity for staff from across the partnership to network and share good practice, usually around current 'hot topics', and funding is made available to enable staff to attend. Since 2000, UHI has held

an annual external examiners' forum that gathers deans, subject network leaders, programme leaders, newly appointed and existing external examiners and examination board chairs to introduce the examiners to the UHI and to share experience across the institution. The Quality Enhancement Group has discussed the possibility of the external examiners' forum being linked to the annual staff development day to enable matters raised by the external examiners to be distributed more widely.

178 UHI indicated that the Quality Enhancement Group was currently considering introducing a range of measures to strengthen and support the dissemination of good practice including establishing regular e-bulletins to staff; publishing annual priorities and targets; developing a dedicated VLE section; promoting the existing activities of subject network leaders in reporting practice within their networks; and holding events to discuss the national Enhancement Themes and the dissemination of their outcomes. These mechanisms would make a valuable contribution to the current activities.

179 Overall, while a range of mechanisms exist for the identification of good practice, these tend to be most effective within subject networks and faculties. Institution-wide management of the links between assurance and quality enhancement is at a very early stage of development, although it is positive that UHI has recognised the need to progress its work in this area.

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

180 Staff matters, such as training, recognition and reward are complex at UHI because academic staff are employed and line-managed by the individual academic partners. Staff, therefore, will have responsibilities and affiliations simultaneously to UHI, the employing academic partner and, increasingly, to their subject network. UHI and the academic

partners have a role in recognising and rewarding good practice. Subject networks have less formal processes, linked to the allocation of responsibilities.

181 UHI has a process for awarding titles to academic staff to recognise excellence in teaching; these titles are separate from increases in salary. The titles include: Teaching Fellow, Senior Teaching Fellow and Professor, and are similar to those awarded for research excellence. The academic partners are able to reward the staff through promotion and they may also award titles but there is not yet consistency in the use of titles across the institution. Discussions with staff during the ELIR visit suggested that the titles are not widely awarded, and there is limited general awareness of them.

182 UHI funds around five sabbatical posts each year which academic and administrative staff can apply for on a competitive basis in order to undertake research and scholarship. Applications are considered by a group, comprising members of the Staff Development Committee and the Research Committee. Although there is an emphasis on research, about one-third of successful applicants have related to teaching activities. These have been clearly aligned to institutional objectives, such as the development of honours programmes and e-learning. UHI is working to strengthen the mechanisms for disseminating the outcomes from the sabbatical studies to maximise their benefit to the institution. Discussions with staff during the ELIR visit indicated that the sabbaticals have become increasingly popular with greater numbers of staff submitting applications.

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

183 UHI has quality assurance processes in place which identify good practice and areas for improvement, and there is evidence of improvements being made in teaching and learning arising from these processes, notably

within the subject networks. UHI is taking steps which are likely to improve its ability to use the outcomes from its quality assurance processes to inform and develop enhancement, and is strongly encouraged to promote and manage this more systematically.

184 UHI is currently missing the ability to take an overarching view of quality enhancement across all of its activities and this is likely to inhibit the extent to which quality enhancement can successfully be managed across the partnership. There are examples of activities which lead to improvement in learning and teaching being managed effectively through the executive and academic structures, for example, the wider implementation of modularisation, and the improvements that have been made to the management of staff development. Equally, there is increasing evidence of subject development led by the subject networks, and this is likely to be promoted through the implementation of the revised Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy which was in draft form at the time of the ELIR.

185 UHI makes extensive use of external individuals in advisory roles as members of a wide range of committees and working groups. While there are clear benefits in maintaining links with the wider higher education community and providing external perspectives on internal developments, UHI should reflect upon the effectiveness of the way in which it makes use of the external advice and opinion it receives to guard against this acting as a barrier to internal development, and to ensure that it informs rather than directs decision making.

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

186 UHI does not have a formal strategy for enhancement and the key policy document linking activities to its strategic objectives is the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy. The Strategy was being revised at the time of the ELIR and UHI should progress its finalisation and the intended development of SMART

targets to assist with the implementation of the Strategy's objectives. In finalising the Strategy, thought should be given to the ways in which it can be linked to other institutional strategies to provide a holistic approach and to assist with the prioritisation of UHI's enhancement activity, targeting effort to support key institutional priorities. The combination of a clearly defined strategy and the new posts which are being added to the Executive Office are likely to add considerable strength to UHI's academic and executive leadership.

187 UHI identifies its Quality Enhancement Group as having overall responsibility for its approach to quality enhancement, but the Group does not regard itself as being responsible for managing enhancement and does not appear well-placed in the committee structure to fulfil such a role. There would be benefit in UHI considering the Group's remit, membership and location within the committee structure.

Summary

Background to the institution and ELIR method

188 UHI was designated as a higher education institution in 2001 and the Privy Council approved the use of the title UHI Millennium Institute. UHI is a partnership of 13 independent institutions known as academic partners: Argyll College; Inverness College; Lews Castle College; Lochaber College; Moray College; North Highland College; Orkney College; Perth College; Shetland College; Scottish Association for Marine Science; Sabhal Mor Ostaig; Highland Theological College; and North Atlantic Fisheries Marine Centre. Seven of the academic partners are further and higher education colleges, four are specialist research and teaching institutions and the two smallest academic partners, Argyll and Lochaber Colleges, provide an infrastructure of academic support for students in rural areas studying further and higher education modules or programmes offered elsewhere. UHI also has two associate institutions: the Ness Foundation, a health research centre which has been

associated with UHI since 1999; and, since 2005, the Sustainable Development Research Centre, a not-for-profit research body involved in supporting the monitoring and measuring of sustainable development.

189 An academic framework of faculties and subject networks provides the organising structure for curriculum planning and development. There are 15 subject networks mapping to four faculties:

- Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences: arts and social sciences; cultural and creative industries; education; Gaelic and other contemporary languages; and theology and religious studies
- Faculty of Business and Leisure: business and management; computing and ICT; leisure, tourism and sport
- Faculty of Health: beauty and associated therapies; and health and social care
- Faculty of Science and Technology: construction; engineering; land and sea-based industries; marine science; and sustainable science heritage and development.

190 In line with the enhancement-led institutional review (ELIR) method, UHI submitted a Reflective Analysis (RA) in advance of the review. In producing its RA, UHI had involved a wide range of staff and students including the UHI Students' Association. In addition, external views had been sought, in part through external membership of UHI committees. While such wide involvement in the production of the RA is good practice, the document itself was missing information about a number of key institutional developments and did not demonstrate a capacity for self-evaluation. This necessitated the consideration of a significant range of additional documents before and during the Part 2 visit in order to aid understanding of UHI's policies and practices.

191 The institution submitted three case-studies with its RA:

- Easing transition: widening access and supporting students from non-traditional backgrounds - which explored a range of UHI's arrangements aimed at promoting lifelong learning.
- Sustainable Science Heritage and Development: development of a new model through the revalidation process - which set out UHI's approach to redesigning its programmes in one subject network, utilising blended learning strategies and the revised modular structure.
- Managing and enhancing the student experience on networked programmes - which described arrangements for delivering teaching and student support on networked degrees in the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences.

Overview of the matters raised by the review

192 A range of themes were pursued in the review including: UHI's relationship with its validating institutions; the use of external advisers; the relationship between the executive office and the academic partners; academic leadership and authority; the impact of the new management structure; the strategic use of management information; student retention and progression; management of the assessment process; the nature of student representation and the attention paid to the student voice; mechanisms for analysing and managing the student experience; equivalence of learning opportunities; the strategic approach to quality enhancement; and staff development and support arrangements.

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

193 In 2005, UHI applied to the Privy Council for taught degree awarding powers (tDAP) and a scrutiny exercise took place during 2005-06.

The resulting report indicated that UHI should take action in a number of areas including: providing further evidence relating to the security and stability of UHI's governance, financial control and structural arrangements; developing further its academic leadership; and developing significantly staff expertise, including in research and scholarship. It had been agreed by UHI and QAA that those matters outstanding from the tDAP process, and which were within the remit of the ELIR method, could be explored during the current ELIR. The evidence of the ELIR indicates that UHI has taken a number of steps to secure the relationship between the Executive Office and the academic partners including: developing the role of senior academic partner staff in relation to the UHI key committees in an effort to ensure their direct involvement in policy development; revising the executive structure and establishing three new senior management groups; creating a number of senior posts including a Vice-Principal (Learning and Teaching) and a Vice-Principal (Research and Commercialisation) who UHI intend will provide senior cross-institutional support for policies and practices, complementing the role of the deans; and strengthening the role of the faculties through a range of measures such as providing added administrative support for the deans and targeting faculty development funding on programme development. While a number of these developments are very recent, the evidence of the ELIR indicates that, at least in principle, they are likely to strengthen academic and executive leadership across UHI and to provide greater integration between the parties within UHI.

194 Senior staff are aware that the UHI committee structure is complex and is characterised by its key committees having large memberships with business being progressed by a significant number of working groups. UHI has expressed a willingness to review the effectiveness of its committee structure and is encouraged to progress this review.

195 The undergraduate degrees and taught postgraduate awards offered by UHI are validated by the Open University through an accreditation agreement. UHI has a generally satisfactory relationship with the Open University in which UHI responds on a regular basis to the University's requirements. Research degrees offered by UHI are awarded either by the Open University or, in selected validated areas, by the University of Aberdeen. The University of Aberdeen has carried out an accreditation exercise involving scrutiny of UHI's processes and procedures, concluding that the accreditation panel was impressed with UHI's approach.

196 UHI has systematic processes in place for assuring quality and securing academic standards including validation, internal subject review and academic partner review. The arrangements for managing the assessment process are generally secure and the quality assurance processes are underpinned by the academic planning arrangements, particularly in relation to the identification of resources required to deliver programmes. In relation to annual monitoring, UHI has identified a number of measures which are likely to strengthen that process including undertaking staff development aimed at improving the quality and consistency of the annual reports; strengthening the action planning element of the programme reports; and strengthening the role of the faculties in relation to overseeing the process. UHI is encouraged to progress with the full implementation of these measures. In support of its management of quality and academic standards, UHI makes extensive and appropriate use of external reference points including the *Code of practice*, published by QAA, subject benchmark statements and the *Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework* (SCQF).

197 There is evidence of UHI evaluating the effectiveness of its internal processes, such as the current review of annual monitoring and the consideration being given to the future of academic partner review following the introduction of internal subject review. UHI is encouraged to continue and extend this evaluative approach.

198 UHI is becoming aware of the need to gather more detailed information on student progression and retention and further progress with this is strongly encouraged. UHI does not currently specify or use key performance indicators to help inform its academic development or its management of provision. Progress with the identification and analysis of this data will be necessary in order to secure broad confidence in UHI's likely future management of quality and standards.

199 Based upon its implementation of systematic processes for the assurance of quality and the maintenance of academic standards, broad confidence can be placed in UHI's current management of the quality of its provision and the academic standards of the awards it offers on behalf of its validating institutions. Taking into account the continuing development of the relationship between the Executive Office and the Academic Partners, broad confidence can be placed in UHI's likely future management of quality and academic standards provided that it takes action to identify and analyse management data relating to quality assurance and the maintenance of standards.

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

200 UHI has adequate mechanisms in place for ensuring the information it publishes about the quality of its provision is complete, accurate and fair.

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

201 The evidence of this ELIR indicates that UHI is a student-focused institution in which staff are committed to resolving the matters that students raise through the student representative structures and through the formal and informal feedback routes. UHI is seeking to engage its students in a range of

activities including committee membership and involvement in the institution's key quality assurance processes. Student involvement has been a challenge and UHI is placing a strong emphasis on improving student engagement and representation, including investing in the development and support of the UHI Students' Association and working with the national body student participation in quality Scotland (sparqs) to support and promote the role of student representatives. In relation to gathering and analysing students' views, UHI has a number of formal feedback mechanisms which are being developed further and are supplemented by the informal arrangements which arise from the small class sizes and the close professional relationships students have with academic staff; a feature that UHI emphasises as a particular strength.

202 In relation to the equivalence of student experience, UHI has an Equivalence Policy and has been engaged in a variety of positive work to promote equivalence of practice across the partnership, for example, in relation to student induction and the greater coordination of the support available to students with disabilities. The positive role fulfilled by student advisers in providing support for students was highlighted consistently during the ELIR by staff and students.

203 UHI is committed to providing support for students that is appropriate to their needs and their place and mode of study. A clear Student Support Services Strategy and the establishment of a small central team have provided a framework for the development of institution-wide policies and the provision of student support services across the partnership. UHI is encouraged to continue the development of its increasingly coordinated approach in this area. UHI has a small number of international students and has plans to expand this in the future. The current level of support available for international students is adequate, including English language support and some assistance with finding accommodation. A more strategic approach would need to be developed to meet the needs of a larger, more diverse student population.

204 Learning centres fulfil an important role in supporting students who are studying in more isolated communities and in helping UHI meet its strategic aims in relation to widening participation. UHI is adopting a more strategic and coordinated approach to their management which is positive and appropriate to the emphasis placed on their importance to the institution.

205 Learning support resources, including library and IT services, are provided by the academic partners and coordinated from the UHI Executive Office. In general, these lend positive support to the student experience. As the library and IT strategies are revised, UHI is encouraged to link those strategic aims to the revised Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy which was available in draft form at the time of the ELIR. In addition, given UHI's strategic mission which embraces widening access to higher education for the people of the Highlands and Islands, the development of the virtual learning environment, including the provision of support for pedagogic training, should be given a higher priority by the institution.

206 UHI's formulation of an Employability Strategy with its associated Employability Plan, which sets out both short and long-term actions, is a positive development. UHI has recognised the need to develop a graduate careers service and has plans in place to develop a more systematic approach to providing careers support for students studying across the partnership, which it is encouraged to pursue. UHI is also aware of the need to take a more coordinated approach to the implementation of personal development planning and is encouraged to progress this more promptly.

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

207 UHI has quality assurance processes in place which identify good practice and areas for improvement, and there is evidence of improvements being made in teaching and

learning arising from these processes, notably within the subject networks. UHI is taking steps which are likely to improve its ability to use the outcomes from its quality assurance processes to inform and develop enhancement, and is strongly encouraged to promote and manage this more systematically.

208 UHI is currently missing the ability to take an overarching view of quality enhancement across all of its activities and this is likely to inhibit the extent to which quality enhancement can successfully be managed across the partnership. There are examples of activities which lead to improvement in learning and teaching being managed effectively through the executive and academic structures, for example, the wider implementation of modularisation, and the improvements that have been made to the management of staff development. Equally, there is increasing evidence of subject development led by the subject networks, and this is likely to be promoted through the implementation of the revised Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy which was in draft form at the time of the ELIR.

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

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targets to assist with the implementation of the Strategy's objectives. In finalising the Strategy, thought should be given to the ways in which it can be linked to other institutional strategies to provide a holistic approach and to assist with the prioritisation of UHI's enhancement activity, targeting effort to support key institutional priorities. The combination of a clearly defined strategy and the new posts which are being added to the Executive Office are likely to add considerable strength to UHI's academic and executive leadership.

211 UHI identifies its Quality Enhancement Group as having overall responsibility for its approach to quality enhancement but it does not regard itself as being responsible for managing enhancement and does not appear well-placed in the committee structure to fulfil such a role. There would be benefit in UHI considering the Group's remit, membership and location within the committee structure.

