



Enhancement-led Institutional Review

University of the Highlands and Islands

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Introduction

1 This is the report of an Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR) of the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI or the University) undertaken by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). QAA is grateful to the University for the cooperation provided to the ELIR team.

ELIR method and report

2 The ELIR method was revised during 2007-08 following extensive consultation with the Scottish higher education sector. Full detail on the method is set out in the *Enhancement-led institutional review handbook: Scotland* (second edition, 2008) which is available on the QAA website.

3 ELIR reports are structured around three main sections: the management of the student learning experience; institution-led monitoring and review of quality and academic standards; and the strategic approach to quality enhancement. Each of these three sections leads to a 'commentary' in which the views of the ELIR team are set out. The three commentaries, in turn, lead to the overarching judgement on the level of confidence which can be placed in the institution's management of academic standards and the quality of the student learning experience. A summary report is also available in printed form (from QAA) and from the QAA website.

Method of review

4 The University submitted a Reflective Analysis (RA), which provided the focus for the review. The RA was accompanied by a number of documents including three case studies relating to: the Curriculum for the 21st Century and the Educational Development Unit; student retention; and the development and function of the UHI Students' Association. The ELIR team also received the report of the University's previous ELIR which took place in 2007, and the reports of the 2007 taught degree awarding powers and the 2010 university title scrutiny exercises.

5 Preparation of the RA was coordinated by a group led by the Vice Principal: Academic and including academic, administrative and student members. The UHI Students' Association (UHISA) had been invited to comment on a draft of the RA and also provided specific material which was presented as one of the case studies. The RA was reviewed and approved by the UHI Academic Council, Executive Board, UHISA Executive Board and the University Court.

6 The ELIR team visited the University on two occasions: the Part 1 visit took place on 15 and 16 February 2012 and the Part 2 visit took place in the week beginning 26 March 2012.

7 The ELIR team comprised: Professor Liz Deane, Mr Pat Devlin, Mr Rio Floreza, Dr Jon Scott, Professor Andrew Walker, and Mr Tony Platt. The review was managed on behalf of QAA by Ms Ailsa Crum, Assistant Director, QAA Scotland. The Part 1 visit was observed by Mr Roddy Henry from Education Scotland.

Background information about the institution

8 The University of the Highlands and Islands is Scotland's newest university, having gained the title in 2010. UHI gained taught degree awarding powers in 2008 and has a strategic goal of gaining research degree awarding powers. Currently UHI meets the criteria for research degree awarding powers, and therefore university title, through a sponsorship model with the universities of Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Strathclyde. UHI offers research degrees through a validation arrangement with the University of Aberdeen. UHI is a collegiate federal partnership of the UHI

Executive Office and 13 Academic Partners comprising a number of Scotland's colleges of further and higher education, research institutes and specialist colleges. In 2010-11, the University had 7,653 students (by headcount). Students are taught across eight subject networks which are organised into two faculties: the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Business; and the Faculty of Science, Health and Education.

9 At the time of the current ELIR, the University was engaged in a formal exercise to review its governance and constitution. The final outcome of that was not known by the completion of the ELIR visits.

Institution's strategy for quality enhancement

10 The University's Learning, Teaching and Assessment strategy identifies the following key aims, to:

- 'ensure that each student has a positive learning experience and look for ways to continue to enhance it
- raise learner retention, achievement and engagement
- recognise and share good practice across UHI
- enhance UHI's capacity for high-quality higher education delivery'.

Management of the student learning experience

Key features of the student population and the effectiveness of the institution's approach to managing information about its student population

Student population

11 The University characterised its student population as predominantly mature, part-time and employment-based. In 2010-11, the University had 7,653 students by headcount (or 4,484 full-time equivalents), of whom 7,120 were undergraduate, 412 were taught postgraduate, and 121 were postgraduate research students. Around one third of the student population were studying at undergraduate degree level with over 60 per cent of the population studying other undergraduate levels (primarily Higher National awards). Of the total student population, approximately 47 per cent were studying full-time and 53 per cent part-time.

12 In 2010-11 over 45 per cent of the total student population was aged 30 or over, and half of the part-time student population was aged between 30 and 49 years. In the same year, 84 per cent of the student population came from the UHI catchment area, a further 10 per cent came from other parts of Scotland, 3 per cent from the rest of the UK, 1 per cent from the European Union, and 2 per cent from overseas.

13 Just under half of the total student population studied at two of the 14 campuses in 2010-11: Inverness College and Perth College. Around 16 per cent of the population studied at Moray College and a further 12 per cent studied at North Highland College.

14 The total student population rose steadily between 2003 and 2008, and there was a small decline in numbers in 2009-10 and 2010-11. There had been a marked increase in postgraduate student numbers in 2010-11, particularly in the taught postgraduate population.

Data management

15 UHI undertook a three-year Data Improvement Project starting in October 2007 which was prompted, in part, by the report of the 2007 taught degree awarding powers scrutiny. The

project was managed by the Head of Student Records and had three distinct strands: data flow, data integrity and data use. The University indicated that, having completed the Project, further development of data systems and processes will be ongoing, led by the UHI Student Records Office. Overall, there is evidence of significant improvement in the availability of data and their usage across UHI (see paragraphs 45 and 72 to 74).

The effectiveness of the institution's approach to engaging and supporting students in their learning

16 The University's approach to engaging and supporting students in their learning is set out in its Learning, Teaching and Assessment strategy.

Student representation and engagement

UHI Students' Association (UHISA)

17 The University identified the primary role of the UHI Students' Association (UHISA) as that of advocate for students across UHI through representing their rights, needs and opinions. Enhancing the student social experience is also included within the UHISA remit.

18 The University highlighted that UHISA has developed significantly in recent years with the addition of a second sabbatical officer post (in place since 2007-08), improved connections to UHI committees, links to the developing Student Council and Subject Network teams, and external links with the National Union of Students. The UHISA Student Council is a biannual event which provides an opportunity for students to meet in person or by video conference to discuss and set UHISA policy. In recent years there has been increased participation in the Student Council by individual college representatives. There has also been an increase in the range of UHISA student officer roles to cover particular student interests including: Gaelic, International, Mature Students, and Disabled Students. UHISA officers identified the student-led teaching awards as an example of the Student Association's ability to successfully form a productive partnership with the University (see paragraph 108).

19 Communication between UHISA and senior academic staff of the University is not formalised but meetings do take place on an ad hoc basis. There are formal joint liaison meetings on a monthly basis between the UHISA sabbaticals, the UHI Student Development Office and the Head of Student Support and Lifelong Learning. UHISA also plays a role in the development and implementation of strategic approaches to learning and teaching, such as the Curriculum for the 21st Century (C21C) project (see paragraph 99), but this type of engagement is not ubiquitous; for example student involvement in the development of the Personal Academic Tutor (PAT) initiative was not as evident. The University is aware of the significance of UHISA and has expressed a desire to extend the UHISA infrastructure. The University is encouraged to continue developing UHISA as part of the process of securing a strategic partnership with the student body (see paragraph 23). Attention should be paid to the sustainability of UHISA as its activities increase in volume and breadth.

Subject Network Student Officers (SNSOs)

20 In an example of partnership working, the University and UHISA launched a pilot scheme in 2011-12 to appoint Subject Network Student Officers (SNSOs). SNSOs receive a payment of £500 per semester. They provide a student perspective on Subject Network committee meetings, act as a communication link between academic staff and students, and are supervised by the Subject Network Leader to carry out a research project. At the time of the current ELIR, it was too early for any projects to have been completed but examples of topics included student retention and Gaelic provision. Although at an early stage, there was enthusiasm for the SNSO role among student representatives and staff. A number of operational challenges have been identified including the possibility of the role overlapping with that of the class representatives, and there

were some issues associated with obtaining email distribution lists for students in particular subject networks. The University is encouraged to work with UHISA and the SNSOs in resolving these matters (see paragraph 23).

21 The University indicated that student representation on programme committees is strong. Different approaches are adopted in the different Academic Partners for encouraging student engagement, including paying students to attend meetings in some cases. Representatives are supported with training provided by a combination of the Student Development Officer (who is a member of University staff), UHISA and the national student development body, Student Participation in Quality Scotland (sparqs).

Student Engagement Special Interest Group

22 The Student Engagement Special Interest Group was established in November 2011 as a result of a staff development workshop where Academic Partners came together to share good practice and discuss student engagement. The Group is chaired by the Depute Director of Shetland College and has a membership comprising staff and student members. It also welcomes attendance by anyone with a keen interest in the agenda, especially students and UHISA officers. The University recognises that the Academic Partners already demonstrate some high quality student engagement and the aim of this Group is to support, develop and share these practices. Work already undertaken includes a review of module evaluation surveys with the aim of developing a more standardised and comprehensive approach to evaluating student feedback. The Group is also working with UHISA and the Student Development Officer to develop a University Social Experience Plan.

23 Overall, there have been a significant number of positive developments in the University's arrangements for student representation since the 2007 ELIR. The University is encouraged to continue developing these arrangements to ensure that they are effective and appropriate for the nature of the student population. In particular, the University is encouraged to continue the process of establishing a strategic partnership with its student body as a whole and with UHISA in particular.

Student feedback

24 In 2010-11, the University carried out a review to explore the student surveys being undertaken across the Executive Office and the Academic Partners. Among the findings, it became clear that communication across the institution could be much improved in relation to the nature and volume of student surveys being used. The University has expressed an intention to adopt more formal, systematic methods of gathering and responding to student feedback, including developing an online evaluative tool for students and staff. This tool adapts questions from the National Student Survey and applies them to a module level. Tutors who already use their own online surveys will be encouraged, but not required, to use this new tool. It was confirmed during the current ELIR that some staff members prefer to use their own survey methods. While this may enable staff to be responsive to their particular student groups, it also presents challenges for the University in promoting consistency and for monitoring the outcomes from student surveys across the partnership.

25 Staff clearly recognise that feedback from students can provide an opportunity to enhance the learning experience and contribute to curricular development. During the current ELIR, students were able to identify examples of action being taken in response to feedback they had provided. Students also highlighted variability between the different Academic Partners in relation to student feedback being acted upon. It appeared that responses to student feedback worked particularly well where informal mechanisms were in place. In a number of cases, students indicated that they were not aware of the outcomes from the formal questionnaires or surveys that they had been asked to complete. As a result, many students met during the current ELIR

had a sense that the same issues were recurring in subsequent years. The University is, therefore, encouraged to develop a more consistent approach to questionnaire design and to improve the ways in which information arising from the questionnaires is reported back to students. This should also aid the extent to which information on student views can be used systematically to inform the monitoring and review processes (see paragraphs 65 to 68).

Red Button

26 Since the beginning of 2010-11, the University has operated the 'Red Button' electronic feedback mechanism. It was introduced following consideration of the outcomes of the Responding to Student Needs national Enhancement Theme. It is widely promoted across the University and provides an opportunity for students to email or complete an online form via the UHI website. Enquiries are received by the Head of Student Services in the Executive Office who operates a triage system, liaising with relevant members of staff and keeping the student informed about progress until the matter is resolved.

27 The University described the Red Button as a useful barometer of student concerns and feedback. During the ELIR, many examples were given of how the Red Button had been used to raise and resolve issues ranging from relatively minor operational challenges to more significant enquiries. Students were clearly familiar with it and staff indicated that they encouraged students to use the Red Button, for UHI-wide issues in particular. There was a sense in which the Red Button appeared to be the default mechanism for raising and resolving a wide variety of issues. While it is clearly recognised as a useful mechanism for generating quick responses for students, there would be benefit in the University analysing and addressing the root causes of the issues raised. This would enable the University to adopt a more proactive approach to addressing systemic challenges, as well as securing the sustainability of the Red Button for matters of concern that might not have been anticipated or identified through more regular routes. The University should also ensure that, albeit with the best intentions, it is not bypassing the formal processes for student representation.

Support for learning

28 The University is engaged in strategic efforts to enhance the quality and consistency of student support through a variety of developments such as the Curriculum for the 21st Century (see paragraph 99), a longitudinal induction initiative, and the introduction of student peer mentoring. In discussions with students, some instances were highlighted where expectations relating to course and/or module provision, as well as arrival and induction support, had not been met. Overall, it was evident that students felt very well supported, with many students indicating that they found the UHI approach to learning and teaching particularly accessible and appropriate to meet their individual needs. There is evidence of UHI fulfilling its mission in providing opportunities some students might not otherwise have had to pursue a higher education from the early levels through to postgraduate study.

Research student experience

29 The UHI Graduate School was created in 2009 to provide leadership and management of the postgraduate research processes with the aim of ensuring quality and equivalence of experience for all research students. The Research Degrees Sub-Committee has responsibility for monitoring the quality of the experience and student progress. The University indicated that pastoral care for research students is provided in a variety of ways, including through the individual supervisors and the Academic Partner student support and welfare officers. The Graduate School allocates a Third Party Monitor to each student. This is a member of UHI staff from a neutral Academic Partner who provides support for pastoral and academic matters in addition to that provided by the supervisors. Graduate School staff are also available to facilitate access to guidance and support.

30 The Graduate School organises an annual research conference for postgraduate students to provide training and enhancement of generic skills while promoting student networks, academic development, and the social aspects of the student experience. Attendance at the conference is obligatory for first-year research students, and the University highlighted that it is increasingly well attended by supervisors and students in other years. The University also indicated that, in October 2010, it introduced a biennial staff and student research conference which should provide a further opportunity for students to become engaged across the institution.

31 During the current ELIR, research students spoke positively about their supervision and support arrangements. They indicated that they were properly resourced for undertaking their projects, and they knew where to seek advice relating to attending external conferences and other activities. There were some comments that career progression towards post-doctoral employment was not a clear pathway, which meant that the University was not retaining graduates as members of staff in the way that it might. There would be benefit in the University reflecting on this, particularly as it develops an enhancement strategy relating to the research student experience.

32 It is evident that the University has put in place a range of measures aimed at promoting a sense of community among the research student body since the 2007 ELIR. The annual research conference was highlighted by students as particularly positive. The Third Party Monitor system is also a positive means of providing additional support for students in the University structure. Nonetheless, challenges remain, most notably relating to the geographical spread of the students, and the University is encouraged to continue with its efforts to develop a research community in the particular context of UHI.

33 In common with practice elsewhere, research students are encouraged to take up opportunities for teaching. Many of the postgraduate students indicated during the current ELIR that they were enthusiastic about gaining teaching experience. However, it was evident that there are no systematic arrangements in place to provide training and support for students when they fulfil a teaching role. As a matter of priority, the University should ensure that all students receive training in advance of undertaking a teaching role.

Communicating with students

34 The University has developed a variety of mechanisms for communicating with students including: members of staff with specific roles, road shows, dedicated webpages, and emails. A number of these, for example communication relating to the Curriculum for the 21st Century initiative (see paragraph 99), have been well considered and carefully targeted. During the current ELIR, some students indicated that, overall, communication with the University was positive. However, other students highlighted examples where communications had been less effective, including pre-arrival information not matching the subsequent offer or instances of confusion around changes in delivery arrangements. In particular, students considered that important programme information could be difficult to identify as a result of the volume of emails they receive through their University accounts. In many cases, students indicated that they receive emails from several Academic Partners irrespective of their own location of study. The University should review the ways in which it communicates with its students to ensure there is a clearer focus on key information, particularly in email communication.

The effectiveness of the institution's approach to promoting the development of graduate attributes, including those relating to employability, in all of its students

Graduate attributes and employability

35 The University has produced a set of graduate attributes and a set of staff attributes which are set out in the Learning, Teaching and Assessment strategy. This work aligned with the

national Enhancement Theme on Graduates for the 21st Century, but the University also emphasised that it is important for the UHI mission of providing higher education that can support the local region through producing graduates who have the skills and personal qualities to support the economy and its employers. The University emphasised that it also wants to produce graduates who are confident and responsive in a global arena for employment, entrepreneurship and further study.

36 UHI recognises the experience that many of its students, particularly part-time students, bring to their programmes of study from relevant employment sectors. The University is also aware of its own contribution to widening access to higher education in the region and, subsequently, to enhancing the employability of graduates. Equally, during the ELIR, students and staff highlighted that not all students enter higher education with a view to gaining employment. Nonetheless, the University has introduced a number of activities and key resources aimed at embedding employability as part of a wider Employability and Enterprise Strategic Plan. The University has begun a three-year initiative, supported through Scottish Funding Council Horizon funding, which seeks to engage students in the relevance of employability, embedding employability skills within the curriculum, and providing work-based learning opportunities through enhanced relationships with employers and professional bodies. These are clearly positive developments in support of the University mission to promote the local and global economies.

Professional development planning

37 The Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy identifies the embedding of personal development planning (PDP) within the curriculum as a key priority. The University has a number of projects and mechanisms in place which are aimed at implementing this, although academic staff recognise that PDP is not yet embedded across UHI. At the time of the current ELIR, the University was piloting a Graduate Attribute Profile (GAP) in an initiative known as the Individual Achievement Map (IAM). This is a positive development in which students are encouraged to evaluate their own progress in the context of the identified UHI graduate attributes.

The effectiveness of the institution's approach to managing the learning environment

38 The distributed structure of the University and its dispersed and diverse student population have necessitated the development of a range of strategies to ensure the quality and consistency of the student learning experience. The University has developed a blended learning model in which the distributed network of Academic Partner locations is used alongside substantial engagement with technologies. The aim is to provide flexibility of access for the student population.

39 In November 2011, the Academic Council and the Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee (LTQC) considered a Blended Learning Standards paper containing guidance on key pedagogical principles which need to be considered when developing blended learning module materials, including minimum IT skills for academic staff and an accessibility checklist. At the time of the current ELIR, a draft implementation paper aimed at providing guidance on expectations and requirements at programme validation was being considered. The University's recognition of the importance of adopting a structured approach to the use of technology is a positive development.

40 The University has invested extensively in video-conferencing infrastructure and in its Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). The University indicated that it is the most significant and experienced single educational user of video-conferencing technology in the UK. Students were generally very positive about the use of video conferencing in teaching, although wider feedback suggests that additional staff development would ensure the more effective use of the facilities by all staff. The University provides extensive online materials to assist staff in developing e-learning

resources and the Educational Development Unit provides targeted assistance with module development, although this intensive pedagogical support has been restricted to a small number of modules. Comments from students indicate that there is variability in the quality of the VLE use across modules. There have also been a number of outages in the VLE service which have been reported through the Red Button (see paragraph 26). Currently, responsibility for the quality of VLE use within modules lies with individual teaching staff, and the relevant Subject Network Leader has responsibility for sharing good practice. Given that the effective use of technology is pivotal to the success of UHI's blended learning approach, there would be considerable benefit in the University developing additional ways of assuring the quality and consistency of its use.

41 Delivery of the University library services and support is dependent on the Academic Partners, with the addition of two staff employed in the Executive Office to coordinate partnership-wide library service provision. The University is using a number of different approaches to support the service, including an extensive inter-site loan service and the facility to post items out to students. Enhancement of the service is based on an increasing focus on online resource provision matched to curriculum needs and integration of online library access with the VLE. The University indicated that this area is still being developed, highlighting that it has undertaken a benchmarking exercise with two other Scottish universities and is increasing its involvement with other libraries in Scotland and the rest of the UK. Student feedback about the library service is not systematically collected, although, during the ELIR, students were positive about the library provision, particularly the willingness of the service to meet special requests or needs. The University is aware that its research students rely heavily on electronic access to journals provided through the University of Aberdeen validation arrangement (see paragraph 8). In view of UHI's ambition to achieve its own research degree awarding powers, it should give explicit consideration to the ways in which the library resource could be recreated beyond the current sponsorship agreement.

The effectiveness of the institution's approach to promoting equality of opportunity and effective learning for all of its students

42 The Learning, Teaching and Assessment (LTA) strategy includes the explicit aim of ensuring that each student has a positive learning experience which the University will seek to enhance. The University indicated that it has a very wide student demographic, with a substantial proportion of students studying on a part-time basis, a wide age range of learners (many of whom are returning to study after a period in employment or raising families), and students with a broad range of additional learning or support needs. In addition, the University highlighted that it operates in a region with high levels of rural deprivation and geographical barriers to study. In this context, UHI seeks to adopt an inclusive approach to its curriculum and support service development. The University aims to provide every student, regardless of location or mode of attendance, with the same opportunities for curricular, co-curricular and pastoral support, access to learning resources, and access to any form of additional support required.

43 The University emphasised that its initiatives are not usually targeted at specific groups but are aimed at 'widening the mainstream'. The Curriculum for the 21st Century (C21C) Project with its emphasis on provision being 'networked' across the UHI partnership and on a work-related curriculum, supports the University's ambitions to make its programmes accessible to its student population. During the current ELIR, teaching staff expressed considerable support for this Project.

44 The Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee (LTQC) and the Quality Enhancement Steering Group oversee a range of activities which support equality and diversity. A number of 'communities of practice' groups report to LTQC, including the Disability Support Practitioners Group and the Student Support Lead Practitioners Group. These practitioner groups play a key role in the development and delivery of practice to support equality and diversity. In addition, the Academic Partners themselves provide valuable support in these areas.

45 The University has invested in improved data systems to enable the provision of informed and targeted support to students with a number of different needs. An accessibility assessment management module, linked to the management information system, has been in place at one Academic Partner since 2010. At the time of the current ELIR, it was being piloted in five other Partners with the aim of it being extended across all of UHI. The University anticipates that this module will be particularly useful for local support staff whose students are enrolled or hosted elsewhere because it will enable closer monitoring of student needs by the relevant support services within and between partner colleges. Although the full benefits of the data improvements are still being realised, this is clearly a positive development for UHI and its students.

46 Support staff within each of the Academic Partners work with students who require additional support in order to negotiate an appropriate Personal Learning Support Plan. This takes account of the student's needs, the support mechanisms deemed most appropriate, and the circumstances in which these can be used. No information is passed on without the student's consent and the Plan itself is reviewed regularly with the student's involvement. In this way, UHI is seeking to adopt a student-centred approach in which students are empowered to take responsibility for the provision of their support. In January 2011, the University launched a dyslexia sticker scheme which alerts markers to a student's condition so that written and oral work can be assessed sympathetically by disregarding dyslexic errors in spelling and grammar while maintaining academic standards. In order to be eligible for the scheme, the student must have a formal diagnosis of dyslexia and agree to the academic staff being informed. Initial feedback from staff and students is overwhelmingly positive about the value of the scheme.

Student retention

47 UHI is aware that its retention figures do not compare favourably with those of other higher education institutions and has established a Retention and Continuation Project aimed at addressing this. There has been an institutional focus on retention since 2007-08 with the introduction of the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) Widening Access and Retention Premium (WARP) funding. WARP funding is distributed across the Academic Partners and the Executive Office. In 2009-10 a new post of Student Retention Lead Practitioner was created, reporting to the Head of Student Services. The Lead Practitioner is responsible for overseeing the administration of the WARP funding and leads on cross-institution initiatives aimed at improving retention, aligning these to the 11 goals identified within the University Retention Strategy. The Lead Practitioner manages the Retention and Continuation Project, which is overseen by a project board chaired by the Vice Principal: Academic.

48 The overall aim of the Retention and Continuation Project is to increase retention rates by improving data collection processes and by addressing the underlying causes of student attrition. An early finding was that some apparent student withdrawal actually related to anomalies in data collection or reporting, therefore a focus on data integrity has been an important area of work. As part of the project, the University reviewed existing practices that were thought to have an impact on retention. These included: student induction, pre-entry information, withdrawal practices, and student adviser and study skills support. Following the conclusion of the review in February 2010, a Retention Working Group was established, chaired by the Dean of the Faculty of Science, Health and Education. It reports to the Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee. The Group's remit is to ensure that consideration of student retention occurs in all learning and teaching activities and to provide strategic direction and engagement with the work of the Student Retention Lead Practitioner.

49 The Project is now split into five streams with aims relating to: ensuring accurate and timely recording of student withdrawal, awards and progression; putting in place appropriate financial drivers; increasing student confidence and success; and using research to inform activity across UHI.

50 The University has a challenging student population in terms of retention and progression. In this context, the University has developed a strategic, systematic and thoughtful approach to improving student retention.

The effectiveness of the institution's approach to supporting and developing staff to promote effective learning for their students

51 Staff development within the University has been progressed through a number of mechanisms. A Staff Development Officer post was created by seconding a senior staff development practitioner from one of the Academic Partners. That post has responsibility for developing and promoting continuing professional development (CPD) logging and sharing of CPD activities and resources across UHI. The Staff Development Committee has been replaced with a Staff Development Practitioners' Group (SDPG), comprising lead staff with direct responsibility for human resources and staff development at all the Academic Partners. SDPG is convened by the Staff Development Officer and is responsible for developing the sharing, networking and promotion of staff development activities, as well as ensuring that CPD logging is adopted within the Partners. Two additional groups, which are accountable to the Academic Council, meet to disburse institutional funds for staff development and sabbaticals. There is a high number of applications from staff for this funding.

52 The Quality Enhancement Steering Group has a role in progressing closer linkages between the Academic Partners and the faculties and subject network groups. During 2011-12, SDPG has been undertaking a review of the CPD aspects of faculty strategic plans to help highlight key faculty priorities that can be progressed through Academic Partner and UHI-wide CPD activity. The CPD log, along with good examples of CPD, is seen as a key mechanism for improving engagement and effectiveness both at individual and faculty levels. This grass roots approach to assessing need and working with staff across the network is well aligned to the distributed structural and operational nature of UHI.

53 The University faces a challenge in ensuring that staff have remission from teaching to enable their engagement in scholarship, research and CPD. This has been raised in a number of subject reviews but is a difficult issue for the University to address because staff are employed by Academic Partners under different terms and conditions of employment, and there is no standard workload planning process for academic staff across UHI. However, the UHI Executive Board has approved an initial mission statement which indicates that all staff will be encouraged and supported to undertake research, knowledge exchange and scholarly activities appropriate to their role. The University indicated that all responsible bodies (such as Academic Partners and Executive Office departments) will be asked to report annually to the Executive Board on how they have supported this mission statement. The Curriculum for the 21st Century (C21C) project is also regarded as an important mechanism for reducing the staff teaching load through rationalising the provision and, thus, freeing time for research, scholarship and other professional development activities.

54 The Educational Development Unit (EDU) was established in 2011 and has provided targeted support for the use of blended learning in a number of key modules. Academic developers in the EDU work across the Academic Partners to share good practice materials, and support is provided by a number of professional staff. EDU has developed a Blended Learning Module from a package of CPD materials directed at supporting staff to reflect on their teaching methods. It is designed to be undertaken in a number of flexible ways including through self-directed study. Although relatively recent, the EDU clearly has the potential to make a significant impact across the University (see paragraph 40).

55 During the current ELIR, staff commented positively on the proactive role taken by SDPG in identifying key staff development needs. The weekly good practice video conferencing event run by SDPG was highlighted a number of times as a positive initiative designed to overcome the challenges faced by busy staff in engaging in staff development. Illustrative of the key role SDPG plays in both the conception of staff development activities and their delivery has been the development of a UHI-wide approach to staff induction (UHI Global Induction) which includes a suite of online materials.

56 UHI is engaged in a number of initiatives to build capabilities and communities. Leadership programmes are in place for Subject Network Leaders and are planned for senior staff in 2012. A number of staff conferences have been run to strengthen and build the UHI community, as well as promoting collaboration and sharing good practice. These include a variety of university-wide conferences focusing on such topics as quality enhancement and research, as well as a number of smaller events in the Academic Partners and faculties. Pivotal to the University's development in many areas of operation has been the establishment of a number of communities of practice similar to SDPG, covering areas such as admissions, student support, careers, and disability. These groups are highly valued and have clearly been effective in promoting a sense of a vibrant academic community. As the University evaluates its approach, there would be benefit in ensuring that staff do not become over-extended through participating in multiple groups. Overall, however, the collaborative community of practice approach has had significant success in helping to foster an academic community that is well attuned to the structural and operational character of UHI.

The effectiveness of the institution's management of the student learning experience on collaborative programmes

57 The University indicated that it has a very limited number of collaborative agreements, only two of which are with partners who are not themselves universities. At the time of the current ELIR, the University had very recently taken the decision to terminate one of these partnerships (see paragraph 87). The University had taken reasonable steps to protect the interests of the current students.

Institution-led monitoring and review of quality and standards

Key features of institution-led monitoring and review at the institution, and the extent to which these arrangements meet sector-wide expectations

58 The University's quality assurance processes are set out in the Academic Standards and Quality Regulations. A Regulations Working Group, which reports to the Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee, oversees the Regulations. The Group comprises programme leaders, quality managers and Executive Office staff, and is chaired by the Vice Principal: Academic. The University stated that, in addition to developing the Regulations, the Regulations Working Group is also responsible for reviewing the Regulations from a broader perspective with a view to ensuring that they both underpin and facilitate UHI's enhancement priorities. The Academic Standards and Quality Regulations are extensive in scope and length. The Regulations Working Group intends to reformat them into two separate documents; one detailing the regulations, the other giving guidance and examples for reference.

59 The University confirmed that its processes adhere to the guiding principles of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*, the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF), and the relevant subject benchmark statements. UHI indicated that a key feature of these processes is their use in strengthening and developing the professional expertise of the academic community. To this end, UHI uses peer review in its processes to develop staff understanding of quality assurance matters. It also involves a wide range of staff, drawn from across the partnership, in the development of its quality

systems and regulations, and indicated that it involves students 'as much as possible' in contributing to quality review and developmental activity.

60 In 2008-09, the University introduced a new process for Annual Quality Monitoring which it described as reflective and continuously cyclical with a focus on student-centred enhancement, rather than having a primary focus on quality assurance. During the current ELIR, staff confirmed that the revised processes were more streamlined and productive. Self-evaluation documents (SEDs) are produced for each organisational level: module, programme, subject network, and Academic Partner. UHI is also piloting an arrangement to bring support services into the Annual Quality Monitoring process. The Regulations state that the SEDs at each level should be reflective and evaluative with a focus on the issues relating to the student experience and the curriculum. The module SEDs provided in the current ELIR varied in analytical content regarding student progression and feedback, and some did not include either a commentary on the previous year or action points for the coming year. The programme SEDs included action points for the coming year but not all commented on progress with the actions identified from the previous year. In order for the SEDs to be effective in enhancing provision, the University should ensure that they all identify clear action points and record progress with their implementation.

61 The Subject Network and Academic Partner SEDs form the basis for discussion at annual quality monitoring dialogues with the Quality Monitoring Group (QMG), which is chaired by the Vice Principal: Academic. QMG produces a report identifying the enhancement themes and key performance indicators (KPIs) for the next cycle. An overarching report of all the dialogues is produced by QMG for consideration by the Academic Partner quality committees and the UHI Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee (LTQC). The University considered that the nature of dialogue and the clear identification of enhancement priorities in the Subject Network dialogues completed in November 2011 represented a positive step change in the effectiveness of the process. Evidence from the current ELIR confirms that positive view.

62 The periodic subject review process has also been revised with a new methodology introduced in 2010-11, following completion of the first full cycle of reviews. This revision was intended to facilitate their operation as an enhancement-led process in line with the ELIR ethos. The unit of review comprises all the programmes within a Subject Network. The core documentation is the SED for the Subject Network, supported by programme documentation. The review panel includes two external members from other UK institutions and a student member. The review reports are considered by LTQC with summaries going to the Academic Council and the Board of Governors. The Subject Network Leader and the Dean are responsible for drafting a response to any action points for approval by LTQC within six months of the review. Within a year, the Subject Network Leader reports to LTQC regarding progress with implementing the action points. This report is discussed at a formal meeting between the Dean, Subject Network Leader, the chair of the review panel, and the Chair of LTQC. The report of the meeting is considered by LTQC with recommendations for approval by the Academic Council. Evidence from the current ELIR indicates that the reviews are evaluative and constructively critical, in line with the intentions set out in the University Regulations.

63 Since 2008, UHI has had an agreement in place with the University of Aberdeen for the award of research degrees. As part of these arrangements, research areas undergo a validation process based on assessment of their research and supervisory capacity. Statements of intent to apply for validation are considered by the UHI Research Degrees Sub-Committee (RDSC) and noted by the Research Committee. Following approval by these committees, a validation panel is established with the University of Aberdeen. The validation panel can approve the research area to supervise postgraduate research students for a period of up to five years, subject to meeting any conditions of the validation process. Progress in addressing any action points arising from the validation is monitored by the UHI Graduate School and signed off by the UHI Research Committee. If UHI wishes to provide research supervision in a subject area that has not

undergone the validation process, the supervisory team must include a member of staff from the University of Aberdeen. Evidence from the current ELIR indicates that the arrangements are rigorous and are diligently pursued by UHI.

64 Overall, the University has quality assurance processes in place which meet sector expectations and which are carried out in line with the UHI Regulations.

The extent to which the institution's monitoring and review arrangements include consideration of all students

65 The University stated that to support the preparation of the annual quality monitoring SEDs, staff have access to analyses of the student profile and achievement on the modules and programmes which can be interrogated in terms of study mode (full or part-time) and gender. Some module SEDs provided during the ELIR included global progression data, but others did not include specific consideration of different student groupings, for example by gender or by location of study. The programme level SEDs provided during the ELIR included data regarding progression by level but again did not consider performance of different student groups, for example across the different Academic Partners.

66 SEDs prepared by the Academic Partners included some overview data regarding mode of study and diversity in terms of student numbers, but at least one SED highlighted ongoing issues regarding the ability to identify the progression of different groups. As a consequence, the only progression data seen in some exemplars related to full-time students. The SEDs at Subject Network level provide programme and module progression data but do not always include consideration of different student groups.

67 As part of the subject review process the subject teams prepare a SED, and the University indicated that the subject review events focus more extensively on diversity and trend analysis of the changing student profile to ensure that the curriculum within the network is reviewed and updated in light of the changing student demographic or student needs. The SEDs provided for the ELIR included overviews of student enrolments by mode of study (for example, full or part-time) and some commentary on progression within individual programmes. The SEDs also reflected on learning support provision for the different student cohorts, including students following taught programmes and postgraduate research, but did not include significant consideration of statistics regarding progression by mode of study, Academic Partner or other demographic information. The panel for a recent subject review had recommended that the progression data should be recorded and managed in a more unified way.

68 Overall, although the University's monitoring and review arrangements are intended to include consideration of all students, the extent to which they can do so in practice is limited by the availability and use of data (see paragraphs 72 to 74).

The effectiveness of the institution's approach to self-evaluation including the use made of external reference points

69 The University has relatively recently engaged in significant scrutiny activities associated with its applications for taught degree awarding powers and university title (see paragraph 8). As part of these processes it considers it has been able to build progressively from the action plan it developed in response to the 2007 ELIR. Through these external engagements, UHI considers it has developed a more open and reflective approach.

70 Through its annual quality monitoring arrangements, the University encourages teaching and support staff to be reflective and to make data-informed decisions about enhancement. This is supported by the Quality Management Group (QMG) dialogues around the Academic Partner and Subject Network SEDs through which common themes are identified, with the LTQC taking an overview of matters raised. At the Academic Partner and Subject Network levels, therefore, it is evident that the University reflects on the outcomes of the quality assurance processes and uses

the evaluations to enhance the student learning experience. At the module level, however, action points are not consistently identified and this limits the effectiveness of those SEDs as tools for enhancement.

71 Through the Sponsorship Agreement, UHI has formal links with the universities of Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Strathclyde. UHI also has active relationships with other higher education institutions in Scotland and the rest of the UK. This includes having external members on its Quality Management Group. Further external referencing is available through accreditation by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) and the external verification of provision awarded by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). The University emphasised the positive impact of comparing its provision with available external reference points, and is encouraged to continue this practice.

The effectiveness of the institution's approach to the management of information to inform the operation and evaluation of its monitoring and review activity

72 Following completion of the Data Improvement Project (see paragraph 15), the University considers that its provision of student data has improved greatly, enabling the development of key performance indicators (KPIs) to underpin initiatives such as the Retention and Continuation Project. UHI has also introduced a system of weekly data verification procedures involving the Academic Partners. However, the University is also aware that work remains to be carried out.

73 The University stated that it is encouraging all staff to make more use of data in reviewing student management. The improvement in the quality and utility of available data was commented on positively by staff during the ELIR but there was also a recognition that there needs to be greater awareness among staff of the data that are available. In addition, a number of the SEDs and review reports provided during the ELIR highlighted ongoing issues of data integrity.

74 Overall, it is clear that the University has made significant improvements to its data management systems since the 2007 ELIR. The University has plans to continue improving the reliability and availability of data, which is positive. The University is encouraged to progress these plans and also to raise awareness among staff regarding the range of reports that are available through the UHI management information system.

The effectiveness of the institution's approach to setting and maintaining academic standards including the management of assessment

75 An increase in the number of shared modules and in networked academic delivery led the University to introduce a two-tier Exam Board system for all of its taught degree provision in 2010-11. The Tier 1 Exam Board is chaired by the appropriate Subject Network Leader and deals with module outcomes and discussion of programme delivery. The Tier 2 Exam Board is chaired by the appropriate dean and deals with programme outcomes in terms of awards and progression. An evaluation undertaken in February 2011, following the first round of Tier 1 Exam Boards, resulted in some adjustments being made. A further evaluation took place at the end of the first full cycle of activity. This concluded that implementation of the two-tier Exam Board system had been successful, with both staff and external examiners indicating that the conduct of the Exam Boards was effective, rigorous, fair, and brought greater consistency across UHI's academic provision. This view was confirmed by staff during the current ELIR.

76 The University indicated that external examiner reports are a key source of evidence in quality monitoring and review processes. The appropriate Subject Network Leader and dean are responsible for finalising the response to an external examiner report. A summary of matters emerging from external examiner reports is submitted to the Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee (LTQC) each year. The University indicated that, following publication of the UK

Quality Code for Higher Education, its regulations and procedures for external examining would be reviewed to ensure continuing alignment with QAA guidance.

77 The University's Learning, Teaching and Assessment strategy refers to the need to ensure a structured and uniform approach to assessment. The Academic Standards and Quality Regulations set out the policies and processes relating to assessment. Among other things, these include detailing the responsibilities of the Academic Partners for the conduct and review of assessment and moderation activity, the role of external examiners, and the arrangements for anonymous and second marking. The Academic Standards and Quality Regulations state that, at the beginning of each level of their programme, students should be provided with details of the requirements to progress or achieve an award. The extent and quality of information relating to assessment criteria contained in student handbooks varied considerably. Some handbooks contained quite basic information while others provided a comprehensive explanation of the criteria to be used in determining the mark/grade to be awarded. The University is asked to review the information provided to students on assessment criteria to ensure the existing examples of good practice are implemented across the institution. The University should also review the consistency with which feedback is provided to students on their assessed work (see paragraph 99).

78 The University stated that two recent initiatives contributed to effective setting and maintaining of academic standards in relation to assessment. First, two-tier Examination Boards provide an opportunity to evaluate the consistency of assessment across broader areas of the curriculum than had been the case previously. Second, the appointment of Module Leaders under the Curriculum for the 21st Century initiative gives the role of coordinating assessment at module level to a single member of academic staff. A review of the University's use of assessment methods is underway, following the development of the Blended Learning Standards document. In evaluating its current assessment methods, the University is making use of the NUS Feedback and Assessment Charter.

79 Overall, the University is setting and maintaining academic standards appropriately and managing assessment effectively.

The effectiveness of the institution's approach to managing public information about quality and academic standards, including the linkage with the institution's monitoring and review arrangements

80 Information about all programmes is published in the University prospectus in online and print versions. The Marketing and Communications team within the Executive Office is responsible for the production of all corporate communications and promotional materials. Through regular contact, including through meetings of the Marketing and Communications Practitioners' Group, it liaises with Academic Partners to ensure consistency of communications and coordination of promotional activities. At the same time, public information about programme content and structure is closely controlled by the faculties to ensure accuracy. The database used to provide the online and print versions of the prospectus with course information was revised in 2010 with a view to ensuring that clear and consistent information is delivered to all prospective students, and the University intimated that the database represented a significant improvement on its predecessor.

81 In addition to the UHI website, each Academic Partner operates its own website. At the time of the current ELIR, new websites were under development for the majority of the Academic Partners. It was intended that these would have a commonality of design, presentation and navigation and, where appropriate, would share content, for example in respect of course information.

82 In a complex environment, the University is taking steps to ensure the clarity and accuracy of the information it publishes. At the time of the current ELIR, discussions were ongoing within UHI regarding how it would manage the adoption of the Key Information Set.

The effectiveness of the institution's approach to linking its monitoring and review processes to its enhancement arrangements

83 Both the Strategic Plan 2008-11 and the Learning, Teaching and Assessment strategy emphasise the promotion of enhancement. Moreover, the University indicated that its monitoring and review processes are designed with the intention of encouraging teaching teams to think in terms of quality enhancement. Hence, for example, annual programme and Subject Network self-evaluation documents (SEDs) identify good practice (see paragraph 60).

84 The University regards its subject review process as integral to linking quality assurance and quality enhancement. One aim of the revised subject review method (see paragraph 62) was to ensure it would operate, and be perceived to operate, as an enhancement-led process. A report summarising the outcomes from subject review identifies areas for commendation and recommendations, which may be highlighted for consideration and action by the Subject Network or by the University. Specific quality enhancement activities are intended to be included in Subject Network action plans, although the extent to which this happens in practice varies (see paragraph 94). The Subject Network plans are monitored at faculty and institutional level.

85 Overall, the University has a range of mechanisms in place that are aimed at linking quality assurance and enhancement.

The effectiveness of the institution's approach to monitoring and reviewing its collaborative activity

86 To date, the University has engaged in collaborative activity to a very limited extent. In anticipation of possible future activity, the University has prepared a suite of policies and procedures which it has set out in a Collaborations Handbook. At the time of the current ELIR, the Handbook was still in draft form but it was evident that the University was seeking to align its policies and anticipated practice with the precepts set out in the Code of practice.

87 A collaborative arrangement, which commenced in late 2007, encountered serious difficulties which first came to light in late November 2011. Following an internal review, the University decided that the collaboration should be discontinued at the end of the academic year 2011-12. The University acknowledged that the review had identified shortcomings, which it is confident have since been rectified. In particular, its policies and procedures for collaborative provision, including due diligence and approval procedures, have been revised and UHI considers these to be significantly more regulatory in nature. Moreover, the University considers that its current faculty and subject network structure would provide better scope to regulate and monitor any future collaborative activity that may be approved.

88 The University should ensure that it implements the full suite of arrangements it has identified for securing and monitoring such activity, particularly in any new collaborative partnerships it may seek to establish.

Strategic approach to quality enhancement

Key features of the institution's strategic approach to quality enhancement

89 The University's Strategic Plan 2008-11 includes the aim to create excellence in learning and teaching, and in research. Within this aim, there are four strategic objectives: to enhance the student learning experience, including the social dimension of learning; to optimise the links between research and teaching; to increase staff capacity to deliver degree and post-degree qualifications; and to achieve optimal outcomes in all areas of external quality assurance. The University indicated that these objectives are to be achieved through the development of student and staff attributes and expertise, and quality assurance processes that will foster an enhanced student learning experience. The draft Strategic Plan 2012-17 has similar objectives, although none of the higher level strategic aims explicitly refers to enhancing the learning experience.

90 The University's integrated Learning, Teaching and Assessment (LTA) strategy 2010-11 focuses on the further development of 10 essential core areas of activity, including several intended explicitly to promote enhancement. In particular, the University regards the networking and sharing of good practice facilitated by the Subject Networks as key to enhancing student learning. The LTA strategy also indicates that the Subject Networks will be supported in a developing enhancement cycle of 'reflection, review, plan and do' through improved linkage of quality assurance and quality enhancement. In this context, the LTA strategy recognises that assessment policy and practice are key to students' learning and therefore seeks to support their further development. The importance of networking, both at programme/Subject Network and University/Academic Partner levels, is further emphasised in the LTA strategy's focus on cooperative working in the planning and development of HNC and HND curricula and on HN/degree articulation. The LTA strategy seeks to support the library service in its aim of being fully integrated across the partnership, and highlights the importance of staff development in blended learning, video-conferencing and the use of tools and technologies to complement the virtual learning environment (VLE).

91 Building on the stated core areas of activity, the LTA strategy identifies institutional priorities for a five-year (2007-12) planning period, together with the current targets (for 2010-12) relating to these goals. Overall responsibility for quality enhancement is delegated to the Quality Enhancement Steering Group (QESG) by the Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee. In particular, the QESG is responsible for monitoring and reviewing progress towards the goals of the LTA strategy and, in addition, identifies specific quality enhancement strategic priorities for which individual members of QESG have more direct responsibility. QESG members sit on all the relevant University committees, including the Quality Monitoring Group, and a wide range of networked practitioner groups, in order to align QESG's activities with institutional strategy. In addition, QESG members represent the University on external bodies dealing with quality enhancement and staff development.

92 The University relies on the Academic Partners to provide an appropriate learning environment, an aspect that is evaluated during programme approval and re-approval. Although this has proved to be adequate, the University recognises that enhancement of the learning environment requires a more proactive approach. It has therefore developed an estates strategy, Estates for the 21st Century (E21C), in which the development of the estate and of learning technologies is explicitly driven by the requirements of the curriculum, as demonstrated by the design of the recently built education facilities at the Scottish Association for Marine Science. In a similar vein, the University is seeking to ensure that staff continuing professional development priorities are geared to the curriculum, and this is the subject of one of the projects planned for the current national Enhancement Theme, Developing and Supporting the Curriculum. This focus on the needs of the curriculum driving strategic planning is a positive feature, demonstrating the University's willingness to seek integrated approaches to enhancement opportunities.

93 The LTA strategy relates to the taught student experience. There is no equivalent documented strategy for enhancing the quality of the postgraduate research student experience. The University is therefore asked to develop an explicit strategic approach for its growing number of research students.

The effectiveness of the institution's implementation of its strategies and policies for promoting quality enhancement across the institution

94 Both faculties have their own strategic plans containing objectives that are aligned with the aims and objectives in the University's Strategic Plan. The faculty objectives are further elaborated into areas for development that include enhancing the learning opportunities from blended learning and from the development of a culture of scholarship and research. Faculty strategic plans make no explicit reference to the other quality enhancement priorities in the LTA strategy, but individual members of QESG are responsible for these and report back to QESG on

their progress in acting on these priorities, as well as on the broader goals of the LTA strategy. Subject Network Leaders translate the faculty strategies into annual operational plans for each Network. The sample of Subject Network plans provided for the current ELIR did reflect the faculty strategies but, in some cases, the quality enhancement objectives were not clearly defined. The University is, therefore, asked to include identifiable and measurable objectives within its Subject Network plans in order to facilitate the implementation of the related faculty strategies.

95 The University's quality enhancement activities are intended to promote, and embed, a broad-based shift from a quality assurance to a quality enhancement mindset in staff at all levels. Senior staff indicated that this had previously been somewhat constrained by the nature of the developing institution (the partnership, dependence on validation through third parties and the focus on gaining taught degree awarding powers and university title), which had resulted in a rather conservative attitude that did not readily identify problems or the need for change. The development of a quality enhancement approach has required the partnership to become much more open, transparent and trusting. The University considers that this has been fostered through institutional strategies and policies that have required the sharing of data and the acknowledgement of challenges as well as strengths across the whole partnership. These strategies and policies include the Data Improvement Project, the transition to centralised two-tier Examination Boards, the openness of dialogue in annual quality monitoring and in curriculum planning, and the widespread use of communities of practice in the form of practitioner and consultative groups.

96 The University emphasised the importance of strong and effective communities of practice in managing and enhancing the student experience in a distributed organisation. These groupings give a formal structure to networks of staff with similar responsibilities and interests across the partnership, although the status of the groups varies considerably. Some groups have responsibilities that are delegated from University committees, while other communities of practice operate as informal discussion groups. Following the lead of the Staff Development Practitioners' Group, QESG has recently approved a pilot scheme that will require each group to produce an annual self-evaluation and associated enhancement plan for submission to the Quality Monitoring Group as a means of monitoring and enhancing quality across the partnership. During the current ELIR, staff were supportive of this development as part of the natural evolution of the groups.

97 The University's quality monitoring processes are designed to identify examples of improvements in the learning experience and to make evidence-based evaluations of opportunities for further enhancement. The University intends the involvement of individuals in self-evaluation, as part of quality monitoring from module to Subject Network level, to foster a culture of quality enhancement across the partnership. The Subject Network Leader/Academic Partner Quality Manager Forum, which had met twice at the time of the current ELIR, has the potential to play an important role in the development of the enhancement culture. However, the Forum has so far concentrated on improvements in quality assurance and programme management procedures, and the University is encouraged to develop more overtly the quality enhancement dimension. The University highlighted that the clear identification of enhancement priorities in the most recent Subject Network dialogues was an indicator of the shift in culture from assurance to enhancement. In addition, programme and Subject Network self-evaluation documents (see paragraph 60) provide examples of how the learning experience has been enhanced and show how activities during the year could be expected to promote students' development of the agreed Graduate Attributes.

98 The University recognises that the learning experience is enriched by links being made between research, scholarship and teaching. Academic staff, therefore, need sufficient time for the reflection and scholarly activities that would allow this aspect of the quality enhancement culture to thrive. It is difficult for UHI to establish a common strategy for workloads across the

partnership (see paragraph 53) and the University is actively considering ways of resolving this, building on a recently agreed mission statement in relation to staff scholarship, research and professional development. As it seeks to embed the enhancement culture, the University is encouraged to continue providing opportunities for staff across the partnership to develop their scholarly activities.

99 The Curriculum for the 21st Century initiative (C21C) aims to enhance both the learning experience and the efficiency of delivery through curriculum rationalisation and greater use of networked delivery and blended learning. An enhanced learning experience is expected to result not only from the improved delivery and a more sustainable curriculum (in terms of the availability of elective modules), but also from the release of staff time to allow reflection, scholarship and in some cases research. The University indicated that greater consistency has also resulted from the introduction of the two-tier examination boards and central Examination Centre (see paragraph 75), giving confidence in the integrity of the examination process, a view echoed by teaching staff. Standards for assessment and feedback are stipulated in the Blended Learning Standards Document, and current practice is being reviewed by the Head of Academic Development. There appears to be scope for enhancing the learning experience through improvements in assessment feedback. The annual institution-level student survey identified delays in the return of assessment feedback, and variability in the speed and usefulness of assessment feedback was confirmed by students during the current ELIR.

100 During the current ELIR, staff confirmed that they felt ownership of quality enhancement activity at the University and recognised the shift in culture. Overall, it is evident that the University has a range of strategic initiatives in place which are, collectively, supporting the development of a quality enhancement culture for staff and students.

The effectiveness of the institution's use of external reference points in its approach to quality enhancement, including the extent to which the institution's approach is informed by national and international practice

101 The University has aligned its quality assurance processes and the development of the curriculum with the Academic Infrastructure, including subject benchmark statements, the *Code of practice* and the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF). The external examiner system is a beneficial mechanism for further benchmarking and exchange of practice. The membership of four University committees includes representatives of the sponsor universities and the Quality Monitoring Group includes members from other higher education institutions, which helps to give a broader perspective to discussions. Individuals from across the partnership are involved in a wide range of higher and further education forums and practitioner groups, and act as external examiners, reviewers and equivalent roles. The University has formal and informal relationships with a range of other higher education institutions, and hosts visits by institutions from Europe and beyond who are engaged in developing distributed, tertiary, rural or collegiate models of delivery in their own countries. All of these contacts provide opportunities for reflection on approaches to quality enhancement elsewhere and to consider their use within UHI on an individual or institutional basis. The University's review of assessment and feedback (see paragraphs 78 and 99) exemplifies the use of external reference points in that it is using the NUS Charter on Feedback and Assessment as a framework.

102 The nature of the University's mission and goals has meant that most of the national Enhancement Themes have been closely aligned with work already being done within UHI, particularly those Themes dealing with the first-year experience, assessment, flexible curriculum, and defining graduate attributes. The University intends that outcomes from the Graduates for the 21st Century (G21C) Theme will increasingly be used as benchmarks within development, support and review activities, and will have very close links with the University's curriculum and estates strategies. The University has submitted three case studies for the current Enhancement Theme, Developing and Supporting the Curriculum. It is evident that the University has used the opportunities provided by the Themes to advance its own strategic enhancement priorities.

103 The University has developed a productive relationship with the Higher Education Academy (HEA) through both individual Fellowships and Subject Centre connections. It established lead contacts with nine HEA Subject Centres and is working towards a Subject Network approach to dissemination and promotion of HEA resources, events and activities. The University participated in a Change Academy in 2009-10 to consider Inclusive Learning and Teaching across all UHI programmes and Academic Partners. The University's Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching in Higher Education is accredited by HEA, and linked to the UK Professional Standards Framework which emphasises quality enhancement and scholarly inquiry.

The effectiveness of the institution's approach to identifying, disseminating and implementing good practice in the context of its strategic approach to enhancement

104 The University is a complex organisation, with particular challenges in promoting quality enhancement across 13 Academic Partners. On the other hand, it is possible for the institution to benefit from that very complexity in being able to draw on a variety of approaches and expertise. Understandably, the University emphasises the importance of various forms of networking for the identification and sharing of good practice. Practitioner groups operate across Academic Partners to share good practice, facilitating both the delivery of training and briefing about operational changes, and acting as networks of 'critical friends' (see paragraph 56).

105 The Staff Development Practitioners' Group is particularly important, with its role of developing the sharing, networking and promotion of staff development activities (see paragraphs 51, 55 and 56). One aspect of this is its work, through the direction of QESG, to link continuing professional development activities and resources more closely at both Academic Partner and institution level, and to help highlight key faculty CPD priorities. The Group also organises lunchtime good practice video conferences to highlight and help disseminate good practice from around the Partnership, promoting awareness and discussion of topical issues in higher education. These events appear to be a good example of both bottom-up and top-down initiatives, with topics being suggested by individuals, by the Group itself and by the Quality Enhancement Steering Group (QESG). They may also be catalysts for further activities, such as the initiation of specific CPD events or the formation of new special interest groups, such as those relating to the use of new learning technologies and assessment.

106 Networking is also a consequence of staff being organised into faculties and Subject Networks, resulting in the development of links between academic teams at different locations, either informally or through internal conferences, as well as through annual and periodic quality management. The University has run a number of residential conferences as quality enhancement or faculty development events, involving UHI and external speakers. The aim is to share and disseminate good practice, promote strategic approaches to enhancement, and to facilitate networking, particularly through strengthening the communities of practice.

107 The University highlighted the benefits of faculty conferences. The Faculty of Arts, Humanities & Business has hosted the LEARNfest and SCHOLARfest events which showcased good practice in the relationship between research and scholarly activity and learning and teaching. Conferences run by both faculties have provided opportunities for discussing the Curriculum for the 21st Century (C21C) project. One tangible outcome of LEARNfest was the publication of four journal articles, illustrating the dissemination of good practice and expertise, as well as a commitment to developing a culture of scholarship and quality enhancement.

108 The Educational Development Unit (EDU), comprising pedagogical, technical and subject specialists, works directly with academic staff to develop materials and skills, particularly for distance learning. In doing so, they act as internal consultants, sourcing, creating or adapting materials to the specifications of the Academic Partner staff. They are, therefore, well placed to identify good practice and innovation across the University and to evaluate, refine and disseminate this practice more widely. At the time of the current ELIR only a limited number of

modules had been supported in this way (see paragraph 40). The University indicated that this enabling role of EDU will be particularly important during the implementation of the C21C framework in helping to realise the enhancement benefits of the project. The EDU will work with the faculties and the Staff Development Practitioners Group (SDPG) to help academic staff across the University to implement the necessary policies, processes and practices, and will provide the associated staff development and technical support.

109 The student-led teaching awards, promoted by the National Union of Students and the Higher Education Academy, have been a valuable means of identifying good practice. Analysis of the students' comments in the nominations has resulted in a list of the characteristics that students value in a lecturer, information that has been fed back to staff through staff conference workshops. Nominees have participated in staff development workshops at UHI conferences and seminars and at local Academic Partner staff development days. The awards were identified by staff and students as having been successful in highlighting the importance of effective learning and teaching, identifying a range of good practice, creating considerable goodwill and empowering students.

110 The University has a range of systematic mechanisms and activities in place that are aimed at identifying and disseminating good practice. There is an appetite among the Subject Network staff for more such arrangements. Overall, it is clear that UHI has created an environment which is highly conducive to the adoption of good practice across the University.

The effectiveness of the institution's approach to enhancing collaborative provision

111 The University has very little collaborative provision involving external partners (see paragraph 86).

Conclusion

Effectiveness of the institution's management of the student learning experience

112 The University is meeting its mission to provide opportunities and support for students, which they might not otherwise have had, to pursue their studies within the Highlands and Islands. This includes access to a range of academic levels from undergraduate through to postgraduate research. Within the context of a challenging student population in terms of retention and progression, the University has developed a strategic, systematic and thoughtful approach to improving student retention.

113 There have been a significant number of positive developments in the University's arrangements for student representation since the 2007 ELIR. The University is encouraged to continue developing these arrangements to ensure that they are effective and appropriate for the nature of the student population. In particular, the University is encouraged to continue the process of establishing a strategic partnership with its student body as a whole and with the UHI Students' Association (UHISA) in particular.

114 The University has introduced the 'Red Button' device, which has been effective in generating quick responses to students on matters of concern. There would be benefit in the University analysing the root causes of the issues raised through the Red Button to ensure the sustainability of the device for matters of particular concern. This would enable the University to adopt a more proactive approach to anticipating systemic challenges. It should also provide an opportunity to ensure that the Red Button is not inadvertently circumventing the more regular mechanisms for student representation and feedback.

115 Staff clearly recognise that feedback from students can provide an opportunity to enhance the learning experience and contribute to curricular development. The University is aware that there is currently significant variability in the way in which feedback is gathered and acted upon

across the institution. The University is, therefore, asked to develop a more consistent approach to the design of student survey questionnaires and to improve the ways in which the outcomes of these surveys are reported back to students. In addition, the University is asked to review the way in which it communicates with its students to ensure there is a clearer focus on key programme information, especially in email communication.

116 The University is engaged in strategic efforts to enhance the quality and consistency of student support through a range of developments, such as the Curriculum for the 21st Century project. Overall, it is evident that students feel well supported. In particular the University has a proactive approach to identifying and providing support for students with additional needs.

117 There is a strategic and a practice-based approach to managing staff development. The collaborative 'community of practice' approach has had significant success in helping to promote an academic community that is suited to the structure and operation of the University. The University is encouraged to continue finding ways to provide staff with opportunities to develop their scholarly activities.

118 The University has invested significantly in video-conferencing infrastructure and in its virtual learning environment (VLE). Given that the effective use of technology is pivotal to the success of UHI's blended learning approach, there would be considerable benefit in the University developing additional ways of assuring the quality and consistency of its use. This should include the provision of staff development to promote the effective use of technology by all staff.

119 It is evident that the University has put in place a range of measures aimed at promoting a sense of community among its growing research student body. The annual research conference has fulfilled an effective role in this regard, and the Third Party Monitor system is also a positive means of providing additional support for students. Nonetheless, challenges remain, most notably relating to the geographical spread of the students, and the University is encouraged to continue with its efforts to develop a research community. The research students currently rely heavily on the library resource of the University of Aberdeen and UHI is asked to consider how the necessary resource would be provided if the current sponsorship agreement were brought to an end. In common with practice elsewhere, UHI research students are provided with opportunities to fulfil a teaching role. As a matter of priority, the University should ensure that all students receive training in advance of undertaking that role.

120 The University's approach to enhancing the taught student learning experience is set out in its Learning, Teaching and Assessment strategy. The University should develop an explicit strategic approach for enhancing the research student experience.

Effectiveness of the institution's arrangements for institution-led monitoring and review of quality, and academic standards of awards

121 Overall, the University has systematic processes in place to secure academic standards and assure the quality of the student learning experience. The University's arrangements for the review of programmes have been revised recently to facilitate their operation as enhancement-led processes in line with the ELIR ethos. The periodic subject reviews are evaluative and constructively critical, with action points being identified and formally signed off within specified timescales. The Annual Quality Monitoring procedures operate well at subject network level. Their operation at module and programme level would be enhanced by the University ensuring that all reports identify clear action points and record progress with their implementation.

122 The University is asked to continue progressing its planned improvements to data management. In particular, the self-evaluation documents produced for Annual Quality Monitoring would be improved by the University making systematic use of the facilities within its management information system to enable the evaluation of different student cohorts at each of module, programme and Academic Partner levels.

123 The University should review the information provided to students on assessment criteria to ensure that the existing examples of good practice are implemented across the institution. The University should also review the consistency with which feedback is provided to students on their assessed work.

124 In relation to collaborative provision, the University should ensure that it implements the full suite of arrangements it has identified for securing and monitoring such activity, particularly in any new collaborative partnerships it may seek to establish.

Effectiveness of the institution's implementation of its strategic approach to quality enhancement

125 The University has put in place a range of strategies and policies across the academic partnership that has helped to develop a culture of quality enhancement. Specific quality enhancement priorities, for which the Quality Enhancement Steering Group has overall responsibility, are included in the Learning, Teaching and Assessment strategy. Faculty strategic plans draw on the University Strategic Plan, with responsibility for implementing the plans being devolved to the subject networks. In order to facilitate this implementation, the University is asked to ensure that the resultant subject network operational plans include identifiable and measurable objectives. There is currently no documented strategy for enhancing the quality of the postgraduate research student experience and the University is therefore asked to develop an explicit strategic approach.

126 In its strategic planning, the University has taken an integrated approach to quality enhancement, as demonstrated for example by the Curriculum for the 21st Century project. The curriculum is also a key driver in other plans, such as the estates strategy and the setting of continuing professional development priorities, and this focus on the curriculum is a positive feature. The University makes effective use of a wide range of external reference points in its approach to quality enhancement, including positive engagement with the national Enhancement Themes. There is a variety of mechanisms by which good practice across the partnership is identified and disseminated; this is facilitated by networking at various levels, including Academic Partner, faculty and subject network, and through active communities of practice. The University is encouraged to continue to provide opportunities for staff to develop their scholarly activities as it seeks to further embed the quality enhancement culture.

Overarching confidence judgement

127 The findings of the ELIR indicate that there can be **confidence** in the University's current and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards and the quality of the student learning experience it offers.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

QAA Scotland
183 St Vincent Street
Glasgow
G2 5QD

Tel 0141 572 3420
Fax 0141 572 3421
www.qaa.ac.uk

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