



QAA Scotland

**Annual Report for academic year
2011-12**

Foreword - Jenny Rees, Chair



At the end of my second year on the QAA Board and as Chair of the QAA Scotland Committee, I can reflect in more depth on the work that QAA Scotland does to support quality in Scotland's higher education within a UK framework.

The annual report describes the work of QAA in Scotland. It reports on Enhancement-led Institutional Reviews held during the year - one of the key elements of the Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework and one that remains at the heart of the revised framework developed and agreed during the year. Enhancement also continues to be at the heart of the Scottish approach, with the Enhancement Themes being a key means by which institutions gain the benefits of collaboration within the context of their own strategic priorities.

I am grateful for the work of the QAA Scotland Director, Bill Harvey, and his team, who are embracing the opportunities provided by internal restructuring to build the connections between enhancement and assurance in order to further develop Scotland's distinctive approach to quality in higher education. I would also like to thank all members of the QAA Scotland Committee for their active participation in the committee's work, with each bringing a valuable perspective from varying backgrounds in the professions, regulatory bodies, business and health as well as school, further and higher education. I would particularly like to thank Pdraig Walsh, Chief Executive of Quality and Qualifications Ireland who stands down from the Committee shortly and who has given generously of his time and expertise to give an international dimension to our deliberations.

Dr Jenny Rees
Chair of the QAA Scotland Committee

Introduction - Bill Harvey, Director



It is now three years since I took up the post of Director of QAA Scotland. I continue to be very impressed with the professionalism and commitment of my colleagues in Glasgow and in Gloucester, and I particularly want to thank the team in Glasgow for their unfailing support, as well as for the very valuable work that they do, not only on behalf of QAA but for the Scottish HE sector and its students. I would also like to thank Jenny Rees, the Chair of the QAA Scotland Committee, for the excellent service she has provided to the Committee, to QAA Scotland, and to the QAA Board throughout her period of service.

This has been a year of significant change for us, both internally and externally. Internally, we have completed a major reorganisation of our organisational structure within QAA Scotland, and I am confident that our new structure will have a very positive impact on our effectiveness. Internal reorganisation is rarely as interesting to an external audience as it is to those directly involved, but I would like to acknowledge the cooperation and patience of my colleagues as we worked through an extensive period of consultation, discussion and also some upheaval as we implemented our new arrangements. Externally, we have completed a major review of the Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework, and we are now well placed to deliver a wide range of review and enhancement services to the Scottish HE sector over the next cycle. We have also continued to build stronger and more effective links with the work of our colleagues in the rest of the UK.

I hope you find it interesting to learn more about our activities during 2011-12, and I look forward to leading QAA Scotland in our future work.

Dr Bill Harvey
Director, QAA Scotland

About QAA

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) was created in 1997. It operates throughout the UK from offices in Gloucester and Glasgow. QAA is an independent body funded by subscriptions from higher education institutions and through contracts with the higher education funding bodies.

The primary responsibility for academic standards and quality in UK higher education rests with individual institutions, each of which is independent and self-governing. QAA checks how well they meet their responsibilities, through periodic audits and reviews, and publishes reports which include judgements about the effectiveness of institutional quality systems. Our reports also identify good practice and make recommendations for improvement. We provide development and enhancement services to help institutions to ensure that students have high quality learning experiences.

QAA in Scotland

QAA Scotland has devolved responsibilities for the work of QAA in Scotland and its operation is overseen by the QAA Scotland Committee, which is a subcommittee of the QAA Board. Much of our work relates to the distinctive Scottish approach to quality, which has been developed over the past decade under the aegis of the Universities Quality Working Group. This is a partnership body involving the HE sector, the Scottish Funding Council, QAA Scotland, the Scottish student body and the Higher Education Academy (HEA). The Scottish approach, known as the Quality Enhancement Framework, is based on the principle that quality activities in a mature, effective HE system should not focus solely or primarily on threshold issues of quality assurance, but should focus on the sector's aspirations for ongoing enhancement of the quality of provision. The framework identifies some key roles for QAA Scotland.

- Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) - based on a four-year cycle of reviews, managed by QAA Scotland, which reports on the effectiveness of institutions' management of academic standards, and the assurance and enhancement of the student learning experience.
- National Enhancement Themes - a programme of activities, managed by QAA Scotland, which operates across all Scottish HE institutions, focusing on issues and topics of common interest to the sector.
- Institution-led quality reviews at the level of disciplines and service areas - QAA Scotland engages with each institution on an annual basis to reflect on the outcomes of these reviews, and compiles an annual report to the Scottish Funding Council summarising these activities for the whole Scottish HE sector.
- Student engagement in quality systems - as described in more detail below, QAA Scotland plays an active role in supporting student engagement, including through the use of student members in all ELIR review teams, and through student membership of our committees and working groups.
- Public information about quality - particularly through publication of the outcomes of ELIR reviews.

Our partners

QAA Scotland aims to work in partnership with all institutions and agencies operating in the Scottish HE sector, including:

- the student body in Scotland, particularly through the use of student reviewers as full members of each ELIR review team; through our role in supporting the work of sparqs (a development agency for student representatives); and through regular liaison with NUS Scotland
- the HE sector, including our support for the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC), which oversees the operation of the national Enhancement Themes, and regular liaison with the sector through annual meetings with each institution, as well as participation in wider sector groups such as Universities Scotland's Learning & Teaching Committee and Teaching Quality Forum
- the Scottish Funding Council, including our role in advising the Council's Quality, Equalities and General Purposes Committee and our preparation of an annual overview report of quality issues in the sector
- the Higher Education Academy in Scotland, through regular liaison at officer level, HEA support for Enhancement Themes, and joint activities in areas such as employability
- the broader education sector in Scotland, through our work with the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) Partnership; collaboration with educational bodies in the health and social care sectors; emerging linkage between the current Enhancement Theme (on Developing and Supporting the Curriculum) and the Curriculum for Excellence; and regular liaison with colleagues in Education Scotland (formerly Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education) to share views on areas of common interest and potential collaboration
- the Scottish Government, through our work with the Scottish Bologna stakeholders group, our regular liaison with senior staff in the Scottish Government's Higher Education Division, and providing expert advice to Scottish Ministers on relevant matters including the award of university title and degree awarding powers.

Our role in the Scottish higher education sector

QAA Scotland plays a key role in Scottish higher education, both as an independent guardian of quality and standards and as a catalyst for change and development within the sector. We safeguard the interests of students, taxpayers and other external stakeholders, and we support the work of our partners within the sector through our emphasis on peer review, quality enhancement, and the central role of the student learning experience.

QAA Scotland provides vehicles and platforms to support the dissemination and exchange of good practice, through mechanisms including institutional reviews and national enhancement activities.

We are committed to building and maintaining strong and effective relationships with our partners in the sector, with student representative bodies, and with other agencies. We are confident that the Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework continues to represent world-leading practice, and we will continue to seek ways to make the framework even more effective and fruitful.

Our work in 2011-12

Quality and standards

Five Enhancement-led Institutional Reviews took place during 2011-12 at: the University of Edinburgh, the University of Stirling, the University of Abertay Dundee, the University of the Highlands and Islands, and the Robert Gordon University. In each case, QAA expressed confidence in the systems which these institutions have put in place to assure academic standards and enhance the quality of the student experience. The review reports also identify areas of positive practice and areas for development. Both full and summary versions of these reports are available for download from QAA's website.

Annual discussions were held at all 18 higher education institutions. These annual discussion meetings form a key part of the ELIR method, providing an opportunity for QAA Scotland officers to discuss progress being made by institutions in addressing ELIR outcomes, as well as key outcomes arising from institution-led quality reviews at the subject level.

As part of the ELIR process, follow-up reports are produced by each institution one year after completion of the review. The year-on reports for reviews conducted during the academic year 2010-11 relate to Heriot-Watt University, Glasgow Caledonian University, the University of the West of Scotland, the University of St Andrews and Edinburgh Napier University. Three of these reports were published in the autumn of 2012 and the remaining two will be published by spring 2013.

As part of the review of the Quality Enhancement Framework, it has been agreed that from 2013 QAA will provide the Scottish Funding Council with an annual report on each institution. This report will draw on evidence from the most recent institutional review, updated by our ongoing programme of annual discussion meetings.

The Quality Enhancement Framework review also resulted in revisions to the methodology of Enhancement-led Institutional Review. A handbook for this revised method (ELIR 3) has been published on the QAA Scotland website, and training materials have been prepared. The first of the new reviews will take place early in 2013. The revised methodology will deliver a range of improvements in the operation of reviews and in the format and content of published reports.

Enhancement Themes

The current national Enhancement Theme, Developing and Supporting the Curriculum (DSC), had a successful first year with considerable work being carried out by the institutions, as well as commissioned activities and outcomes at sector and discipline levels. DSC is committed to making the learner journey more effective for students and more efficient for staff and the public purse, with a strong focus on quality. It aligns closely with the Scottish Government's post-16 agenda.

The Theme has identified 3 strands of activity:

- Curriculum for Excellence and its impact on higher education
- The flexible curriculum
- Staff: enhancing teaching.

Each of these areas is being taken forward by commissioned consultants and the entire programme is overseen by the overall Theme steering committee, chaired by Professor Philip Winn.

Our overall strategy for enhancement continues to be monitored and supported by the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC), chaired by Professor Andrea Nolan. SHEEC has published its strategy and vision for 2012-16.¹ This identifies an ambitious forward programme of work addressing a range of areas: leadership and influence, growing the sector's evidence base, internationalisation, quality cultures, and evaluation.

The annual Enhancement Themes conference was held in March 2012, attracting over 300 delegates from across the Scottish sector and also from the rest of the UK and from other countries. As in previous years, there was a large number of workshops and presentations, including presentations from senior academic leaders from the UK and overseas. Delegates' evaluation of the conference was very positive.

A particular priority for SHEEC in the current year is the organisation of a major International Enhancement Theme Conference, to be held in June 2013, to celebrate 10 years of the Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework.

We have given a high priority in the past year to communications and engagement for all aspects of our enhancement activities. This included the ongoing development of our Enhancement Themes website, www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk, which was re-launched with increased interactivity, including a searchable database that enables users to search all of the Themes outcomes to date. The Enhancement Themes newsletter continues to be issued regularly and now has a distribution of around 2,000. We continue to receive positive feedback about the value of the newsletter. To further develop this aspect of our work, we have appointed a Stakeholder Engagement Coordinator to enhance our capacity for communicating and engaging with our key partners and stakeholders, including Scottish universities, student organisations, national agencies and the Scottish Government.

The National Symposium series continued with sessions in October 2011 focusing on 'Graduates for the 21st Century', and in June 2012 with a session on 'Curriculum for Excellence' speakers. The symposium series supports the sector's reflection on key areas identified in the national Enhancement Themes. Contributors (who include employers and thought leaders from the UK and overseas) provide a range of perspectives on the nature and purposes of higher education and what this means for the students, graduates, staff and curricula. Outcomes of all Themes events are available to view on the Enhancement Themes website.

Learning from International Practice

QAA manages a programme of work which seeks to identify interesting and relevant practice in other countries that may have a bearing on the needs of the sector and students in Scotland. In the past year, we completed a workstream on the research degree student experience; the final report is available on the Themes website. A new project, investigating the taught postgraduate student experience, was launched in January 2012 and will continue until July 2013.

¹ QAA Scotland: *Strategic Directions, 2012-16* can be found on the QAA website: www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/QAA-Scotland-strategic-directions.aspx.

More generally, in all aspects of our work, we encourage the Scottish HE sector to actively engage with practitioners in other countries and to learn from international practice. Our strong commitment to an international approach is demonstrated through our use of international reviewers in every institutional review; through our systematic engagement with good practice in other countries as part of our enhancement approach; and through our professional links with quality agencies and review processes in many other countries. Over the past year, colleagues from the sector, and QAA Scotland officers, were invited to participate in a range of activities - such as conferences, institutional discussions and research projects - demonstrating the work of the Themes in locations including Sweden and Oman.

Flexible delivery

QAA Scotland continues to support the development of flexible delivery in the Scottish HE sector through support for projects, networks and workshops on areas such as work-based learning, practice-based learning and recognition of prior learning (RPL). This work has resulted in several commissioned reports which have been published by QAA Scotland.

Organisational change within QAA Scotland

As part of a wider programme of organisational review within QAA, the QAA Scotland office underwent a review of its structures during 2011 and this led to the introduction of a new organisational structure, with effect from February 2012. The work of the office is now organised around three functional teams, led by the Head of Enhancement (Claire Carney), the Head of Reviews (Ailsa Crum) and the Administration Manager (June Barrie). These colleagues, together with the Director of QAA Scotland, form the Management Team for QAA Scotland. We also filled the vacant post of Stakeholder Engagement Coordinator within our new structure, with the arrival of Linzi Crawford who joined our team in October 2012.

Strategic Directions

In July 2012 we published *QAA Scotland: Strategic Directions 2012-16*. This document provides an overview of QAA Scotland's vision and strategic priorities for the next four years. Complementing QAA's *Strategy 2011-14*, this document sets out our strategic objectives within the specific policy context of Scotland. It is available on our website at: www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/QAA-Scotland-strategic-directions.aspx.

Key trends and issues

QAA provides an annual briefing to the Scottish Funding Council in which we seek to identify key trends and issues in the sector. This year's briefing document will be published in due course on the Funding Council's website. In summary, drawing on all our engagements with the sector over the past year, we identified the following issues as major features of the Scottish HE context:

- the Scottish HE sector continues to have effective arrangements for securing academic standards and enhancing the student learning experience
- institutions continue to confirm the value of QAA's review processes in supporting institutional evaluation and reflection

- there is strong and widespread engagement across the sector with issues around graduate attributes and employability
- there is increasing interest in and engagement with the new school framework of Curriculum for Excellence, and the work of the Enhancement Themes has been widely recognised as supporting that process of engagement
- there is a continuing trend towards increased student engagement in learning and teaching, including a major role for students in the management and enhancement of their learning experience
- institutional engagement with the national Enhancement Themes continues to be active and effective, and there is evidence of growing engagement via discipline-level activities
- there is widespread interest in internationalisation across the Scottish HE sector, including not only international recruitment and partnerships but also an interest in learning from international practice
- there is clear evidence of increasing alignment between institutional quality enhancement strategies and the developmental opportunities provided by the national enhancement activities.

The policy environment

There continues to be significant divergence of government policy for higher education in the different countries of the United Kingdom. QAA is committed to developing and delivering services which meet the needs of each part of the UK (for example, through different approaches to institutional review) while maintaining and supporting common features and elements of the HE system, such as the Quality Code and a consistent approach to academic standards. We are confident that QAA can continue to address both the UK-wide and the country-specific aspects of quality assurance and enhancement in the foreseeable future, and that the role of the QAA Scotland Committee, as a committee of the QAA Board with devolved authority for the work of QAA in Scotland, continues to be a central element in the governance and oversight of our work in Scotland.

The Scottish Government continues to develop and implement its own distinctive policies on higher education, with notable divergence from the rest of the UK on the issue of tuition fees. We expect legislation to be tabled in the Scottish Parliament during the current session, and this is likely to include some revisions to governance and organisational structures in HE. During this year we completed the review of the Quality Enhancement Framework. This has resulted in a number of modifications and improvements to elements such as the Scottish Funding Council's guidance to institutions on quality, and to the methodology of ELIR. Overall, the review has very positively endorsed the distinctive enhancement-led approach to quality in Scotland, and it is clear that this approach has the active support not only of our partners in the review (the Scottish Funding Council, the HE sector and the student body) but also of the Scottish Government.

However, the future is not without its challenges. Both here in Scotland, and across the UK, there are clear signs that future financial support from the Funding Councils will, at best, be held at current levels, despite predicted increases in volumes of review activity in future. QAA is actively exploring business development opportunities and diversifying its range of activities, in an attempt to provide additional sources of funding. That will pose particular challenges for the small team in Scotland, where we have very limited capacity for diversification.

In the rest of the UK, QAA has for some time conducted reviews of HE provision within further education colleges, and is now seeing an increased interest in such further education colleges becoming subscribers and members, and also a growth in private sector subscribers. The arrangements in Scotland are different. These trends are likely to have an impact not only on the governance of QAA but also on the attribution of costs and overheads across the UK. Overall, we expect that the coming year will involve us in very active scrutiny and review of funding and cost allocation arrangements within QAA, and bring with it a need to ensure that resources are used to the best possible effect.

Looking ahead

As we look ahead to 2013 and beyond, the future appears to be dominated by the continuing impact of the economic recession and its implications for public sector funding. In Scotland, a great deal of attention is being given to the planned referendum on independence, to be held in autumn 2014. Over the next year, we expect to hear much debate about how the HE sector in Scotland compares with, interacts with, and/or competes with HE in the rest of the UK. QAA Scotland has no political axe to grind in these discussions. But we are well placed to provide helpful, objective information about the operation and key characteristics of the Scottish HE sector, and we look forward to participating in the national debate about Scotland and its future. More generally, we at QAA Scotland are ready to play our part in supporting the sector, its students and its wider stakeholders, in order to ensure that higher education in Scotland continues to thrive, and that the quality of the student learning experience in our sector is maintained and further enhanced.

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