



Annual report for academic year 2009-10

Foreword

Professor Nick Kuenssberg, Chair of QAA Scotland



As I hand over the role of Chair to Dr Jenny Rees, I would ask for the reader's indulgence to make some observations on the activities of QAA Scotland.

There have been significant changes of personnel in the last two years with a new QAA Chairman, Chief Executive and Director of Scotland immediately following the excellent ENQA report. The latter reflects on the period of office of Director of Scotland Norman Sharp OBE, whose contribution in both Scotland and the UK was immense. It was he who galvanised academic and officer colleagues and ensured the existence and development of the special character of QAA in Scotland covering the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF), the pioneering Enhancement-led institutional review, national Enhancement Themes, annual engagement with each institution to reflect on the outcomes of these reviews, student engagement in quality systems, international benchmarking and the role of the international reviewer, both academic and student, and respect for the relevance of work-based learning.

These significant innovations have been recognised explicitly by the new senior officers and strongly endorsed by Dr Bill Harvey, although whether they are embraced south of the border remains the responsibility of the QAA Board. The distinctiveness of the Scottish system is accepted by QAA and the efficacy of the Scottish system is widely acknowledged; it is supported by both a committed QAA Scotland team and an engaged QAA Scotland Committee that plays the constructive 'critical friend' role. The key is the collaboration of the academic community in Scotland that has worked closely and positively with the officers of QAA Scotland. The concept of partnership, initiated under Norman Sharp's leadership, remains at the core of the Scottish approach, a philosophy to which Bill Harvey is also fully committed.

There will be difficult times ahead in terms of imminent financial stringencies, the potential implications of the recommendations of the Browne Commission and the demands of public information and comparability, but I have every confidence that QAA Scotland will meet these challenges to the satisfaction of its stakeholders. The innovation of this annual report is another component of this work and I commend it to you.

Introduction

**Dr Bill Harvey,
Director of QAA Scotland**



I took up the post of Director of QAA Scotland in September 2009. In my previous role at the Scottish Funding Council, I worked closely with QAA Scotland, and especially with my predecessor, Norman Sharp, in helping to develop and maintain Scotland's distinctive approach to quality assurance and enhancement in the higher education (HE) sector. I would like to thank all my colleagues in the QAA Scotland office in Glasgow for their welcome and their support over the past year.

QAA of course operates UK-wide and over this year I have got to know many new colleagues in the Gloucester office of QAA. It has been fascinating to observe and contextualise the very different, often divergent, policy contexts affecting the HE sector in the different countries of the United Kingdom. Just one month after I joined QAA Scotland, Anthony McClaran was appointed as the new Chief Executive of QAA; I have very much enjoyed working with Anthony over the past year and I much appreciate his continuing support and advice.

This is a very challenging time for the HE sector and QAA is fully engaged in these challenges. But while we face many uncertainties in the future, I take great comfort from the track record of QAA Scotland, including our work over the past year, as a clear demonstration of our capacity to deliver highly professional services which address the need of Scotland's HE institutions, its students, and its wider stakeholders, and which fully meet the contractual requirements of the Scottish Funding Council. I hope you find it interesting to learn more about our activities during 2009-10.

Scope and context of this report

This is the first time that the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) Scotland has produced an annual report. We intend to produce such reports every year from now on, and each report will focus on the activities of QAA in the preceding academic year. So this report deals mainly with our work during academic year 2009-10, that is, between 1 August 2009 and 31 July 2010. However, because this is the first such report, we have also included a broader account of the policy context in which QAA Scotland operates, so that readers can appreciate the bigger picture within which we operate.

We hope this report will allow a wider audience in Scotland and beyond to learn more about what we do. If you would like to know more about our work, or if you have any questions about the issues raised in this report, please get in touch with us. Contact details for QAA Scotland are available on our website at www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland.

About QAA

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 HE institutions and through contracts with the HE funding bodies.

The primary responsibility for academic standards and quality in UK HE 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 also provide development and enhancement services to help institutions to ensure that students have high quality learning experiences.

QAA plays a unique role in the operation of the HE sector. We provide objective information about quality and standards through our reviews, drawing on a wide range of evidence and research. We work in partnership with the HE sector through our use of peer review and our support for sector-led development and enhancement activities. And we are building ever stronger links with students, employers and other stakeholders to ensure that we understand their concerns and aspirations about the quality of learning and teaching, and support the sector in addressing these issues.

UK-wide activities

Although the focus of this report is the work of QAA in Scotland, staff in the Glasgow office also contribute a great deal to the broader work of QAA throughout the UK, for example in participating in the current review of the Academic Infrastructure - essentially a set of guidelines, frameworks and principles which underpin institutional processes for maintaining quality and standards in all UK HE institutions - and in supporting QAA's broader corporate development in areas such as public engagement, equalities and diversity, and strategic planning.

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, itself responding to the QAA Board. Much of our work relates to a 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 (SFC), QAA Scotland, the Scottish student body and the Higher Education Academy. This 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 report on the effectiveness of institutions' management of academic standards and the assurance and enhancement of the student learning experience
- Enhancement Themes - a programme of activities, managed by QAA Scotland, which operate across all Scottish HE institutions, focusing on issues of common concern 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 SFC 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, most notably through our use of student members on all ELIR review teams since 2004
- public information about quality - particularly through publication of the outcomes of ELIR reviews.

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 team; 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 coordinates 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 and Teaching Committee and Teaching Quality Forum
- the SFC, 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 (HEA) 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 SCQF Partnership; collaboration with educational bodies in the health and social care sectors; emerging linkage between Enhancement Themes and the Curriculum for Excellence; and regular liaison with 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.

QAA Scotland supports Scotland's aspirations to develop strong international links in our HE activities, including:

- the use of international reviewers within each ELIR team, bringing to bear a broader perspective on current Scottish practice
- international benchmarking activities, to ensure that Scotland can learn from best practice in other countries and to support our aspiration of a world-class HE sector
- support for Scottish engagement in the Bologna process, including this year significant work on Recognition of Prior Learning in a European context
- the use of international experts to support our enhancement activities, including invited speakers at national conferences
- QAA Scotland officers participating in, and bringing expertise to, institutional audits and reviews in other countries
- presentations on Scottish activities to international audiences, through talks to visiting delegations and papers at international conferences.

QAA's budget is agreed annually as part of a UK-wide process of negotiation involving all HE institutions (as subscribing members of QAA) and all UK HE funding bodies (which provide grants to QAA in return for a contracted programme of activities). The work of QAA Scotland is specified through a Service Level Agreement held jointly by Universities Scotland, the SFC, and QAA Scotland. In academic year 2009-10, Scottish HE institutions paid a total of around £400,000 in subscriptions to QAA. The SFC provided a grant of around £1 million to support the core activities of QAA, plus a further £400,000 specifically to support QAA Scotland's programme of national enhancement activities.

Our work in 2009-10

Quality and standards

Six Enhancement-led institutional reviews were operated during 2009-10 at the University of Dundee; University of Glasgow; Glasgow School of Art; University of Strathclyde; Scottish Agricultural College; and University of Aberdeen. In each case, QAA expressed confidence in the systems which these institutions have put in place to assure and enhance quality. The review reports also contain many specific recommendations and comments on areas of good practice and issues for potential improvement. Both full and summary versions of these reports are available for review on or download from QAA's website.

Annual discussions were held at all 19 HE institutions. These annual discussion meetings form a key part of the ELIR method, providing an opportunity for QAA Scotland officers to discuss with institutions progress being made in addressing ELIR outcomes as well as key outcomes arising from institution-led quality reviews at the subject level.

As part of its commitment to enhancement, QAA Scotland also publishes a series of 'Learning from ELIR' reports, which draw together evidence and information on specific themes discussed during review activities and present analyses of these

themes in relation to the whole Scottish sector. During 2009-10 we completed the final report to draw on the evidence of the previous cycle of ELIR reviews - Emerging approaches to the management of quality assurance and enhancement: evolution and progress - which has recently been published on the QAA website. For next session, we are developing a new methodology for these reports which are intended to deliver a sharper focus on specific academic practices, on shorter timescales and drawing on a broader range of evidence.

Managing risk

QAA Scotland operates a protocol for managing potential risks to quality and standards in the Scottish HE sector. The protocol provides an equivalent mechanism to the Causes for Concern arrangements that are in place in England and Wales. The locus and methodology of the protocol was agreed with our partners in the Universities Quality Working Group. This is not a complaints procedure - complaints are in the first instance a matter for each institution, with recourse to the Scottish Public Sector Ombudsman (SPSO) in the case of unresolved issues. QAA's protocol operates where a complaint (or evidence arising from other sources) indicates that there may be a systematic risk to quality and academic standards within an institution. The protocol provides a clear and explicit methodology for investigating such issues with a proportionate response ranging from informal enquiries to a full formal review. During 2009-10, there was a very small number of informal enquiries but no cases were pursued using the formal protocol. Three enquiries that had been raised in previous years required ongoing liaison but none involved the use of the formal Protocol.

QAA Scotland has continued to be vigilant in this general area, for example attending the sector-led Student Complaints Practitioners' Forum and responding to the recent consultation by the SPSO on a model complaints procedure.

Enhancement Themes

The current national Enhancement Theme, Graduates for the 21st Century: Integrating the Enhancement Themes, was launched in February 2009 and will run until the summer of 2011. In keeping with our general approach to Enhancement Themes, there is clear ownership of the Theme and its activities by staff and students in the Scottish HE sector, in particular through the Theme Steering Committee, including representatives of all the HE institutions and of Scottish students. To support the Theme, QAA also manages a wide range of institutional and sectoral activities, including funded contractual activities in each institution. To support the integrative aspects of the current Theme, QAA has also contracted with sector experts acting as facilitators, with a role of pulling together work from previous themes and presenting key findings in easily accessible ways. For example, a synthesis and overview of relevant activities has been commissioned taking place across all Scottish HE institutions. Learning from past experience, a key emphasis in the current Theme is to ensure that the outcomes of the Theme are short, easy to digest, and highly focused on their potential impact on daily academic practice. For example, in June we published a short overview entitled *Things that make a difference: lessons from the Enhancement Themes* (available from the Enhancement Themes website at www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk). QAA Scotland staff have this year presented papers on the Scottish approach to enhancement at major international conferences in Copenhagen and Valencia and we regularly receive visits from international delegations wishing to learn more about the Scottish model.

The 7th annual Enhancement Themes conference was held in March 2009. This has become an important feature of the Scottish academic calendar and this year we attracted nearly 400 delegates from all Scottish HE institutions as well as colleagues from the rest of the UK, Ireland, South Africa, Australia and the USA. The main conference topic was the Graduates for the 21st Century Theme. As well as plenary sessions involving major international speakers, delegates had a choice of over 50 workshop sessions and a similar number of poster presentations.

SHEEC has begun planning the next cycle of Enhancement Themes, which will start from summer 2011, and we expect that the programme for the next few years will be agreed by the time of the next Enhancement Themes conference in March 2011.

We believe that the model of national Enhancement Themes has proven very successful as a way of creating significant interest and activity in key aspects of learning and teaching. The Themes have provided an excellent framework for supporting coordinated engagement by all Scottish HE institutions while preserving institutional autonomy and flexibility, so that each institution can engage in ways which meets its own interests and priorities. However, this is by no means the only way in which QAA Scotland is supporting the enhancement of the student learning experience in Scotland and the next section highlights some of our other main activities.

International benchmarking

The International Benchmarking project, which is managed by QAA Scotland on behalf of the Scottish HE community working through SHEEC, has sought to inform teaching and learning practice in Scotland by looking at practice in other countries. Student support was identified as the first such area for exploration, and work on this topic was carried out between 2008 and 2010, including a study tour to examine current practice in Denmark and Sweden. A conference was held on 25 May 2010 to complete the work on the International Benchmarking: Supporting Student Success project. A report from the conference will be used to inform future discussions with the sector.

In 2009, the second topic for international benchmarking was identified to be the research degree student experience. (This activity is supported by another QAA project on the 'nature of doctorateness', exploring the nature of doctoral candidates and processes in HE institutions across the UK.) QAA Scotland has established a Working Group, composed of senior management representatives from all Scottish HE institutions and observers from sectoral organisations including Universities Scotland, the SFC, Vitae, and HEA. Three meetings of the Working Group and a sector-wide seminar have been held to identify key themes to explore in relation to research degrees and a programme of work is now well underway with a view to holding a national conference in June 2011. QAA Scotland is linking with work on research degrees in Europe in order to learn from wider practice, including the organisation of an International Bologna Seminar in collaboration with the Scottish Government in spring 2011. Links have also been made with the European University Association Council for Doctoral Education, which will contribute to this event.

QAA Scotland also forms part of an integrated working programme on research degrees with Vitae, HEA and SFC. Two collaborative events on 'Postgraduates Who Teach' and 'Professional Skills' are scheduled with HEA and the UK Council for

Graduate Education for early 2011 to coordinate work on research degrees in Scotland.

Employability and work-based learning

In response to the growing diversity of HE provision and the emphasis on employer-HE links, QAA Scotland has worked with the sector to support the development of work-based learning (WBL). In addition to the development of a guide to WBL, our activities included a major national conference on WBL which took place in May 2010 in Dundee, and which focused on employer engagement with HE institutions through WBL. This event was highly successful and identified a range of activities for future development now initiated; the report of this conference is available from our website.

Practice-based learning

We are currently working on more specialised opportunities for enhancing professional development in the areas of health, social care and education. Working with NHS Education Scotland, the General Teaching Council for Scotland and the Scottish Social Services Council, we have identified many areas of common interest and have established strong and productive links with these professional bodies. We aim to continue this work by producing developmental materials to support practice-based learning and to work more closely together in key areas such as placement management.

Personal development planning: the effective learning framework

QAA Scotland has for some years been working jointly with HEA and the Centre for Recording Achievement, to support the wider implementation of personal development planning (PDP) within the Scottish HE sector. A current priority is an online toolkit to enhance PDP strategy, policy and practice in Scottish HE institutions. During 2009-10 this toolkit was piloted and evaluated and it is now in the process of being published and disseminated throughout the sector. Another focus in this area is continuing to investigate the role of reflective learning processes in supporting transitions and progression between learning programmes within and between institutions. We aim to find ways of maximising the effectiveness of reflective learning processes in supporting successful transitions across the different educational sectors.

Recognition of prior learning

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is an important means of promoting greater flexibility and effectiveness in the HE system and has particular relevance for workforce development, widening access and articulation between programmes. QAA Scotland is collaborating closely with Universities Scotland and the SCQF Partnership to develop, pilot and disseminate a range of tools and resources to support RPL processes in the HE sector. This year we have developed close links and exchanges of practice with colleagues in Northern Ireland. A current priority is to strengthen and extend our networking throughout Europe. QAA Scotland staff organised a major European conference on RPL, held in Brussels in February 2010. This resulted in a decision by the Bologna Follow-up Group to set up a European network for RPL, which QAA Scotland will be supporting. The first meeting of this new network will be in Glasgow in November 2010. QAA Scotland has also recently

undertaken an exercise to collect European case studies which will benefit practitioners in learning from practice.

SCQF Partnership

QAA Scotland officers continue to be involved actively with the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) Partnership, through membership of the SCQF Board, the Quality Committee and the SCQF Forum. A subgroup of the SCQF Quality Committee has recently agreed the terms of reference and focus for the review of the SCQF Level descriptors. Further guidance and support materials have been developed for the SCQF website, with significant input from QAA Scotland staff - an overview of SCQF rating bodies, guidance on becoming a credit rating body, and resources for credit rating bodies, including guidance on using the level descriptors and college credit rating guidance.

Looking ahead

As we look ahead to 2011 and beyond, the future appears to be dominated by the impact of the economic recession and its implications for public sector funding. There seems no doubt that the HE sector will face severe financial challenges over the next few years and this will inevitably have consequences for the work of QAA Scotland, not least the potential implications of Browne's proposal that QAA in England should become part of a new Higher Education Council and the inevitable change in the student-university relationship as the student, rather than the Government, becomes the paymaster. A new audit methodology is now under development for England and Northern Ireland, while in Scotland the current cycle of reviews will continue until 2012. The Scottish Funding Council will conduct its own review of quality early in 2011, and QAA Scotland expects to play a major part in this review as a key partner in the Quality Working Group. Elections for the Scottish Parliament will also take place in May 2011, and new legislation affecting HE may be presented in both the Westminster and Scottish parliaments during the coming year. So it seems likely that the HE sector will face not only some major policy changes but also an increasing potential for policy divergence across the UK, over issues such as student funding, private sector provision, public information and the very structure of the HE sector.

It is therefore clear that we face much uncertainty in the financial and policy environment which will frame our work in 2011 and more significantly beyond. But we are confident that there will continue to be a strong, perhaps even an increased, focus on ensuring that the Scottish HE sector can provide the highest possible quality of learning experience for its students. This will require a continuing commitment to high levels of professionalism in the sector, learning, wherever possible, from good practice both in Scotland and further afield, as well as robust approaches to maintaining and enhancing the quality of learning and teaching. We are sure that there is a very important role for QAA Scotland to play in that process, and we look forward to working with our partners to develop sustainable and effective approaches which continue to meet the needs of Scotland, its HE institutions, and its learners both now and into the future.

Annex A: Membership of QAA Scotland Committee

The current membership of QAA Scotland Committee membership is set out below.
Members

- Professor Nick Kuenssberg, OBE, lately Chairman, The Glasgow School of Art, Chair of the Committee, to be succeeded in October 2010 by Dr Jenny Rees, Vice-Principal (Academic Quality and Customer Service), Edinburgh Napier University
- Professor Mark Allison, Executive Director, Education and International, Institute of Chartered Accountants of Scotland
- Sir Rodney Brooke, CBE, Chairman, QAA Board
- Ms Jennifer Cadiz, Depute President, NUS Scotland
- Professor Bob Craik, Deputy Principal (Learning and Teaching), Heriot-Watt University
- Mr Mike Devenney, Principal of Moray College, UHI
- Professor Brian Durward, Director of Educational Development, NHS Education, Scotland
- Professor Russel Griggs, OBE, Chair of CBI UK SME National Council
- Professor Grant Jarvie, Deputy Principal, for Learning, Teaching and Students, University of Stirling
- Ms Eve Lewis, Head of sparqs
- Dr Gill Stewart, Depute Director, NQ, Scottish Qualifications Authority
- Mrs Michele Sutton OBE, Principal and Chief Executive, Bradford College
- Dr Padraig Walsh, Chief Executive, Irish Universities Quality Board, Chief Executive Officer of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, Chief Executive Officer Designate of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance Ireland (QQAI)
- Mr Sandy Watson, OBE, Chairman, NHS Tayside Board; Member of Scottish Funding Council Board
- Professor Petra Wend, Principal and Vice-Chancellor, Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh

Observers:

- Universities Scotland: Mr Alastair Sim, Director /Ms Kirsty Skidmore, Senior Policy Officer (Learning and Teaching)
- Scottish Funding Council: Ms Lesley Sutherland, Assistant Director, Learning, Governance & Sustainability

Annex B: Outcomes of Enhancement-led institutional reviews (ELIR) conducted in 2009-10

Conclusion and judgement within ELIR

ELIR is an evidence-based method of peer review. Each ELIR team makes a judgement about the institution's management of academic standards and of the assurance and enhancement of the student learning experience. This judgement is expressed in the form of the level of confidence that can be placed in the institution's current, and likely future, management of these activities. Each ELIR team also provides a commentary on:

- the effectiveness of the institution's management of the student learning experience
- the effectiveness of the institution's arrangements for institution-led monitoring and review of quality and academic standards of awards, however and wherever delivered
- the effectiveness of the institution's implementation of its strategic approach to quality enhancement.

The reports also identify areas of positive practice and areas for development.

During 2009-10, ELIRs were undertaken at the following institutions:

University of Dundee

University of Glasgow

The Glasgow School of Art

University of Strathclyde

The Scottish Agricultural College

University of Aberdeen

The findings of these reviews indicate that there can be confidence in the institutions' current, and likely future, management of the academic standards of the awards, and the quality of the student learning experience they provide. In each case, this is a positive judgement, indicating that these institutions have secure arrangements for managing academic standards and for assuring and enhancing the quality of the student experience.

Full and summary reports are available on the QAA website at www.qaa.ac.uk.