



**QAA**

## **Learning from ELIR 2003-07**

**Emerging approaches to institution-led  
quality review at the subject level:  
combining assurance with enhancement**



**Sharing good practice**

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ISBN 978 1 84482 889 0

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Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

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## Preface

In 2003 Scotland adopted a new approach to managing quality and standards in higher education. The enhancement-led approach is now attracting significant international interest. Its key features include: a focus on improvement; important roles and responsibilities for students; and partnership working between Universities Scotland, QAA Scotland, the National Union of Students in Scotland, the national independent student development service, student participation in quality Scotland (sparqs), the Higher Education Academy and the Scottish Funding Council.

In addition to Enhancement-led institutional review (ELIR), the Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF) comprises a rolling programme of national enhancement themes, institution-led review at the subject level, student engagement in quality management, including support provided through sparqs, and the inclusion of student reviewers as full members of institutional review teams.

Scottish higher education institutions have made significant progress in developing their approaches to the management of assurance and enhancement. Institutions' success is apparent in the published ELIR reports from the first cycle, 2003-07. Institutional systems continue to be judged rigorous and robust in assuring the quality of provision and the maintenance of academic standards. Individual institutions have taken the enhancement agenda forward according to their particular strategic priorities and mission, supported by a common framework which provides support for the sector. With growing insight into the management of enhancement, institutions have made very effective structural, systemic and process changes designed to encourage a culture of critical reflection on learning and teaching, and the wider aspects of the student experience.

These various changes combine to create a synergy which reinforces and strengthens the drive for enhancement. The growing focus on the student experience has led institutions to foster wider student engagement in quality and enhancement processes, with external support for the training of student representatives being provided by sparqs. The recent (2007) independent external evaluation of QEF stated that it 'brought right to the fore the simple and powerful idea that the purpose of quality systems in higher education is to improve student experiences and, consequently, their learning' and concluded that 'the approach to quality that we review(ed) here is ambitious, distinctive and, so far, successful'.

QAA Scotland will commence the second cycle of ELIR this autumn, using a revised method which will build on these achievements in a number of ways: integrating ELIR more fully with other aspects of the QEF; sharpening the focus on the enhancement of the student learning experience through the three fundamental principles of quality culture, student engagement, and high quality learning; and drawing more on good practice, not only across the United Kingdom (UK), but internationally (including through the inclusion of an international member on future ELIR review teams).

Having excited considerable interest since its inception, both in the UK and internationally, the enhancement-led approach to managing quality in Scotland now finds resonance with approaches in a number of other countries, most notably Ireland, Finland, New Zealand and increasingly, in the United States of America.

QAA Scotland will continue to develop these and other international links to inform the ongoing development of the enhancement-led approach in Scotland.

This report is one of a series of six reports addressing a range of topics relating to the enhancement-led approach in Scottish higher education over the last five years. It provides an overview of evolving approaches to institution-led quality review at the subject level and explores a number of different aspects, including its role in supporting and promoting enhancement within institutional structures; student engagement with the process, both through panel membership and as student representatives; staff engagement with the process, through reflection and evaluation; and the growing linkage between subject review, institutional enhancement strategies and local strategic planning processes.

The companion reports address evolving approaches to the management of assurance and enhancement; student engagement in quality assurance and enhancement; virtual learning environment based and other information technologies; staff development, focusing on recognition, reward and the dissemination of good practice; and employability and personal development planning. An interim report on evolving approaches to the management of assurance and enhancement, based on the first 15 ELIR reports, was published in June 2007. These reports collectively provide evidence of the impact to date of the enhancement-led approach, to inform national and international debate and, more particularly, to support the embedding of a quality culture across the Scottish higher education sector.

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## Background

The Scottish Government's Lifelong Learning Strategy recognises the need to develop a quality framework which is 'fit for purpose', and which puts learners' needs at the centre of educational systems.<sup>1</sup> The enhancement-led approach to quality in the Scottish higher education sector is consistent with this. For the purposes of ELIR, enhancement is defined as 'taking deliberate steps to bring about continuous improvement in the effectiveness of the learning experience of students'.

The Scottish higher education sector is small but diverse, containing within it a wide range of institutions of varying missions and sizes, cultures and organisational complexity, including three designated small specialist institutions. Across the sector, institutions have approached the enhancement agenda from a variety of starting points and perspectives. The ELIR method has the flexibility to address this diversity while systematically addressing key aspects of managing provision.

ELIR reports are structured around three main sections:

- internal monitoring and review of quality, standards and public information
- the student experience
- the effectiveness of the institution's strategy for quality enhancement.

The factual evidence of the overviews is complemented by more discursive commentaries which provide deeper insight into the effectiveness of the various systems, processes and strategies, and the way in which they interact to support quality assurance and quality enhancement.

This analysis is based on an examination of the reports of 20 ELIR reviews, conducted during the first cycle of ELIR, 2003-07 (see below Annex). It draws primarily on the evidence contained in the first and second main sections, together with the final summary. Early draft versions were circulated for comment to members of the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee, the QAA Scotland Committee, and to QAA Scotland officers, all of which groups provided valuable and constructive feedback.

While each ELIR report covers broadly the same aspects of provision, it represents the outcome of an engagement with the institution, which will necessarily address the institution's own state of evolution and particular strategic priorities to promote enhancement, with differing emphases from one institution to another. This overview is a synthesis of information drawn from ELIR reports from the first cycle, not a snapshot at a single point in time. Its primary purpose is to illustrate developments across the sector over the last five years. QAA Scotland is conscious of the ongoing evolution and development of institutional approaches to enhancement, particularly in institutions which were reviewed early in the cycle, as well as the importance of institutional context. Consequently, the particular examples of practice cited here have not been attributed to institutions, but are offered as a stimulus to reflection and further development, rather than as exemplars of good practice in themselves. QAA Scotland will be pleased to facilitate enquiries relating to specific examples, by referring them to the relevant institution. Please contact [t.barron@qaa.ac.uk](mailto:t.barron@qaa.ac.uk)

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<sup>1</sup> *Learning to improve: quality approaches for lifelong learning*, Lawrence Howells, Scottish Executive, Edinburgh 2005.

However, a sector-wide project to identify and disseminate good practice in institution-led quality review is currently in progress, under the auspices of the Universities Scotland Teaching Quality Forum. The outcomes of that project, which has been informed by the findings of this report, will be published later this year.

### Executive summary

The 21 ELIR reports published between March 2004 and May 2007 show that, overall, institution-led quality review at the subject level is robust and operating effectively. Not only is it fulfilling its role as a mechanism for the assurance of quality and the maintenance of academic standards, but it is evolving into a more reflective, evaluative, and learner-centred process, which supports a focus on enhancement, and articulates with institutional strategic planning processes.

### General conclusions

From the evidence of the first cycle of ELIR, the following general conclusions emerge.

- The enhancement-led approach to institution-led quality review is seen as an improvement on previous compliance-orientated approaches to subject review, whereby a more collegiate approach, based on critical self-reflection and self-evaluation, provides a more positive developmental engagement for the subject area.
- A robust peer review process is being operated with institutionally-appointed review panels comprising internal and external members, the latter including academic subject experts and, where appropriate, employer and professional representatives, whose contribution as 'critical friends' is viewed as a positive and valuable aspect of the process.
- Institutional processes continue to take due cognisance of external reference points for quality and academic standards, including the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*, subject benchmark statements, published by QAA, and the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF), together with a wide range of other base-line reference points and relevant guidelines, reports and publications.
- Institution-led quality review is becoming a pivotal link between the subject area and institutional strategic planning processes, providing an opportunity for discussion of key strategic issues relating to learning and teaching within the institution, and for monitoring and review of the implementation of institutional enhancement strategies.
- An increasingly learner-centred approach is emerging through increased student representation and engagement in institution-led quality review processes, which includes student membership of review panels and more formalised engagement with students and student representatives in the process.
- Institution-led quality review is providing one important mechanism for the identification and dissemination of good practice in learning and teaching within

institutions, with evidence of some centres for learning and teaching becoming more closely involved in the process.

- In general, institution-led quality review is being operated effectively, providing confidence in institutions' ability to manage quality and maintain academic standards at the subject level.

### Future development of institution-led quality review

Collectively, the ELIR reports identify a number of aspects in which the institution-led quality review process can be strengthened further. Some of the operational issues identified reflect the fact that in some institutions, this is a new process, which is still bedding down. In institutions with more established quality review processes, the commentary focuses more on the scope and duration of the review, how it supports enhancement and how it engages with students. Evidence from the annual discussions with QAA Scotland officers confirms that individual institutions are addressing a range of issues as part of their follow-up response to the ELIR. In the wider context, the identification of these more challenging aspects of the quality review process will inform the ongoing development of cross-sector strategic support for the embedding of enhancement by the partners in the Quality Enhancement Framework. The areas identified in ELIR for further development fall into the following six broad areas.

#### Scope

- Improving provision for the review of joint programmes, involving more than one department or subject area.
- Including postgraduate research students within the scope of review or ensuring that there are alternative mechanisms to address this group.

#### Duration

- Ensuring that sufficient time is allowed to allow learning and teaching to be adequately covered, especially where the quality review is holistic in nature.

#### Review process

- Integrating or streamlining processes to avoid duplication or overlap, for example with programme approval/validation events, where these operate separately.
- Ensuring appropriate distance and objectivity in external appointments, in addition to ensuring teams have requisite experience in quality assurance.
- Ensuring external reviewers are appropriately trained/briefed.
- Ensuring consistency of scrutiny of elements of the Academic Infrastructure, for example the *Code of practice*, benchmark statements, and SCQF.
- Ensuring consistency in approach to student engagement in quality review across the institution.
- Ensuring that appropriate management information and data are available and used effectively.



### **Reporting process and follow up**

- Maintaining a detailed record of discussions, including evidence to support conclusions/recommendations.
- Giving greater focus to follow up and action planning, with clear timelines specified, and responsibilities designated.
- Maintaining a transparent and timely monitoring process, especially for year-on reporting, including evidence of how specific conditions/recommendations have been met.
- Ensuring timeous reporting of review outcomes back to students.

### **Focus on enhancement**

- Making explicit the link between quality assurance and quality enhancement in the process.
- Developing linked monitoring and review procedures to build a focus on enhancement.
- Including in the quality review process greater opportunities for development of provision.
- Developing reporting styles to encompass a focus on enhancement as well as on quality assurance.
- Improving means for identifying and disseminating good practice.

### **Links to institutional enhancement strategy**

- Facilitating strategic discussions within quality review through closer alignment between institutional and local planning processes.
- Identifying common themes emerging from quality reviews to inform institutional planning.
- Producing forward-looking overview reports that identify issues of strategic importance.

## Introduction

1 The aim of this report is to provide a general overview of evolving approaches to institution-led quality review at the subject level as a vehicle to support assurance and enhancement in the Scottish higher education sector. Institution-led quality review represents one of the five key elements of the Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework adopted in 2003. All Scottish higher education institutions are required to operate a process of internal quality review at the subject level in accordance with guidance issued by the Scottish Funding Council.<sup>2</sup>

2 This guidance identified a range of characteristics of effective (internal) institution-led quality reviews at the subject level, such as to generate evidence with which the (external) institutional review process could engage fully and consistently, while also recognising the need for flexibility in the design and operation of the process, to accommodate differences in institutional mission, size, and internal structures. Accordingly, the guidance set out the following broad requirements that:

- all subject provision be reviewed in a cycle of not more than six years, with decisions on scheduling and aggregation of provision residing with the institution
- institution-led quality reviews should:
  - take full account of the *Code of practice*, subject benchmark statements and the provider's approach to the SCQF
  - provide an objective review of provision based on an understanding of national and international good practice, through the inclusion on the review team of at least one external member with a relevant (subject) background
  - take full account of student feedback, and include procedures to obtain student views on the provision being reviewed
  - consider the effectiveness of annual monitoring arrangements and follow-up action for programmes covered by the review
  - promote dialogue on areas in which quality might be improved
  - identify good practice for dissemination within the institution and beyond
  - encourage and support providers' efforts to reflect critically on their practice.

3 While ELIR teams were to include a student member there was no equivalent requirement for institution-led quality review teams to include student members. However, institutions were encouraged to consider the potential merits of including student members, and to put in place mechanisms for effective engagement with the student body during internal reviews. Many institutions took the opportunity to revise the review team membership to include a student member, such that at the time of their ELIR at least 13 of the 20 institutions had included a student member(s) on the review panel (see also paragraph 13).

4 Institutions have been required to submit annual institutional statements to the Scottish Funding Council on the outcomes of their quality reviews. These summaries, together with copies of quality review reports for the previous 12 months, and the

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<sup>2</sup> *Handbook for enhancement-led institutional review: Scotland, QAA, 2003, Annex 5.*

institutional policy document and guidance on quality review, also serve to support annual discussions between QAA, senior managers of institutions and student representatives. The annual discussions help to inform the institutional profiles prepared and updated by QAA, subject to the agreement of each institution, which include key summary information on quality review outcomes. This cumulative body of information in turn informs the external institutional review process, providing important contextual information for briefing the ELIR team.

5 The effectiveness of each institution's quality review procedures and processes is a matter for serious consideration by the ELIR team, the effective management of institution-led quality review being one of the key elements on which the 'confidence' judgement in the ELIR report rests. The primary function of institution-led quality review is to provide assurance of the effective management of quality and standards of the subject provision, taking due cognisance of a range of external reference points, and to provide evidence of commitment to continuous development and enhancement. ELIR reports confirm that, in the majority of cases, institutions' quality review processes are being operated effectively, thereby affirming institutions' ability to manage quality and maintain academic standards at the subject level. The evidence of the ELIR reports also shows that institution-led quality review processes are articulating more effectively with institutional enhancement strategies and with institutional and subject-level strategic planning processes, to provide a key mechanism for the enhancement of the student experience.

6 The following sections explore in more detail key features of institutional approaches to quality review, which emerge from the ELIR reports. They include matters of process, such as duration and frequency; panel composition, scope and focus; reporting and follow-up; as well as matters of strategy. Particular strategic considerations include how the combined function of assurance and enhancement is being implemented, how the process impacts on institutional strategy to support the development of an enhancement-led culture, and how it can facilitate increased student representation and engagement to promote more effectively the enhancement of the student experience.

### **Frequency and duration**

7 Just over half of the institutions reviewed operate a five-year cycle, while the remainder operate a six-year cycle. At the time of their ELIR, two institutions did not yet have in place procedures for quality review at the subject level, but had comparable processes as a basis for the development of quality review. The duration of the review varies depending on the scope of the review and the amount of documentation circulated in advance, which can enable the panel members to identify key issues and determine the strategic focus of the review. Typically, the review visit is conducted in two to three days, although in some institutions it is confined to a single day, and in at least one institution is reported to take two to five days depending on the scale of provision under review.

8 In at least two cases, where the reviews were holistic, the ELIR teams queried whether the duration of the review allowed sufficient time to give full attention to learning and teaching. In the first case, the ELIR report notes the institution's response

that 'despite the wide-ranging nature of the one-day review visit, consideration of the documents before the visit allowed the panel to devote attention to matters relating to learning and teaching. An advantage of the panel composition was that it included members already familiar with the department and it was explained that this assisted in focusing attention on the relevant issues rather than spending time understanding operational detail'. In the second case, the review lasted a day and a half, with the half day devoted to learning and teaching. In this case, the ELIR team considered the review process in the context of the institution's new organisational structures, which placed primary responsibility for the management of quality and standards upon departments, forming the view that, in light of these changes, a sharper focus on matters of quality management at the subject level was required. To this end, the ELIR team encouraged the institution 'to consider how it might enhance the effectiveness of [its] review [process] as an instrument for focusing on programme-specific matters and, more broadly, on learning, teaching and assessment'.

## Scope and focus

9 In 15 institutions the scope of the quality review process is confined to taught provision in a particular discipline or set of cognate disciplines. In several cases, the review is closely modelled on the former QAA academic subject review method, focusing on academic standards, quality of learning opportunities and the management of quality and standards. This includes five institutions where the quality review process is linked to programme review, two of which currently operate separate, but interlinking processes of programme validation and quality review (although one of these is piloting a revised process which encompasses programme validation). Likewise, in one of the small specialist institutions, the review process comprises separate but interlinked processes of course review and departmental review, which collectively satisfy the Scottish Funding Council requirements. In general, professional, statutory and regulatory body accreditation visits have not been subsumed within the institution-led quality review process, although three reports contain explicit reference either to the possibility of combining these processes or to their having been combined in practice. The two institutions which were still in the process of developing procedures for institution-led quality review at the time of their ELIR were at that point still subject to external subject review. One of these institutions is confirmed as having successfully implemented quality review in its follow-up response to the ELIR, and the other is progressing the development of procedures.

10 In two institutions, special provision is made to include postgraduate research students in the review process, and in a further five institutions, quality review comprises an holistic review of all aspects of a department's operations, including general strategy, research, and resources, as well as the quality assurance of taught and postgraduate research provision. One ELIR report noted flexibility as a key feature of the institution's approach, which permitted reviews to be organised at two levels: programme level, which covers all undergraduate and taught postgraduate courses; and school level, which covers postgraduate research provision and other courses organised at the school level (for example, combined studies). Two emerging issues are the focus for review of postgraduate research provision, and the lack of mechanisms to address joint programmes adequately. In the latter case, it is worth

noting that one institution had a separate parallel review process for its graduate school postgraduate provision, and had addressed joint programmes through the mechanism of quality review, by having a single review of joint provision.

11 At least three ELIR reports highlight the institutions' existing practice or intention to extend and adapt the quality review method for the review of central services, such as for example IT services, the library, the academic registry, student support or learner support. This was viewed by ELIR teams as a positive development which is likely to aid the extent to which an institution can evaluate the learning and teaching experience offered to students.

## Panel composition

12 Panels for institution-led quality review include at least one and often two or even three external members, including employer and professional representation, as appropriate, in addition to academic subject expertise. Internal membership varies but is not necessarily contingent on the scope of the review: the ELIR reports indicate that reviews may be chaired either by the vice-principal for learning and teaching, or by a dean or vice-dean (or equivalent), sometimes from the home faculty, sometimes from another faculty. Internal panel membership includes academic peers sometimes from a cognate discipline within the same faculty, sometimes from another faculty, or from a combination of the two. In at least two institutions where the quality review process is relatively new, the panel may include staff observers, as a form of staff development, to enable staff to gain experience and understanding of the process. Additionally, in at least one institution, the panel membership includes a member of staff from the centre for learning and teaching; in this instance the link with the central service for learning and teaching reflects both that service's advisory role in the preparation of the subject area's self-evaluation, and their role in developing service agreements with faculties based on the review outcomes. In one institution, the ELIR report notes that the deputy principal for learning and teaching attends all the reviews to ensure consistency of the operation.

13 The ELIR reports indicate that at the time of their ELIR at least 13 of the 20 institutions had included a student member(s) on the review panel, while a further four were keeping the position under review.<sup>3</sup> In one institution where the review process was holistic, representatives from the student association shared the institution's view that the wide coverage of the reviews, with much material that would have limited immediate concern to students, militates against student membership. Typically, student members are sabbatical officers, but in at least two institutions they are drawn from a pool of student reviewers provided by the student association, with demand for places reported to be considerable.

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<sup>3</sup> At the end of the first ELIR cycle, anecdotal evidence suggests that all institutions either have or are in the process of revising their subject review procedures to include a student member on the review panel.

## Procedure and format of review event

14 Institutions provide detailed written guidance on the procedure and process, reinforced in the majority of cases by oral briefings. Institutional guidance generally includes a template or a set of indicative headings for the preparation of the self-evaluation. Two-thirds of the ELIR reports refer explicitly to the preparation of a self-evaluation document, which is informed by the outcomes of annual monitoring and review processes, and of periodic programme validation or review processes, where these are separate. The self-evaluation also addresses key external reference points such as the *Code of practice* and subject benchmark statements, published by QAA, articulation of provision with the SCQF, and other relevant external reference points including professional, statutory, and regulatory body accreditation. In addition to the self-evaluation, the review panel typically receives a range of management information including data on admissions, student progress and degree awards and further destinations, together with a range of documentation relating to learning and teaching. This might include programme specifications; external examiners' reports and follow up; minutes of subject area committees particularly student-staff liaison committees; publicity and marketing materials; any relevant external publications or reference points, such as Higher Education Academy subject centre outputs or QAA publications noted above; or any other relevant contextual documentation.

15 The ELIR reports show that in many, although not yet all, institutions, the focus of the self-evaluation is shifting from description towards evaluation and from assurance towards enhancement. For example, one report notes, 'The University has introduced a series of changes designed to improve the process, including amending the panel membership and encouraging a much greater emphasis on evaluation and enhancement in the Analytical Accounts prepared by the schools'. The ELIR report further refers to 'what is described in the RA as a discernible shift within the associated Analytical Accounts from a compliance culture to a greater emphasis on self-critical reflection'.

16 ELIR reports indicate a number of ways in which the focus of internal quality reviews on enhancement has engendered a wider engagement with service and support areas. ELIR reports make specific reference to the involvement of the institution's centre for learning and teaching either in a pre-review briefing or in the preparation of the self-evaluation. Another refers to liaison with the careers service in parallel with internal subject review. Staff consider that these wider engagements enrich the process. One ELIR report notes that, 'as well as providing a catalyst for support services to work together the better to support student learning, the [quality enhancement strategy] had given impetus and status to the work of those services, and had already helped them to work even more productively with departments. It appears to have had an immediate impact on the quality of the self-evaluation reports of departments preparing for a [quality review] event, by giving pointers to what should be addressed in terms of enhancement-related strategies and policies'.

17 The review event itself typically includes meetings with different groups of teaching and support staff and student representatives, including members of student-staff liaison committees, and may also include tours of facilities. Less commonly, the process involves graduate students or makes provision for the views of graduate students to be sought via questionnaire (see below, paragraphs 19, 20).



## Guidance and training of student panel members

18 ELIR reports confirm that at the time of their ELIR at least seven institutions were providing generic training to prepare students to participate as members of internal quality review panels; in at least four of these the training was provided through student associations in association with the national student training service, sparqs. Of the remaining six institutions with student members of internal quality review panels, two institutions are reported to provide support through student association staff, and at least three provide written guidelines on the process combined with oral briefings, including in one case from the chair of the review panel. The available evidence indicates that student members of review panels discharge their responsibilities professionally, and that their participation is valued by staff: 'Student membership of [quality review] panels is positively valued by staff.... Academic staff and students highlighted that [the quality reviews] are influenced by student involvement in other ways, including through the reporting of SSLC discussions during the [review] process and by [review] panels meeting groups of students'. Where the ELIR reports comment on the engagement of student members, it appears that student panel members view their role as a valuable and useful experience, participate confidently, and make an effective contribution to the process (see below, paragraphs 19, 20).

## Student engagement in the review process

19 The ELIR reports demonstrate that, in addition to the standard meetings between review panels and student representatives, as well as the supporting documentation relating to student feedback and student-staff liaison committees, institutions are exploring a variety of ways of engaging students more effectively in the review process. In one institution where there was no student panel member, the ELIR team learnt that 'there were opportunities for students to comment on elements of the material departments submitted and that students' views were sought during the panel one-day visit' and that 'students considered they had contributed positively to the exercise and that their opinions had been taken into account'. Similarly, another report affirms,

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

The same report went on to state 'During ELIR staff indicated that student panel members were appropriately critical and professional and that students brought a different perspective to the reviews'. However, institutions need to be mindful of a student member's ability to prepare and therefore engage fully with the process, particularly when the scope of the review is more extensive. Student panel members from the same institution suggested to the ELIR team that when a review covers a

number of programmes, it may be beneficial to have more than one student panel member in order to spread the workload.

20 At least two institutions have sought to involve students in the preparation of the self-evaluation document, and a third encourages its departments to consider a student-led submission as part of the review documentation. Student members of the student-staff consultative committee are invited to contribute a student written submission to the quality review panel. Where the students take the opportunity to submit a written commentary to the panel, the ELIR report notes, these submissions make an effective contribution to the review process. Having seen examples of student submissions 'which clearly demonstrated a departmental commitment to engaging students in this aspect of the management of quality and standards', the ELIR team suggests that 'the University may wish to consider the benefits of further encouraging the student written submission to become universal practice'. Where institutions did not have students as members of quality review panels, student engagement with the review process is afforded indirectly through other representative mechanisms. Thus one ELIR report notes that after the event, the student-staff liaison committee is asked to consider the main findings of school reviews, thus providing additional systematic student feedback which can be recorded.

21 One emerging issue here, particularly for institutions with more devolved management structures, is how to ensure a consistent approach to student engagement. As one ELIR report notes, 'Students' views are captured as part of the [quality review] process, but there is considerable variation in the ways this occurs in practice. All [quality review] panels meet with groups of students but the style of these meetings can differ in their degree of formality'. This variation of approach may also contribute to a lack of clarity among students about how their views have impacted on provision. The ELIR team suggests that 'The University could enhance the [quality review] process by reflecting further on how it could adopt a more consistent approach to engaging students, as well as providing information to students on action taken'.

### **Staff engagement in the review process**

22 The ELIR reports indicate wide endorsement of the quality review process by senior managers implementing the process, as well as by staff undergoing review. The following comments typify this positive view of the quality review process.

'Staff are enthusiastic about the revised process believing it to be less burdensome and conducted in a more positive atmosphere of critical self-reflection and self-evaluation than either external subject review or previous internal review methods.'

'Staff considered the process to be beneficial and regarded the investment of their time as worthwhile. Staff particularly welcomed the holistic review of a subject, as well as the emphasis on enhancement, in addition to the process of quality assurance.'



'Overall staff expressed the view that internal...reviews were more helpful than the Agency subject review had been, and that they encouraged self-analysis rather than self-promotion.'

'Staff who had been involved in the reviews spoke positively to the ELIR team about the process and its role within the...wider quality assurance processes, as well as its link with external processes. They considered the process has a clear focus on enhancement, and emphasised the positive opportunity it provides for discussion across subjects. They saw benefits in being a review panel member, including personal development and learning about review practice.'

'The [quality review] factual reports demonstrate the liveliness of the review dialogues, and the evaluative reports are rich and useful documents for the future development, management and resourcing of the subject areas.'

## Reporting process and follow up

23 Quality review reports typically provide a detailed commentary, which includes consideration of quality and academic standards of provision, reflection on the quality of learning opportunities, identification of good practice and areas for further improvement. After the draft report has been shared with the subject area under review, for factual corrections the report and recommendations are normally submitted to the central committee with responsibility for quality and academic standards. Depending on the locus of the review process, this may be followed or preceded by consideration by the relevant faculty or school board. Normally, the subject area is required to produce an initial response and action plan once the report has been considered by the relevant committee. One ELIR report highlights the developmental aspect of the follow-up process: 'The University emphasised that the school's preparation of a development plan in response to the review outcomes was a key enhancing element of the process'. ELIR reports comment in some cases on institutional requirements for action plans to contain specific targets with identified completion dates and designated responsibilities. Progress is monitored either centrally or at the local level, with year-on reporting of progress, and, in at least two institutions, a six-month follow-up report. One ELIR report notes that the institution conducts a three-year interim review to monitor progress against actions and outcomes. In many institutions the reports are made available online, and may be accessed externally.

24 Typically, the secretary to the review panel (usually an experienced administrator) drafts the report and recommendations, in consultation with the panel members as a team, such that the outcomes (including the recommendations) are collective decisions. Interestingly, one institution, which had modelled its quality review process very closely on QAA academic subject review, had adopted a procedure where a factual report was produced together with a second more evaluative report, including a panel 'confidence' judgement on the academic standards of the awards in the subject area in question.

25 The quality review process is an increasingly important vehicle for the identification and dissemination of good practice. Indeed one ELIR report notes that,

in addition to the standard documentation, the institution's schools may also submit additional documents that showcase strong features of provision. In another case, the ELIR report illustrates the importance of the linkage with annual monitoring processes, in this case with the 'Annual Faculty Quality Assurance and Enhancement Reports', which provide an opportunity to comment on the development of good practice identified in subject reviews. The ELIR report notes that 'Many of the incremental developments initiated in departments have arisen from the critical evaluations prompted by monitoring and reviewing activities'. The inclusion in panel membership of staff from centres for learning and teaching is clearly one way of facilitating the identification and dissemination of good practice. Some institutions have established websites summarising the good practice identified through quality review and related monitoring and review processes, while others recognise a need to improve the means for identification and dissemination of good practice in otherwise thorough and effective processes.

## Focus on enhancement

26 ELIR reports clearly illustrate the way in which the quality review process is evolving into a more developmental process with increasing focus on enhancement and stronger links to institutional strategic planning. The following comments are typical:

'The [quality reviews] have systematic enhancement functions both for the staff in the area being reviewed, who reflect on learning, teaching and enhancement activities and benefit from the involvement of external peers, and for the wider University community, which has access to the...reports. The Quality and Enhancement Unit reports to the Learning and Teaching Board on common themes and key outcomes and the academic support services are expected to reflect these in their work with the schools. In discussions during ELIR, staff commented on the range of benefits derived from [quality review], beginning with the dissemination of good practice between schools, the extent to which it allows specific issues to be addressed at school and University level, the way it is used to influence staff development, and its impact on increasing consistency between different disciplines.'

'The [quality review] process, in particular, has been effective in leading to enhancement at programme and subject level, achieving greater integration with recently established schools and in engendering a culture of continuous improvement.'

'Staff who have been directly involved are particularly positive about the benefits of the [quality review] process in leading to quality enhancement, and a shift from the perceived compliance culture engendered through previous processes.'

27 One institution was reported to consider that the most significant external influence in quality enhancement was through the involvement of two senior subject specialists in its quality review process, notwithstanding the role of the external examiner system as a link between quality assurance and quality enhancement.

## **Linkage with institutional enhancement strategies and local strategic planning processes**

28 In many institutions, the ELIR reports confirm that institution-led quality review is developing into a key vehicle for the promotion and embedding of enhancement at the subject level, and which articulates with institutional strategies and faculty/school/college plans. Indeed, some ELIR reports note that the development of institutional strategies for enhancement is having a positive effect on the self-evaluation aspect of the subject reviews, encouraging a more reflective approach. One ELIR report notes that while individual members of staff are not necessarily engaged fully with the quality enhancement strategy itself, individuals are likely to become more engaged in the future through the requirement for quality enhancement to be embedded in individual school plans and through quality enhancement being given greater emphasis in internal quality reviews.

29 The ELIR reports show that in many institutions the linkage between the quality review process and the institutional enhancement strategy is explicit and dynamic. For example, one ELIR report notes that 'The whole of the [quality review] process has been designed to elicit evidence that enhancement is happening, and has been further revised to focus less on matters of process and more on issues that affect students directly'. In a second example, the ELIR report concludes:

'The University has in place a range of policies and processes which include a focus on enhancement, and which are well understood and supported by staff. In particular, the University has an effective system of [quality review] which encourages colleges and schools to reflect on the operation of their provision and undertake an enhancement focused review. The outcomes of [the quality review process] are reflected upon at University and college level and this informs the strategic planning process.'

30 A third report highlights continuity of processes: '[Quality review] was described as not an event, but a process', which has a dynamic relationship with [the strategy for the enhancement of the quality of learning and teaching] and influences priority setting'. This is echoed in a fourth report, which states:

'The outcomes, both recommendations and commendations, arising from validation and internal review events are used to enhance provision and to formulate quality enhancement agendas.... The Analytical Accounts produced for [quality] reviews are expected to include critical evaluation of key developments and enhancements in the learning infrastructure and the mechanisms for collecting and responding to student feedback. From the start of session 2006/7 [quality] review panels have been asked to identify in their reports up to 3 areas of significant good practice for wider institutional enhancement.'

31 Several ELIR reports note the importance of effective linkage with annual monitoring arrangements. One report observes that 'There are an effective set of arrangements in place to ensure that quality assurance processes, such as annual course monitoring and internal review at programme and school levels, enable improvement and contribute to the enhancement agenda at both school and institutional levels'. One institution makes the linkage with annual monitoring

processes explicit by using the same six thematic headings for both the annual school 'Quality of Student Experience' reports and the self-evaluation in the quality review process. The ELIR team considered that this close alignment between quality review and annual monitoring arrangements strengthened both processes.

32 In a minority of institutions, particularly where the quality review process was either newly established, or more strongly rooted in pre-existing validation processes, the ELIR reports note, for example, that 'the opportunity [to make connections between quality assurance, quality enhancement and institutional strategy] has not yet been realised fully' and encourage the institutions to capitalise on the enhancement potential of periodic review. Many institutions are recognising the need for quality review to act as a vehicle for the promotion and embedding of enhancement, and are developing their processes to promote key linkage with institutional enhancement strategy.

## Conclusion

33 The ELIR reports confirm that institution-led quality review at the subject level is being operated effectively in Scottish higher education institutions as a peer review process with a high degree of externality. The process provides a robust system for the assurance of quality and maintenance of academic standards through the use of a number of external reference points, as well as affording a key vehicle for the promotion, monitoring and review of enhancement. The development of a more evaluative, self-reflective approach at subject level is the basis for a dynamic engagement which can articulate with local and institutional strategies. As the focus on the student learning experience increases across institutional structures, systems and processes, institution-led subject review epitomises the change in emphasis, through deepening engagement with student representatives in the process and widespread student membership on review panels. Institution-led quality review is a lynch-pin in supporting the enhancement-led approach at the subject level. Building on the achievements of the last five years, the sector is currently engaged in a project to identify and disseminate good practice in institution-led subject review, the outcomes of which will be published later this year.

## Annex

This interim report draws on the evidence of the following ELIR reports:

The Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, Glasgow	March 2004
University of Glasgow	April 2004
Queen Margaret University College*	May 2004
Bell College of Technology, Hamilton**	June 2004
University of Dundee	November 2004
The Glasgow School of Art	February 2005
Edinburgh College of Art	March 2005
University of Aberdeen	April 2005
University of Strathclyde	April 2005
The Scottish Agricultural College	May 2005
Bell College of Technology, Hamilton* (Follow-up review)	November 2005
Glasgow Caledonian University	December 2005
Heriot-Watt University	February 2006
University of St Andrews	March 2006
University of Paisley*	April 2006
Napier University, Edinburgh	April 2006
University of Edinburgh	November 2006
University of Stirling	November 2006
The Robert Gordon University	April 2007
University of Abertay Dundee	May 2007
UHI Millennium Institute	May 2007

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\*\*now the University of the West of Scotland

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