Updating commentary for
Good practice in Reflective Analysis when preparing for Enhancement-led institutional review

During the 2012-13 academic year, a project commissioned by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) looked at institutional approaches to self-evaluation (IASE) in the Scottish higher education sector. One aspect of self-evaluation considered by the IASE project was how institutions prepare for Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) including, of course, the production of the Reflective Analysis. Part of the project brief was to look back at the 2008 report, *Good practice in Reflective Analysis when preparing for Enhancement-led institutional review*, and to update it. This commentary is the result of that process.

Background to the *Good practice in Reflective Analysis* report

The *Good practice in Reflective Analysis* report resulted from a 2007-08 project, which was commissioned by Universities Scotland Teaching Quality Forum and managed by QAA Scotland as one of a number of enhancement projects during the interim period between the first and second cycles of ELIR. The project report was published in November 2008.[1]

The Reflective Analysis (RA) document is a central element of the ELIR process and the key means by which the ELIR team engages with the institution under review, particularly in the early stages of the ELIR process. The RA also represents a significant outcome of the process of institutional self-reflection in preparation for ELIR. The purpose of the project was to identify, collate and disseminate elements of good practice in relation to the process of preparing an RA; and to help higher education institutions in Scotland to reflect upon their own self-evaluation processes and potentially improve the linkage between institution-led and QAA review processes.

ELIR reviewers and institutional representatives responsible for producing RAs were asked for their views on the features of a 'good' RA, and the elements in ELIR preparation that help to produce one. Answers to these questions, supplemented by analysis of RAs and ELIR reports, produced the guidance in the report.

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[1] *Good practice in Reflective Analysis when preparing for Enhancement-led institutional review* (2008) is available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Universities-Scotland-Teaching-Quality-Forum-Project-Good-practice-in-Reflective-Analysis-when-preparing-for-Enhancement-l.aspx

Outcomes from the 2008 *Good practice in Reflective Analysis* report

In terms of '**Product**', many respondents agreed on the main features of a 'good' RA and made suggestions about how these could be achieved.

- **Approach**: ensuring that the RA meets the needs of the ELIR team, which is the primary audience, while also having the potential to be a useful internal tool in institutional development; being reflective, analytical and evidence-based; and being an open and honest (some preferred 'transparent') account of the institution's strengths and limitations, and its plans to deal with the latter.
- **Layout and length**: designing and structuring the RA to make it as accessible as possible to the ELIR team and other readers.
- **Additional material and format**: supplementing and linking the RA with additional explanatory material, and providing printed and electronic formats.
- **Style**: ensuring that the RA is a readable narrative.
- **Balance**: balancing description and analysis so that the former does not greatly outweigh the latter; and meeting the requirements of the RA to describe and analyse both the management of quality assurance and enhancement.
- **Case studies**: trying to ensure that these prove more used and useful than in some previous ELIRs, and illustrate institutional processes rather than isolated examples of good practice.

In terms of '**Process**', responses were grouped as follows.

- **Ownership and inclusivity**: views and suggestions about responsibilities for preparing the institution for ELIR and writing the RA while seeking buy-in and wider ownership from constituencies across the institution; and ensuring that RA preparation is as inclusive as possible of students and staff.
- **Timescale**: the importance of starting RA preparation in sufficient time to allow inclusivity and ownership.
- **Integration**: the better linkage of ELIR and the RA with internal review processes.

The main conclusion of the project was that institutions which adopt an open, inclusive, reflective and evaluative approach to the production of their RA are more likely to achieve an ELIR outcome that they see as satisfactory and useful.

Finally, the report provided a broadly chronological checklist of matters to consider and do in preparing an RA for ELIR, which institutions were invited to consider and adapt for their own needs as appropriate.

Changes since *Good practice in Reflective Analysis* was published

The evidence base for the 2008 *Good practice in Reflective Analysis* report was derived from the experiences of institutional representatives and ELIR team members in the first round of ELIR up to 2007. Since the report was published the second round of ELIR has been completed, the third round is already underway, and institutions have acquired much more experience in preparing for ELIR. In addition, while the basic features of ELIR have not been radically altered, the guidance to institutions on the ELIR process and preparation for it, as set out in the *ELIR Handbook*, has changed between ELIR 2 and ELIR 3.

The advance information set (AIS)

The most important change as far as the RA is concerned is described in the 2012 edition of the *ELIR Handbook* as follows:

> 'The adjustments in the ELIR method for the third cycle are, collectively, intended to provide a sharper focus on enhancement within the individual reviews. This is the clear intention behind the proposal to provide ELIR teams with an advance information set, which should enable enquiries relating to quality assurance and the management of academic standards to be addressed earlier in the process than has been the case in the previous cycles. In turn, this will free up time during the review visits for exploration of institutional approaches to enhancing the student learning experience.' (Page 1)

The Handbook goes on to point out the role of the AIS which:

> 'provides the ELIR team with direct access to information about the institution's key processes for securing academic standards and assuring quality at an earlier stage in the review than was the case in other iterations of the ELIR method. This permits the ELIR team to identify specific areas for exploration with the institution and, consequently, allows more time during the review visits for discussions relating to quality enhancement.' (Paragraph 32)

Clearly the introduction of the AIS would be expected to replace some of the descriptive material that might previously have been found in the RA.

Is the advice in *Good practice in Reflective Analysis* still relevant?

Do these and other changes make the advice in *Good practice in Reflective Analysis* irrelevant? The results of the IASE project suggest not. Given the expertise of those who were consulted in the 2007-08 project, the conclusions reached then about the processes of evaluation and reflection underlying preparation for ELIR and the production of the RA were expected to retain currency. Now in the IASE project, fresh consultations with ELIR reviewers and institutional representatives have allowed the guidance to be revisited. In particular, the question of what makes a 'good RA' was reprised. Encouragingly, little has changed in the 2013 answers according to which the characteristics of a good RA are that it:

- addresses the ELIR team which is the primary audience, and is fully accessible to external readers
- is reflective, analytical and evidence-based
- summarises a process of continuous reflection with a forward-looking dimension
- is open, honest (transparent), and upfront about areas for further development
- balances description and analysis, and assurance and enhancement
- is not too long - a readable, consistent narrative but reflecting institutional diversity.

Case studies

The IASE responses also reiterated a view about case studies expressed by ELIR 1 team members that to be useful to the ELIR team, case studies need to illustrate the working out of strategic processes rather than just being examples of what institutions consider to be good practice.

The value of the ELIR preparation process

One marked change between responses in 2007 and 2013 was the much more positive view expressed by institutional representatives about the opportunity that an upcoming ELIR presented for prior institution-level evaluation. For example, one respondent wrote:

> 'The ELIR provided an opportunity to step back and reflect on the many activities and processes that underpin quality enhancement thereby ensuring a holistic review of our approach'.

Another wrote that:

> 'the process of thinking about what you do that's good and thinking honestly about where things might be improved, has been helpful overall'.

Another welcomed the ELIR as providing:

> 'a framework (and impetus) for us to take a look, at the institutional level, at our enhancement plans and assurance processes'.

The evidence of the IASE project is of greater integration between institutions' approaches to monitoring and review and preparation for ELIR thereby meeting one the aims of the *Good practice in Reflective Analysis* project to 'improve the linkage between institution-led and QAA review processes'.

Sharing experiences of ELIR preparation

The IASE project has also shown that some institutional representatives would find greater sharing of preparation experiences between institutions useful. Some had already consulted colleagues in similar types of institutions or at the same point in the ELIR cycle, and seeing examples of RAs (some are publicly available online) was helpful. It was suggested that the most useful experience was membership of an ELIR team to get an understanding of what a reviewer looks for in an RA.

The length of an RA

The *Good practice in Reflective Analysis* report gave the following advice about the length of an RA.

> '**Aim for a readable length**: the ELIR Handbook does not make recommendations about RA length and it is obviously a difficult area on which to give definitive guidance because of variations in institutional size, complexity and state of development. However, as a rule of thumb one respondent suggested that an RA length should be such that it 'can be read in one (long) session', which is more likely to give reviewers an overall sense of the institution rather than several fragmented readings.'

Alongside this advice was the estimate that the average length of a sample of RAs from the first ELIR cycle was around 30,000 words, though variance was high. However in a similar sample from ELIR 2 that figure had just about doubled. This runs counter to the advice about a 'readable length'. Some institutional representatives who were interviewed for the IASE project were not surprised at the growing length of RAs, citing the need to explain at greater length the ever-growing complexity of their institutional contexts to those reviewers from outwith Scottish higher education, and the importance attached to securing a positive ELIR

outcome working against brevity. To set against this, ELIR reviewers have commented on the difficulty of working with overlong RAs and still see the relevance of the concept of a 'readable length'.

With the advent of ELIR 3, institutions should be able to use the new requirement for the AIS as an opportunity to move some of the more descriptive quality assurance material out of the main text of the RA and produce the more readable narrative that ELIR reviewers have said they want to see.

Conclusion: using *Good practice in Reflective Analysis* in ELIR 3

The *Good practice in Reflective Analysis* report was generally well received by those preparing RAs in ELIR 2, and has also been of interest to institutions and agencies outwith Scotland. It drew on the considerable accumulated experience and expertise of colleagues, who were either or both institutional representatives and ELIR team members.

The results of the IASE project show that the main conclusions of the report are still relevant now. With the proviso that *Good practice in Reflective Analysis* needs to be read in conjunction with the latest edition of the *ELIR Handbook* and in particular the new requirement for the AIS, the advice and guidance in *Good practice in Reflective Analysis* remains a useful adjunct to institution's preparations for an upcoming ELIR.