

Evaluative practices in the Scottish university sector 2013

Outcomes from the institutional approaches to evaluation (IASE) project

'Considerable confidence can be derived from an institution that has systematic arrangements in place for evaluating its strengths and identifying and addressing potential risks to quality and academic standards.'

ELIR handbook, third edition

Context

Scottish higher education institutions evaluate their learning and teaching in a variety of ways using procedures that have been developed over a number of decades. The *Institutional approaches to self-evaluation* (IASE) project, undertaken on behalf of QAA Scotland by Professor Paddy Maher during 2012-13, aimed to consider and codify the various arrangements that institutions have in place. The project also aimed to identify the features that make institutions' evaluative arrangements effective. The [full project report](#) and a further publication, [Effective approaches to evaluation in the Scottish university sector](#), are available on the QAA website.¹

Key developments in institutions' evaluative practices

The [Enhancement-led Institutional Review \(ELIR\)](#)² process has demonstrated that the Scottish higher education institutions have systematic arrangements in place for monitoring and reviewing the academic standards of the awards they offer and the quality of the student learning experience they provide. Using a combination of approaches including literature reviews, interviews and focus groups, the IASE project found that institutions' evaluative processes have developed in the following ways since 2003 when the [Quality Enhancement Framework in Scotland](#)³ was introduced:

- institutions' approaches to self-evaluation have become more reflective and analytical
- there has been a positive shift from assurance to enhancement
- there is closer alignment between annual monitoring and periodic review processes
- the quality and accessibility of data to support evaluation has improved and this is continuing to be developed in a number of institutions
- there is greater student engagement with evaluative processes, including students as full members of review panels and, in a number of institutions, students actively engaging in the evaluation of the provision

¹ IASE project resources are available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/types-of-review/Pages/effective-approaches-evaluation.aspx

² Further information on ELIR is available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/types-of-review/Pages/ELIR.aspx

³ Further information on the Quality Enhancement Framework in Scotland is available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/aboutus/pages/Quality-enhancement-framework-in-Scotland.aspx

- institutions are using a greater range of external reference points in undertaking evaluative activities, including those derived from increasing engagement with the [Enhancement Themes](#)⁴.

Scope of the project

The IASE project considered four types of institutional evaluation: annual monitoring; institution-led quality review; preparation for ELIR; and transformational reviews of institutional processes. The main findings from the project in relation to each of these four types are set out here.

Annual monitoring

Annual monitoring processes are becoming more reflective and enhancement focused. Positive developments in annual monitoring include:

- the use of a greater range of external reference points, including the National Student Survey (NSS) and the Enhancement Themes
- improvements in the breadth, quality, consistency and accessibility of monitoring data (and most institutions are developing or further refining their data management arrangements)
- enhancements to processes for 'closing the loop' on feedback from students (many institutions are now using the 'You Said, We Did' model of communication to students)
- closer alignment between institutions' annual and periodic review arrangements, with the evidence base for institution-led quality review increasingly being provided by the annual monitoring process.

In the context of a very positive picture across the sector as a whole, some institutions highlighted ways in which they would like to see their annual monitoring activity develop. For example, a number identified that annual monitoring should be:

- more fully embedded in regular academic activity
- less paper heavy
- less operationally focused
- more reflective and analytical
- more responsive.

Several institutions have annual monitoring arrangements that are intended to meet these suggested developments. For example, a number have adopted approaches that could be characterised as 'a little more conversation' in which more emphasis is given to discussion between colleagues and less to the passage of paper. In these cases, the written report informs a face-to-face dialogue between the subject team and the monitoring group. This is having a positive impact in shifting the focus of annual monitoring from an audit approach to one where a conversation can develop about what's working well, what the potential problems are and what's new and innovative. This can help to promote a more analytical approach by the subject team.

⁴ More information on the Scottish Enhancement Themes can be found at: www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk

Institution-led quality review

Institution-led quality review processes are being developed to become more streamlined and enhancement-led.

- Links between annual and periodic review processes are being strengthened through the use of accumulated annual monitoring reports (which draw on a wide range of external reference points) as the evidence base for review. This reduces the need for additional paperwork and enables staff to concentrate on evaluation and enhancement.
- There is an increasing emphasis on institution-led quality review as an opportunity for subject teams to reflect on what they have been doing and why, and to analyse challenges and new initiatives.
- There are improvements in student engagement as students are being provided with systematic support and training for their role as periodic review panel members.
- There is an increased emphasis on subject development which makes more effective use of external panel members.

The active engagement of academic staff in institution-led quality review processes is key to the successful operation of periodic review as an enhancement tool. Although such engagement continues to be a challenge, a number of institutions are making particular efforts to engage staff by identifying the wider purpose and benefits of institution-led quality review (sometimes referred to as: answering the 'so what?' question). Institutions are more likely to be successful in securing the engagement of academic staff when they have mechanisms in place to:

- develop the leadership skills of subject area leaders
- develop the self-evaluation skills of academic staff
- embed evaluation as part of professional practice
- highlight the academic value of institution-led quality review
- ensure institution-led quality review has a developmental rather than bureaucratic approach.

Active student engagement is a significant success in Scottish higher education and institutions are continuing to seek ways of making it even more effective. To support this, and other developments in institutional review processes, a number of institutions indicated that they would welcome more opportunities to share practice across the sector.

Preparation for ELIR

Preparing for ELIR is regarded by institutions as an important (and generally positive!) catalyst for the strategic, holistic review of quality arrangements. In the majority of institutions, ELIR preparation is closely integrated with internal cycles of self-evaluation. This is a much more positive position than the responses given during a similar survey in 2007-08 as part of the *Good practice in Reflective Analysis when preparing for ELIR* project. At that time ELIR was more frequently regarded as a separate, external, one-off activity. However, in 2012-13, several institutions stressed that their self-evaluation processes were not ELIR-driven. In their view, evaluation is a constant, and ELIR preparation is an additional and complementary opportunity for reflection on an institution's strategic approach to enhancement. Further information on good practice in preparing for ELIR is available in this updated guide: [Updating commentary for Good practice in Reflective Analysis for ELIR](#).

Transformational reviews of institutional processes

A notable feature of the Scottish university sector over the ELIR cycles is the number of institutions which have undertaken major transformational projects affecting their curricula and/or academic structures. These have tended to take the form of long-term, 'root and branch' projects, requiring lengthy periods of consultation, significant evidence gathering and extensive external engagement, and they are a demonstration of institutions' ability to undertake effective self-evaluative activity. A number of institutions, as well as carrying out internal evaluation, submitted these transformational projects as ELIR case studies. In all institutions the projects were regarded as having been successful, having an energising effect and leading to enhancement of the student learning experience.

Although the precise nature of these transformational reviews varies considerably to fit the individual institutions, and what they were seeking to achieve, common features supporting their effectiveness are:

- Clarity of strategic vision (what the project is intending to achieve)
- Engagement of staff and students in forming the intended outcomes and/or their implementation
- Extensive consultation over the lifetime of the project(s)
- Learning from practice elsewhere (in a number of cases, this included learning from practice outside the higher education sector and/or international practice)
- Evaluation of the project(s) during the development and implementation phases

Conclusion

Monitoring and review processes in the Scottish higher education institutions are systematic and have become more enhancement-focused since 2003. Guidance on the monitoring and review arrangements is set out by the [Scottish Funding Council](#).⁵ In addition, institutions address a range of reference points and regularly review their own evaluative activities to meet external and internal requirements. The IASE project has demonstrated the sector's vigour and 'continual improvement' ethos in relation to its approaches to self-evaluation.

While the enhancement-led approach is more successful in engaging academic staff than previous quality regimes, competing demands mean that staff will need clear incentives to prioritise their engagement in evaluation. The greater convergence of academic and quality cultures, encouraging institutional research on institution-led evaluative practices and framing evaluation as part of professional practice should help to ensure discussion within and between institutions about the ongoing development of effective approaches to self-evaluation.

It is evident from the IASE project that the stability provided by the Quality Enhancement Framework since 2003 has supported the development of evaluative practices in institutions. This is in line with the findings of the external evaluation commissioned by the Scottish Funding Council: [Enhancement in the Scottish University sector 2003-12](#),⁶ which stated that a continuing commitment to the long-term is 'particularly beneficial in bringing about effective culture change'.

⁵ Further information about the Scottish Funding Council is available at: www.sfc.ac.uk

⁶ *Enhancement in the Scottish University sector 2003* is available at: www.sfc.ac.uk/web/FILES/CMP_QEGPCCommittee29November2012_29112012/QEGPC12_33_cover_QAA_2_cycle_report.pdf

Next steps

The outcomes of the IASE project will inform the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee's (SHEEC) forward programme of work, and will also underpin the evaluation of ELIR 3 and the development of future review methods.

Two specific resources have been produced as a result of the project: [Updating commentary to Good practice in Reflective Analysis for ELIR](#); and [Effective approaches to evaluation in the Scottish university sector](#). Both of these resources will be widely disseminated for use by institutions and are available on the QAA website.

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