



QAA Scotland
Annual Report for academic year 2012-13

Foreword - Jenny Rees, Chair



At the conclusion of my term of office on the QAA Board and as Chair of the QAA Scotland Committee, I can commend the significant achievements of QAA in Scotland of which this annual report gives the most recent picture.

My perceptions of the work of QAA Scotland have been heightened by my recent personal experience of working in higher education (HE) outwith Scotland. I can see even more clearly that QAA in Scotland, in partnership with the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and the higher education institutions (HEIs) and their students, has developed in the Quality Enhancement Framework something of international significance.

It was particularly pleasing that Scotland could therefore host a highly successful international conference, described in this report, marking the tenth anniversary of the national Enhancement Themes.

I would like to thank all my fellow members of the QAA Scotland Committee whose varied backgrounds and experience enabled them to contribute to lively and constructive committee discussions. In keeping with QAA Scotland's international outlook, it was particularly pleasing to welcome Dr Helka Kekalainen to the Committee. The QAA Scotland staff have risen to the opportunities afforded by last year's restructuring and are recognised across Scottish HE for the work they do. I am particularly indebted to Thelma Barron for her professional support for the QAA Scotland Committee itself.

The QAA Scotland Director, Dr Bill Harvey, retires in March 2014 and through this introduction I can be one of the first of many who will want to record their appreciation for the work he has done for QAA Scotland and for QAA's work in HE in Scotland. He has ably taken forward the distinctive approach to quality and its assurance in Scottish HE based on confidence in academic standards and a continuing focus on enhancement. He will be missed but has developed a strong platform on which his successor can build.

Dr Jenny Rees
Chair of the QAA Scotland Committee

Introduction - Bill Harvey, Director



This report summarises what has been a very positive year for QAA Scotland. Our achievements would not have been possible without the professionalism and commitment of my colleagues in the Glasgow office and the support we received from colleagues in our Gloucester office.

The structural changes which we put in place for QAA Scotland last year are now paying clear dividends, both in the internal management and operation of our office, and in our wider work with the Scottish HE sector, its students, and our other stakeholders in Scotland. I would particularly like to thank Claire Carney (Head of Enhancement) and Ailsa Crum (Head of Reviews) for the way they have developed and led their teams over the past year. I would also like to thank Jenny Rees, the outgoing Chair of the QAA Scotland Committee, for the excellent service she has provided to the Committee, to QAA Scotland, and to the QAA Board during her three-year term of office. I am delighted to note that Professor Philip Winn has been appointed as Chair of the Committee for the next three years.

I hope you find it interesting to learn more about our activities during 2012-13. This will be my last annual report since I will be retiring in March 2014. But I look forward to seeing QAA Scotland continue to play a leading role in the future work of the Scottish HE sector.

About QAA

QAA was created in 1997. It operates throughout the UK from offices in Gloucester, Glasgow, Cardiff and London. QAA is an independent body funded by subscriptions from HEIs 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 provide development and enhancement services to help institutions to ensure that students have high quality learning experiences.

QAA in Scotland

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

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

Our partners

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

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

Our role in the Scottish higher education sector

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

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

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

Our work in 2012-13

Quality and standards

This year we implemented planned changes to our Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR) method as we began the third cycle of reviews. We conducted two reviews under the ELIR 3 model at Queen Margaret University and at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. As part of the revised methodology, we have amended the format of our reports on the outcomes of review so that the main report is now aimed at meeting the needs of a non-technical audience, with an additional technical report providing more detail for those who wish it. In each case, QAA judged that the institution had effective systems in place for managing standards and the student learning experience. The review reports also identify areas of good practice areas for development at the institutions. The reports are available from QAA's website.

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

As part of the ELIR process, follow-up reports are produced by each institution one year after completion of the review. The year-on reports for reviews conducted during the academic year 2012-13 relate to the universities of Abertay Dundee, Edinburgh, and Stirling, the Robert Gordon University and the University of the Highlands and Islands. These reports are all available on QAA's website.

Starting in 2013, QAA now provides the SFC with an annual report on each institution, in the form of a statement of assurance about quality and standards, with additional briefing information on the specific context of each institution.

This year we completed a major project to support institutional approaches to self-evaluation. This project, led by Professor Paddy Maher, has produced a range of useful resources including a set of indicators of effective evaluative practice, and updated guidance on producing a Reflective Analysis for ELIR. The outcomes of this project are all available on the QAA website. We also ran a programme of training and development events for reviewers and institutions.

There has been much discussion in the HE sector and beyond about Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) which have developed at a very rapid pace in HE and which are transforming the scale and reach of our conventional understanding of e-learning. Although many Scottish universities are experimenting with these new formats, they are typically not yet used to deliver programmes which lead to academic credit or awards. This means that MOOCs are not normally encompassed within the scope of QAA's institutional reviews. However, that situation may change in the future and QAA is actively considering and developing the potential implications of MOOCs on our future approaches to reviews of provision.

Enhancement Themes

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

The Theme has identified three strands of activity:

- Curriculum for Excellence and its impact on HE
- the flexible curriculum
- staff: enhancing teaching.

Each of these areas is being taken forward by commissioned consultants and the entire programme is overseen by the overall Theme steering committee, now chaired by Rowena Pelick, Director of Academic Strategy and Practice at Edinburgh Napier University.

Our overall strategy for enhancement continues to be monitored and supported by the SHEEC, chaired by Professor Andrea Nolan. We were very pleased to note that Professor Nolan was appointed as Principal and Vice-Chancellor of Edinburgh Napier University earlier this year, and delighted that she has agreed to continue to act as Chair of SHEEC until 2014.

This year, to celebrate 10 years of the national Enhancement Themes, we organised an international conference which was held in Glasgow on 11-13 June 2013. The conference attracted 540 delegates, with 114 of these delegates from outside Scotland, coming from 24 different countries. As well as the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, speakers included senior international academics from the University of Hong Kong, MIT and Philadelphia University. Conference breakout sessions included 110 contributed papers, along with 17 workshops and 34 poster presentations. A wide range of conference resources is available for download from our [Enhancement Themes website](#).

We have also organised a range of other activities to celebrate 10 years of Enhancement Themes, including a [video presentation](#) on the work of the themes, an overview report highlighting key features of the Themes and pointers to the future, and a reception held at the Scottish Parliament.

Learning from International Practice

QAA manages a programme of work which seeks to identify interesting and relevant practice in other countries that may have a bearing on the needs of the sector and students in Scotland. Our most recent work has focused on the experience of students on taught postgraduate programmes, and in particular on the characteristics of 'Mastersness'.

More generally, in all aspects of our work, we encourage the Scottish HE sector to actively engage with practitioners in other countries and to learn from international practice. Our strong commitment to an international approach is demonstrated through our use of international reviewers in every institutional review; through our systematic engagement with good practice in other countries as part of our enhancement approach; and through our professional links with quality agencies and review processes in many other countries. Colleagues from our enhancement team have given invited presentations at a range of international workshops and events in Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Poland, Finland and Estonia.

Recognition of Prior Learning

QAA Scotland continues to support the Scottish HE sector in promoting more flexible approaches to teaching, learning and assessment, and, in particular, we are currently working with the sector to develop a national framework for Recognition of Prior Learning. Initial proposals have been developed and discussed with senior managers in the sector, and we expect that the final version of the framework will be completed and published in 2014.

Key trends and issues

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

- engaging students in dialogue about learning and how the student experience is managed
- influencing and learning from international practice
- promoting employability

- providing curriculum and student support
- designing, implementing and evaluating enhancement-focused learning and teaching strategies
- evaluating practice at the discipline and institutional levels
- securing academic standards and the quality of the student experience.

The following issues were identified as areas of continuing challenge for the sector:

- feedback on assessment
- management of data on the student experience
- widening participation and student transitions
- retention and progression
- recognising leadership in learning and teaching.

The policy environment

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

The Scottish Government's Post-16 Education Bill came into force on 7 August 2013. The bulk of the proposals relate to merger and rationalisation of the Scottish college sector, but the Bill also gives new powers to Ministers to define good practice in university governance, and to define and agree widening access agreements for all HEIs.

The SFC has continued to develop its approach to the use of outcome agreements, and we have had extensive and helpful conversations with outcome agreement managers at the SFC in order to ensure a common understanding of how QAA processes and outputs can best support the SFC's actions.

The independence referendum, scheduled for September 2014, is having a major impact on thinking across Scotland about the potential consequences of different electoral outcomes. The Office of the Scottish Charities Regulator has produced helpful guidance on how charities can appropriately engage with the policy context, and QAA Scotland has begun work on scenario planning and other policy exploration to consider potential implications. Universities Scotland has produced a helpful document on key features of the Scottish HE sector which should be maintained regardless of the referendum outcome, and we were pleased to note that the Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework, and the work of QAA Scotland, were identified as central elements of the distinctive Scottish HE context. The British Council also published a report on a strategic analysis of the distinctive assets of the Scottish HE sector, and we were again pleased to note that the quality assurance system and national enhancement themes were cited among the top five assets of the sector.

Looking ahead

Although we look ahead to 2014 from a position of confidence and with the knowledge that our work is valued by our partners and stakeholders, we are very conscious that constraints on public funding will continue to be severe. It will be important to provide the best possible evidence of the positive impact of our work and to be able to demonstrate to our funders and owners that we provide good value for money.

QAA 585 01/14

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ISBN 978 1 84979 974 4

All QAA's publications are available on our website www.qaa.ac.uk

Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786