

Enhancement-led Institutional Review of the University of Aberdeen

Outcome Report

November 2013

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About the Enhancement-led Institutional Review method

A dedicated page of the QAA website explains the method for [Enhancement-led Institutional Review](#) of higher education institutions in Scotland and has links to the ELIR handbook and other informative documents.¹ You can also find more information [about QAA](#) and its mission.²

Further details about the enhancement-led approach can be found in an accompanying [ELIR information document](#),³ including an overview of the review method, definitions of the judgement categories, and explanations of follow-up action. It also contains information on the Scottish Funding Council's response to ELIR judgements.

About this review

This is the Outcome Report of the Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at the University of Aberdeen. The review took place as follows: 8-10 October 2013 and Part 2 visit in the week commencing 18 November 2013. The review was conducted by a team of six reviewers:

- Professor Jeremy Bradshaw (Academic Reviewer)
- Pat Devlin (Academic Reviewer)
- Professor Marianne Howarth (Academic Reviewer)
- Professor Elizabeth Deane (International Reviewer)
- Laura Timperley (Student Reviewer)
- Gavin Lee (Coordinating Reviewer)

This report sets out the overarching judgement formed by the ELIR team on:

- the current and likely future effectiveness of the institution's arrangements for managing academic standards and enhancing the quality of the student learning experience

It is possible for the overarching judgement to be expressed in three levels which indicate that the institution's arrangements are: effective; have limited effectiveness; or are not effective. More detail on these categories is provided in the ELIR information document.

The overarching judgement for this report can be found on page 3, followed by the areas of positive practice and the areas for development.

A more detailed [Technical Report](#) is also available for this review.⁴ The Technical Report sets out the ELIR team's findings under each of the headings in the ELIR 3 method.

¹ Further information about the ELIR method: www.qaa.ac.uk/institutionreports/types-of-review/pages/elir.aspx

² Further information about QAA: www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus

³ ELIR information document: www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/ELIR-information.aspx

⁴ Technical report: www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/Reports/Pages/ELIR-Aberdeen-13.aspx.

About the University of Aberdeen

The University of Aberdeen is one of the oldest universities in the UK and the third oldest in Scotland. It has a strong commitment and mission to deliver high quality teaching and research. It describes itself as a 'distinctively Scottish University, but our reach and aspirations are global.'

The academic structure is based on three colleges: Arts & Social Sciences; Life Sciences & Medicine; and Physical Sciences. In 2012-13, the University had a total student population of 13,308 full-time equivalent students of whom 10,967 were undergraduate, 1,458 were postgraduate taught and 883 were postgraduate research.

Overarching judgement about the University of Aberdeen

The University of Aberdeen has **effective** arrangements for managing academic standards and the student learning experience. These arrangements are likely to continue to be effective in the future.

This is a positive judgement, which means the University has robust arrangements for securing academic standards and for enhancing the quality of the student experience.

Areas of positive practice

1 The ELIR has identified a number of areas of positive practice and these are summarised below.

2 **Curriculum Reform** - the University's progressive implementation of its Curriculum Reform project has been successful. It has had a transformational effect on the undergraduate curriculum as well as providing the catalyst for a range of other positive initiatives, touching all areas of learning and teaching at the University.

3 **Evaluation leading to transformational change** - there is a culture of self-reflection and critical self-evaluation that is evident in the University's willingness to initiate and support significant transformational projects for the benefit of the entire University community.

4 **Optimising the use of the virtual learning environment** - the University's virtual learning environment (VLE), MyAberdeen, is being used to enhance the student experience in a range of imaginative ways, and its development is responsive to student views.

5 **Systematic student support** - the University has systematic arrangements in place for providing student support and this is likely to be enhanced further with the implementation of the Personal Tutor System. Students spoke very positively during the review about the pastoral and academic support they receive from staff, in particular students emphasised and appreciated the access they have to academic staff.

6 **Promoting employability and graduate attributes** - the arrangements for promoting employability and delivering the Aberdeen Graduate Attributes in the undergraduate curriculum are systematic and have brought about a range of enhancements to the student experience. Development of the Aberdeen Graduate Attributes was central to the new curriculum and it is evident that considerable thought has been given to their careful embedding. Support for this is provided through a range of measures, such as staff support provided by the Centre for Academic Development. A clear focus on employability is achieved through the systematic contribution of the programme advisory boards, through which employers can influence and engage with the graduate attributes and programme design and delivery.

7 **Student partnership** - the University has a positive and constructive relationship with the Aberdeen University Students' Association. There are opportunities for students' views to be considered at all levels of the institution through the feedback arrangements, the University committee structure and the formal student representative system.

8 **Clear focus for academic development** - the Centre for Academic Development has an emerging role in providing coordinated staff development and support across the University, including facilitating the dissemination of good practice across schools and colleges.

9 **Internal Teaching Review** - the Internal Teaching Review process provides methodical and detailed critical analysis of discipline areas. The plans to include a more explicit enhancement focus to this assurance-based process are likely to ensure the University can benefit further and provide greater linkages between its assurance processes and the variety of enhancement activities.

Areas for development

10 The University is asked to consider the areas summarised below.

11 **Evaluating success of initiatives** - give more detailed consideration to effective ways of evaluating the implementation of its significant initiatives, such as Curriculum Reform and the data management project, OneSource. Doing this from the outset would, among other things, provide a clearer baseline against which the University could consider the effects of implementation.

12 **Support for a more diverse student population** - in the context of the University's plans to promote widening participation and diversify its student population, progress a range of intended actions including those relating to internationalisation and broadening its analysis of progression rates to include part-time and postgraduate students. The University is also asked to consider the access for part-time students to student support services, such as the Student Learning Service, out of core hours.

13 **Pace of responding** - consider its responsiveness to external feedback. Specifically, the University is asked to prioritise implementing the intended revisions to the Common Assessment Scheme and implement the Annual Programme Review process in 2014 as intended.

14 **Strengthening the links between assurance and enhancement** - continue to develop more explicit links between the University's assurance processes and its enhancement activities to capitalise on the benefits of both.

15 **Availability of information** - related to the review of its committee structure, the University is encouraged to make its committee minutes and papers more promptly and widely accessible to staff.

16 **Detailed use of external reference points** - enhance its practice in the use and detailed scrutiny of external reference points in the programme proposal and approval processes. In particular, there would be benefit in promoting more explicit engagement by staff with subject benchmark statements and other reference points. This is in the context of the University, overall, meeting sector expectations in its use of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.

What happens next?

17 QAA Scotland will continue to engage with the institution through the annual discussion visits which, amongst other matters, consider the ways in which the institution is responding to the ELIR outcomes.

18 One year after publication of the ELIR Outcome and Technical Reports, institutions are asked to provide a follow-up report to indicate how they are responding to the outcomes of ELIR. Institutions also engage in a follow-up event with colleagues from other institutions to explore the ways in which the ELIR outcomes are being implemented. The final version of the institution's follow-up report is published on the QAA website.

Further information

19 A more detailed [Technical Report](#) is also available for this review. The Technical Report sets out the ELIR team's findings under each of the headings in the ELIR 3 method.

20 This review and its findings relate to the institution as a whole and do not provide information about individual programmes of study or subjects. For further information about those, contact the institution or visit the [University of Aberdeen website](#).

21 University sector institutions in Scotland also engage in systematic Enhancement Theme activity. Further information about that work, which has a sector-wide and institutional focus, can be found on the [Enhancement Themes website](#).

22 Further information about QAA Scotland and the enhancement-led approach, including the ELIR method, can be found on the [QAA website](#).

23 For further information about the Scottish Funding Council see www.sfc.ac.uk.

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