

# Enhancement-led Institutional Review of the University of Aberdeen

## Technical 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.<sup>1</sup> You can also find more information [about QAA](#) and its mission.<sup>2</sup>

Further details about the enhancement-led approach can be found in an accompanying [ELIR information document](#),<sup>3</sup> 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 Technical 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: Part 1 visit on 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)

In advance of the review visits, the University submitted a self-evaluative document (the Reflective Analysis) and an advance information set, comprising a range of materials about the institution's arrangements for managing quality and academic standards. In addition, the University submitted a case study: the OneSource Programme and the Student Life Cycle Projects.

## About this report

In this report, the ELIR team:

- delivers an overarching judgement 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.

The overarching judgement can be found on page 3, followed by the detailed findings of the review given in numbered paragraphs.

ELIR Technical Reports are intended primarily for the institution which hosted the review, and to provide an information base for the production of thematic reports which identify findings across several institutions.

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<sup>1</sup> Further information about the ELIR method: [www.qaa.ac.uk/institutionreports/types-of-review/pages/elir.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/institutionreports/types-of-review/pages/elir.aspx)

<sup>2</sup> Further information about QAA: [www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus)

<sup>3</sup> ELIR information document: [www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/ELIR-information.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/ELIR-information.aspx)

Technical Reports set out the ELIR team's view under each of the report headings. Shorter Outcome Reports are provided which set out the main findings of the ELIR for a wider audience. The [Outcome Report](#) for this review is on the QAA website.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Outcome Report: [www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/Reports/Pages/ELIR-Aberdeen-13.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/Reports/Pages/ELIR-Aberdeen-13.aspx).

# 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.

## 1 Institutional context and strategic framework

### 1.1 Key features of the institution's context and mission

1 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 described itself as a 'distinctively Scottish University, but our reach and aspirations are global'. In 2012-13, the University had a total student population of 13,308 full-time equivalent (FTE) students of whom 10,967 were undergraduate, 1,458 were postgraduate taught and 883 were postgraduate research.

2 The academic structure is based on three colleges: Arts & Social Sciences; Life Sciences & Medicine; and Physical Sciences. Each college contains a number of schools and is led by a Vice-Principal, supported by a College Director of Teaching and Learning and a Head of Graduate School for undergraduate and postgraduate matters respectively.

3 A new Strategic Plan was developed for 2011-15, setting out the University's agreed priorities including strategic objectives relating to: delivering a high quality student experience, growing the student population, embedding a culture of internationalisation, and continuing to promote partnership working. The Strategic Plan is underpinned by a series of operational plans for: Learning and Teaching, Research, Internationalisation, Finance, Estates, and Information Technology.

4 The University has engaged in two significant transformational projects: Curriculum Reform (CREF) which received strong endorsement in the 2010 ELIR report and the development of a single data and records management system, OneSource.

5 In discussion with the ELIR team, senior staff indicated that the University regarded the ELIR as an opportunity for both internal evaluation and external review of the progress of a number of initiatives and achievements since the 2010 ELIR. In particular, progress is associated with the embedding of CREF. The Reflective Analysis was developed as a collaborative effort across the University and has served to demonstrate the wide range of initiatives currently in progress.

### 1.2 Strategic approach to enhancing learning and teaching

6 The University has an effective strategic approach to enhancing learning and teaching which is set out within its well articulated and widely understood Strategic Plan (2011-15). The extent to which the Strategic Plan and the associated Learning and Teaching Operational Plan are well understood by staff across the University reflects the fact that they were developed through wide consultation. The University described the Learning and Teaching Operational Plan as a live and dynamic document, emphasising that student feedback plays a significant role in its ongoing development. The colleges and schools have developed their own initiatives to support the fulfilment of the strategic objectives.

7 The University is able to monitor progress towards the achievement of its strategic targets through its thorough risk management process. The Risk Management Policy and Procedures were revised in 2010 to integrate formally with the University strategic planning process. The University Register of Strategic (or Corporate) Risks is overseen by the University Risk Management Committee. In 2011-12, the risk model was extended to cover key strategic objectives, each of which has its own risk register: learning and teaching, research, and internationalisation. In addition, each college maintains an active risk register which aligns with key areas of the University Strategic Plan, and these local registers inform the institution-wide risk management process and Register.

8 The progressive and successful implementation of CREF has had a transformational effect on the design and delivery of undergraduate courses and programmes, and has driven a range of supplementary initiatives including the revised personal tutor scheme (see paragraphs 30-32) and the employability resources available through the ACHIEVE framework on the virtual learning environment, MyAberdeen (see paragraphs 42 & 45). The availability of distinctive enhanced study options, such as the 6th Century Courses (6CCs) and language courses, has expanded in response to student demand. Course approval forms and processes now require the explicit identification of graduate attributes. This emphasis on enhanced employability has resulted in the development of programme advisory boards and Employability Action Plans at school and discipline level. Good practice identified in the Employability Action Plans is disseminated through reports from school and college level to the Careers Service and to the University Committee on Teaching & Learning (UCTL).

9 The project to develop a single data and records management system, OneSource, was at an early stage of implementation during the current ELIR. The ELIR team considered that clear plans were in place for the project, although the timescales appeared ambitious given the scale of the initiative (see paragraph 24).

10 Building on previous arrangements, which received positive comment in the 2010 ELIR, the Centre for Academic Development (CAD) was established in December 2012 to provide integrated support for learning, teaching and research within a single structure. The University emphasised the potential of CAD to help the institution develop and achieve its strategic approach (see paragraphs 47, 48 & 54).

### **1.3 Effectiveness of the approach to implementing strategies**

11 The University has demonstrated effectiveness in its approach to enhancing teaching and learning. This is evident in the reflective and consultative approach taken to implementing Curriculum Reform (CREF), which has engaged staff and students. Implementation of the Strategic Plan is supported by monitoring and reporting through the risk management process. The decision for college plans to be reported to the University Committee on Teaching & Learning is a positive arrangement which supports cohesion and the attainment of strategic goals across the institution. In addition, the annual review of student experience provided to the Senate, *Delivering a High Quality Student Experience*, is an example of good practice in providing a well synthesised institution-wide analysis of progress against the learning and teaching plan.

## 2 Enhancing the student learning experience

### 2.1 Composition and key trends in the student population, including typical routes into and through the institution

12 In 2012-13, the University had a total student population of 13,308 FTE students of whom 10,967 were undergraduate, 1,458 were postgraduate taught and 883 were postgraduate research. The Strategic Plan expresses the intention for the University to increase the number of its postgraduate, international and part-time students.

13 The University regards its student population as diverse and cosmopolitan, and highlighted that it has moved from being an 'admitting' to a 'selecting' university. The majority (54 per cent) of the student population is from Scotland, of whom 27 per cent are from the Grampian and the Highlands and Islands regions. Around 20 per cent of the undergraduate population is from the rest of the UK (rUK) and 30 per cent are from a wide range of international countries. The University would like to maintain the rUK numbers but acknowledges this may be challenging given the current student fee and support arrangements.

14 Overall, student numbers have dropped by around eight per cent since 2009. This is mostly due to a drop in non-EU international students. By contrast, the number of home/EU students has remained largely static over the last five years. Within this group, the home student numbers are declining while the EU numbers are increasing.

15 Increasing international recruitment has been identified as a priority for the University. The Strategic Plan included targets of increasing the international student numbers to 2,360 and improving the University's position in international league tables, particularly in relation to the proportion of international students and international staff. In discussions with the ELIR team, staff spoke of a number of University initiatives at the school level designed to recruit international students, including the development of 2+2 programmes with Chinese universities. Progress towards the overall aim of increasing non-EU international numbers has been slow. However, a newly-appointed Vice-Principal (Internationalisation) was due to take up post in January 2014 and the University has appointed regional champions. The University indicated that these appointments were essential to the development of the Internationalisation Strategy and were likely to facilitate a strategic approach to achieving the institutional targets. The University is encouraged to progress its plans for internationalisation which are likely to support the student population as well as the strategic intentions.

16 Postgraduate research student numbers are relatively low, given the research-intensive nature of the University and postgraduate taught numbers have decreased by 20 per cent since 2010. The 2011-15 Strategic Plan expresses the intention to increase the numbers of postgraduate students, with a specific target of raising the research student population to 1,100 (from 883 in 2012-13).

17 The University has offered a wide range of postgraduate taught programmes, many with very low numbers of students. The University is currently restructuring this provision into a 'hub and spoke' model with the intention of making the programmes more attractive to international students, and to help achieve the strategic target of increasing the postgraduate taught population to 2,275. These changes to the programme portfolio draw on the findings of two reviews of the taught postgraduate provision, an internal and a commissioned external review carried out in 2010-11. However, it was less clear to the ELIR team whether there had been thorough reflection and research into the reasons behind the reduction in international and postgraduate taught student numbers, other than attributing this to the

impact of the changes introduced by the UK Border Agency, and to the titles of some degree programmes. The ELIR team noted that the reduction in postgraduate taught numbers was not evenly distributed across schools; student numbers on vocational programmes have tended to remain steady. The University emphasised that it has begun research into the underlying reasons for the drop in postgraduate student numbers and that is resulting in changes to the overall postgraduate portfolio. Nonetheless, linked to its own strategic intentions, there would be benefit in the University continuing to undertake reflective and analytical research in this area.

18 The Strategic Plan includes the target of increasing the part-time student population to 1,520. Currently, the majority of programmes are open to part-time students across the University. The School of Engineering, which has more part-time than full-time postgraduate taught students, has a weekend master's programme. There is also a Saturday Open day, particularly for the benefit of potential applicants who are in employment.

### **Widening participation**

19 The University aims to attract students from a diversity of backgrounds but, despite a long-standing commitment to widening access, acknowledges that recruiting widening participation students remains a challenge. The University has emphasised that, due to the SIMD40 definition of deprivation, there is only a small pool of school leavers in the local area which meets the criteria, and this presents a particular challenge. Nonetheless, the University is working with local secondary schools in a number of established initiatives aimed at providing support and raising aspirations. The University has also identified that, in the most recent admissions cycle, although it had made offers to several hundred prospective students from SIMD40 postcodes, fewer than 50 had taken up a place. There would be considerable benefit in the University continuing to explore the reasons for this low conversion rate.

20 In February 2013, the University established a widening participation working group to make recommendations on policy to UCTL and the Advisory Group on Student Recruitment and Admissions. The group is chaired by the Vice-Principal (Learning & Teaching) and includes representation from the Directorate of Academic Affairs, Policy, Planning and Governance, Colleges, SRAS and Aberdeen University Students' Association (AUSA). The group has been developing a framework to promote widening participation from pre-application to post-graduation. The group has been working to ensure that the University is using the most appropriate statistical indicators in relation to widening access and is also developing partnership working to engage with school pupils at an early stage of their school career. In the partnership working approach, the University recognises two key elements: raising aspirations and supporting schools to enhance attainment. The University is discussing this approach with local authorities and school head teachers.

21 The Strategic Plan also identifies targets for widening participation through flexible entry routes and increasing the number of programmes offering further education articulation routes by 30 per cent. The number of articulations has increased recently and the number of students progressing to the University through articulation agreements has increased considerably over the last three years. The University has established a number of new articulation agreements with college sector institutions in Scotland and it was made clear to the ELIR team that senior staff consider this to be one of the key ways in which the University can meet its widening participation targets.

### **Student retention**

22 The Strategic Plan 2011-15 sets a target of improving overall retention rates to four per cent better than the University's benchmark figure. Non-continuation data for the full-time undergraduate student population is analysed in detail annually and considered by the senior management team and the schools. This analysis includes the level of study, student

domicile, incoming qualifications, and entry route (summer school, access, clearing). However, the University does not currently monitor non-continuation rates for part-time students. Senior staff indicated that this was because 'continuation' is more difficult to define for a part-time student, but acknowledged that this should become part of the annual data. The University is encouraged to progress these plans.

23 Overall, non-continuation rates have improved, although there is variation between the different schools, with the vocational subjects tending to perform better. First year retention has also improved, but remains a focus for the University's attention with a range of initiatives being put in place to improve retention and overall student satisfaction, such as the Personal Tutor System (see paragraphs 30-32). In May 2013, the University hosted a symposium to share good practice in recognising 'at risk' students and promoting student retention. The University hopes the event will be held annually. The ELIR team learned about a variety of positive practice and supportive initiatives being undertaken in the schools to promote student progression.

### **Management of student data**

24 Management information relating to student recruitment, retention, progression and achievement is considered as part of the formal monitoring and review processes. The University has identified the need to improve its management information systems and is introducing an ambitious institution-wide project, OneSource, which will replace the current systems for: student records, admissions, research management, human resources, payroll and pensions, finance, and procurement. In the Case Study submitted for the current ELIR, the University set out the approach it will take to the Student Lifecycle Project, a major project in itself and the first to be undertaken within the context of OneSource. The timescale for implementing the online course selection system, MyCurriculum, a key element of the Student Lifecycle Project, has been determined by the implementation date for the restructured Academic Year, 2014-15. The implications of the short timescale and the risks for the student learning experience associated with slippage against the timescale are recognised and subject to careful monitoring by the University. In discussion with the ELIR team, staff displayed considerable confidence in the approach and their ability to secure successful implementation of these ambitious targets. Staff emphasised that the implementation of OneSource was building on the experience the University has gained with other major transformational initiatives, such as Curriculum Reform. It was also emphasised that the approach exemplified the way in which the University has evaluated and learned from its approach, and that continuous evaluation and review would be an ongoing part of the project's implementation. Staff and students were enthusiastic about the benefits the new arrangements are intended to bring.

## **2.2 Supporting equality and diversity in the student population**

25 The University has made significant progress in developing and implementing an effective approach to supporting equality and diversity. There have been a lot of positive initiatives and a significant volume of institutional activity, much of which has been relatively recent, as well as work to support student retention. The University acknowledged it has further work to do in order to mainstream its equality and diversity activity. This has been a driver for the University's participation in the Equality Challenge Unit project 'Mainstreaming Equality through Governance and Management'. The University currently holds a bronze Athena SWAN award and has established a team to support the aim of achieving at least one departmental Silver Award each year.

26 The University developed a vision for equality and diversity in 2012. Since then it has conducted an annual critique of a wide range of data including student numbers, continuation rates and trends. The resulting paper is considered by the Senate. This detailed and reflective exercise provides key information which will enable the University to identify



the progress it is making towards its equality and diversity goals.

27 In support of mainstreaming, the course and programme proposal forms (known as SENAS forms) now include questions on the equality and diversity implications of the proposals. For existing provision, consideration of equality and diversity implications features in the Internal Teaching Review process.

28 The ELIR team's discussions demonstrated considerable engagement by staff and alignment with the University's intentions to ensure that equality and diversity should be a day-to-day consideration. Staff spoke to the team about a variety of initiatives within their schools and were clear about the equality and diversity implications of their teaching and assessment activity. There is online training for staff which also forms part of the training for personal tutors and, since all academic staff fulfil that role, this training will have institution-wide impact. Equality and diversity training is also embedded in the Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education and the two-day training programme that is compulsory for all new probationary lecturing staff. A number of schools have appointed an Equality and Diversity Adviser to supplement the role of the existing Disabilities Coordinator post which all schools have. As the University develops its work in this area, it could reflect on the value of all schools introducing Equality and Diversity Advisers.

## **2.3 Engaging and supporting students in their learning**

29 The University has an effective approach to engaging and supporting students in their learning.

### **Personal Tutor System**

30 The Curriculum Reform (CREF) exercise highlighted the need for a new support system for undergraduate students to work alongside the existing services and the University introduced the Personal Tutor System from the start of 2013-14. This system includes more pastoral support than the previous Adviser of Studies arrangements, with tutors having ongoing contact with students throughout the year, and a focus on employability, feedback and graduate attributes.

31 The Personal Tutor System has been implemented alongside the existing Adviser of Studies arrangements, with the latter being phased out at the end of 2013-14 academic year. A Senior Personal Tutor has been appointed for each school with a role to develop support materials and training, and to support implementation of the System. It is intended that the Senior Personal Tutor will fulfil a liaison role between the Student Support and Registry services and the other personal tutors based in their school.

32 A Personal Tutor website holds a range of material for the implementation of the System including training resources, guidance for meetings and role descriptors. In discussions during the ELIR, staff were positive about the new system, despite the initial increased workload for some now that virtually all academic staff are required to take on personal tutor duties. Information on the Personal Tutor System is available for students on the University website. Between the two ELIR visits, there was increasingly positive comment from students about the new arrangements. As the System was so recently introduced it is difficult to comment definitively on its benefit, but the ELIR team took the view that it has the potential to enhance the support that all students receive.

### **Student support**

33 The University highlighted that it has enhanced the coordination and management of its student support over the last three years, and students are now able to benefit from a single point for all enquiries through the Infohub and an associated website. In acknowledging the outcomes of its 2012 internal student satisfaction survey, which

indicated that some students considered the support could be improved, the University hopes that the introduction of the Personal Tutor System and the introduction of a peer mentoring scheme will enhance the support further. The ELIR team would concur with this view, regarding the introduction of both of those initiatives as positive and likely to ensure that the support students receive, which is already good, will be systematically available to all student groups.

34 The Student Learning Service offers a range of academic skills workshops, including Dyslexia Study Advice sessions. Places can be booked on the workshops and individual Study Skills Sessions are available. Students spoke highly of the study skills training available. However, currently, the courses and advice sessions are only available during core office hours which can make it difficult for students studying part-time to access these resources. The University is encouraged to consider the availability of student support, including the workshops and study skills sessions, as it works towards its strategic goal of increasing the part-time student population.

35 Students confirmed to the ELIR team that academic and non-academic support is readily available. They indicated that staff are encouraging and approachable and make considerable effort to ensure students have a positive experience. Several students identified specific examples of academic staff providing opportunities to promote their students' academic or professional careers, such as supporting students to co-author a paper, or introducing students to industry contacts. A number of students indicated that the level of support they had received, notably through the 'open door' policy, had prompted them to stay at the University for their postgraduate studies.

### **Virtual learning environment**

36 The University's virtual learning environment (VLE), MyAberdeen, is used to enhance the student experience in a range of imaginative ways. Since 2011, the University has recruited student interns to support the enhancement and development of the VLE, ensuring that developments take student ideas and perspectives into account. The range of information and the form of its presentation is responsive to student opinion. It incorporates a variety of useful tools, such as the Peer Assessment Module and a Frequently Asked Questions section relating to points arising from the student survey. Student engagement with graduate attributes is promoted through the VLE with the inclusion of a class blog, reflective journal and e-portfolio which enable students to document and collate evidence of their self-evaluations, work experiences, and reflections on their learning from work. The School of Medical Sciences developed student retention support using the VLE, an approach which the ELIR team heard is now being rolled out across all schools. In discussion with the team, undergraduate students, in particular, were very positive about the range of material available through MyAberdeen and staff emphasised its benefits in support employability.

### **Student representation**

37 The University places a high value on student engagement. Student representatives have the opportunity to sit on all decision-making forums within the University, including the Senate and Court. Training is provided for student representatives and was developed with support from student participation in quality Scotland (sparqs). The introduction of School Convenors has strengthened the communication between Aberdeen University Students' Association (AUSA) and class representatives, with these 'super reps' moving beyond being solely feedback focused at Staff-Student Liaison Committee level to being involved in Class Representative Conferences and Class Representative Councils.

38 During 2013-14, the University is piloting a new system of representation, Universal Academic Representation. This new system was proposed by AUSA for undergraduate and taught postgraduate students. One of the benefits will be running a single representative

system, rather than the 13 systems that have been in use across the schools and which led to some inconsistencies in student engagement in school committees in the past. AUSA has developed a code of practice for the new representative arrangements. Elected students will be in post for one academic year and represent their discipline or programme in their year of study. The Universal Academic Representation system includes the introduction of a Representation Planning Form which will aid schools by highlighting aspects that need to be considered at the beginning of the year including how many representatives they need, who is responsible for filling these roles and when the SSLC meetings take place. In addition, 'Rep Passes' will provide evidence that students are fulfilling their representative roles through documenting their activities, including their participation in compulsory training. Both AUSA and the pilot schools plan to evaluate the new system through students, student representatives and staff in key roles, Directors of Learning and Teaching, and Education Development Coordinators.

39 Overall, students indicated to the ELIR team that they are satisfied with the representative opportunities available and feel listened to as the University is responsive to the feedback given through formal committee meetings as well as through informal channels. The relationship between the student representatives and the University was tested over the decision to change the academic year structure, with students reporting dissatisfaction with the way in which students were consulted. The ELIR team explored the matter during the visit and took the view that the University had been responsive to the student body as a whole. Students and staff were supportive of the new representative scheme, indicating that it would 'professionalise' the representation system, making it easier for students to engage in representation and develop a variety of skills, as well as promoting student views.

#### **Feedback to students on assessment**

40 The University has implemented a number of initiatives to address the sector-wide issue of feedback and assessment. This includes the Enhancing Feedback website which offers support for staff and students and is easily accessible through the VLE, MyAberdeen. Students are supportive of the newly-implemented three week turnaround for feedback, introduced as part of the Feedback Framework. Students also told the ELIR team that staff are open to discussing feedback if students wish expansion on their written comments. The University is continuing to monitor its progress in this area.

## **2.4 Approaches to promoting the development of graduate attributes, including employability**

41 The University has placed considerable emphasis on employability through the Curriculum Reform (CREF) activity and has a wide ranging and systematic approach to its promotion. The University has enhanced its student experience through the introduction of the Aberdeen Graduate Attributes (AGAs) which are a core element of the new undergraduate curriculum. The 19 AGAs are grouped into four main categories: academic excellence; critical thinking and effective communication; learning and personal development; and active citizenship. The review and revalidation of programmes during CREF involved explicit consideration of AGAs and all new programmes now have to demonstrate how they will aid the development of AGAs through the approval forms (SENAS) and related process. During ELIR, staff reported that review of the AGAs had become more thorough and detailed over time, a view which was confirmed by the supporting materials.

42 The explicit achievement of AGAs is not assessed but the University aims to assist students to articulate the skills and attributes they develop in addition to their academic awards, for example through the tools available on the VLE (see paragraph 36) and through

discussion with their personal tutors. To support staff understanding, and therefore student development, the Centre for Academic Development embeds AGAs in all of its staff training. Students indicated that they found information on AGAs and the related area of the VLE, known as ACHIEVE, easily accessible. Students were particularly positive about the ACHIEVE resource. Some students indicated that they would appreciate more focus on AGAs in class time to support their reflection. The University provided examples of courses which explicitly support student reflection on the AGAs, such as the Learning to Work course provided by the School of Education and the Biotechnology course Working Out: Placement and Career Skills. The University also indicated that AGAs for postgraduate taught and research students have been developed and will be launched in 2014-15.

### **Employability**

43 The University has an Employability Framework in place which aligns with the Learning & Teaching Operational Plan and AGAs. The Framework comprises five employability strands: AGAs, Curriculum Development, Employer Engagement, Co-curricular Activities, and Career Planning.

44 Employer engagement is a priority for the University and the development of the AGAs was underpinned by an analysis of employer views. A review of employer engagement across the institution led to the establishment, in 2011, of the Careers Service Employer Board, chaired by the Vice-Principal (Learning & Teaching) and a supporting network of programme advisory boards (PABs). The Board acts as a steering group for the Careers Service and a discussion forum for employer groups and University staff, as well as reviewing PAB work annually. PABs enable students, academic staff, alumni and employers to exchange ideas and experiences on employability-related topics. PABs, along with schools, are responsible for producing Employability Action Plans that highlight how schools are approaching employability and create action lists of how they can improve further.

45 Students are able to discuss matters relating to their employability with their personal tutors and have access to Student Employability Action Plans and other resources through ACHIEVE, available on the VLE. All students graduating from summer 2014 will receive an Enhanced Graduate Transcript which will record their co-curricular achievements.

## **2.5 Effectiveness of the approach to enhancing the student learning experience**

46 The University has an effective and systematic approach to enhancing the student experience, closely linked to the Curriculum Reform initiative and a range of activities aimed at promoting employability. In addition, the University has a positive and constructive partnership with the Aberdeen University Students' Association. In the context of the University's strategic ambition to diversify the student population through, for example, increasing the numbers of part-time and widening participation students, there would be benefit in the institution addressing a number of detailed matters, such as reflecting on the availability of student support services for students studying on-campus outside core hours and pursuing its plans to monitor continuation rates for all student groups.

### **3 Enhancement in learning and teaching**

#### **3.1 Approaches to identifying and sharing good practice**

47 As recognised in the 2010 ELIR, the University launched a Strategy for the Identification and Dissemination of Good Practice in Learning and Teaching in 2009-10. The Strategy is currently implemented through the new Centre for Academic Development (CAD) (see paragraphs 48 & 54).

48 There is an Annual Learning and Teaching Symposium, which aims to showcase innovative approaches to pedagogy with themes influenced by the national Enhancement Themes. The Symposium includes a Good Practice Fair (poster session), which has been held annually since 2008. The CAD also organises an annual event for Teaching Fellows which is designed to provide an opportunity for staff from across the University to share ideas and experiences, and to contribute to their professional development. The University acknowledges that attendance at the Symposium has been modest, although the ELIR team did learn of rising attendance at some events targeting the sharing of good practice and a growing number of staff are Higher Education Academy Fellows and Associate Fellows. There would be value in the University continuing to promote staff engagement with these internal and external opportunities.

49 The University indicated that it had modified its quality assurance processes to promote their contribution to quality enhancement, for example external examiners are asked to highlight good practice in their annual reports (see paragraph 69). The school, college and institutional reviews of external examiner reports, as well as those relating to other quality processes, such as Internal Teaching Reviews and Annual Course Reviews, provide a mechanism for identifying good practice. The QAC maintains an institutional overview and recommends further work or dissemination as appropriate.

50 The University Committee on Teaching and Learning (UCTL) receives an Annual Report on the Identification and Dissemination of Good Practice in Learning and Teaching. The report is also considered by college teaching and learning committees. The ELIR team noted that, while college teaching and learning committees considered good practice, the extent to which they did this varied. It was a standing agenda item in one college but not in the others. During the ELIR, examples of enhancement activity at school level were provided for all three colleges and, in discussions, school-level staff were able to provide examples of good practice that had been learned from or shared with other parts of the University.

#### **3.2 Impact of the national Enhancement Themes and related activity**

51 Overall, the University's engagement with the national Enhancement Themes is broadly in line with sector expectations. There is good engagement with the Themes at institutional level with staff contributing to the Themes' development and the Themes being used to influence institutional activity. Engagement with the Themes at school level is more variable, although teaching staff did demonstrate awareness of topics such as graduate attributes, employability, responding to student needs, and assessment, while often being unaware that these related to national Enhancement Themes or that there was such an initiative. However, the ELIR team considered that this is because much of the school engagement with the Themes is embedded within the suite of CREF initiatives. These topics are part of normal business for staff in schools and, as such, that represents a positive approach.

52 The Annual Learning and Teaching Symposium (see paragraph 48) has been running for the past five years and is aligned to national Theme topics. The University's

Learning and Teaching Enhancement Programme is also aligned to the current Enhancement Theme. Established in 2007, the Programme provides grants of up to £5,600 to support projects that assist the development of innovative approaches or enhancement of curriculum support.

53 The previous Enhancement Theme, Graduates for the 21st Century, aligns closely with the University's development of Aberdeen Graduate Attributes (see paragraph 41) and the University submitted four case studies for the Theme: The University of Aberdeen's Sixth Century Courses: The Natural World; The University of Aberdeen's Learning & Teaching Enhancement Programme; The University of Aberdeen's Sixth Century Courses: The Mind Machine; and The University of Aberdeen's Sixth Century Courses: Science and the Media. The University Centre for Academic Development (CAD) website has a database, Spotlight on Good Practice, which categorises the examples using the Enhancement Theme headings.

### **3.3 Engaging and supporting staff**

54 The University has an effective approach to engaging and supporting staff. The Strategic Plan articulates a strong ambition to set the highest standards of teaching and the University confirmed its commitment to providing continuing professional development to support its staff in achieving that ambition. This activity is coordinated through the Centre for Academic Development (CAD) which offers a range of provision including structured accredited programmes, workshops, good practice sharing events, online information and annual reports for the University Committee on Teaching and Learning. In addition, the CAD collaborates with schools to provide a coordinated approach to staff development.

55 New staff are required to undertake a two-day compulsory course to develop their teaching skills. Additionally, a multi-stranded postgraduate qualification in Higher Education Learning and Teaching attracts around 35 enrolments each year. The strands of the formal programme are structured to meet the needs of different groups including new and experienced staff. The programme is intended to support blended learning, particularly the improved use of the VLE, MyAberdeen. The ELIR team heard positive reflections on the value of these programmes from staff. The colleges also fulfil a key role in professional development and are responsible for training sessional staff and research supervisors.

56 Postgraduate research students who were involved in sessional teaching did not appear to be required to undertake the two-day CAD course but spoke positively about the skills development provided as part of their induction programme. Staff indicated that research students could have more support for their involvement in teaching and some general improvements in skills and career development has been highlighted in the Postgraduate Committee reports. In discussion with the ELIR team, research students spoke positively of the support and training that had been provided by their schools.

57 The University has a Framework of Academic Expectations in place, which is seen as an important workload and staff planning mechanism. The Framework complements the teaching and scholarship track which has been in place since the University's promotion procedures were revised in 2006. Although relatively small in number, the ELIR team heard that Teaching Fellows are viewed as a positive mechanism to engage staff with diverse backgrounds, such as those from industry, in contributing to teaching. The Fellows have an established collaborative network and annual meeting to share good practice.

### **3.4 Effectiveness of the approach to promoting good practice in learning and teaching**

58 The University is moving toward a systematic approach to enhancing teaching and learning, building on the outcomes of the 2010 ELIR. It recognises the challenge of successfully engaging staff and has adopted multiple approaches to improving this, for example, through the work of the CAD, the Teaching Fellows network and the Framework of Academic Expectations. The establishment of the CAD is proving to be an effective mechanism to bring a more holistic approach to supporting teaching and learning and the CAD occupies a pivotal role both in supporting staff and in disseminating good practice.

## **4 Academic standards**

### **4.1 Approach to setting, maintaining and reviewing academic standards**

59 The University systematically uses a range of processes in setting, maintaining and reviewing academic standards. The processes and procedures in place have been enhanced since the 2010 ELIR and are described fully in the extensive Academic Quality Handbook. The Quality Assurance Committee (QAC) has responsibility for the monitoring and maintenance of academic standards across all taught provision. Set up in late 2010, QAC combines the activities of the former undergraduate and postgraduate Academic Standards Committees and reports to the University Committee on Teaching and Learning (UCTL).

60 Course and programme approval is a two-tier process. At college level, proposals are considered in relation to the nature of assessment, student engagement, resources, and alignment with school and college policy and strategic plans. At QAC level, the focus is on conformity to institutional regulations and practice and compliance with the UK Quality Code for Higher Education and the SCQF. The approval processes are served by Senate Academic Standards (SENAS) forms. As the 2010 ELIR report identified, the SENAS forms are well structured and comprehensive.

61 The University used the 2010 ELIR report to reflect on its quality assurance practices, as a result of which a number of changes have been, and are being, made. While annual monitoring of taught provision at course level has been a long standing quality assurance mechanism, a new Annual Course Review (ACR) system has been in place since 2012-13. QAC retained oversight of the process in the first year of operation but responsibility for course review rests with heads of school. An Annual Programme Review (APR) system is being introduced in 2013-14. The APR process seeks to provide a focus for areas of work previously carried out by schools. APR reports, together with school action plans, will be considered by QAC and it is intended that APR will become the University's main institutional quality assurance procedure for taught provision. Both the 2005 and 2010 ELIR reports suggested that consideration should be given to introducing some form of programme monitoring. The University is therefore encouraged to ensure that the new APR process is implemented in 2013-14 as intended.

62 Internal Teaching Review (ITR) is the process by which programmes are revalidated. Introduced in 1994 and modified on a number of occasions to meet various external requirements, ITRs explore both undergraduate and postgraduate provision. The ITR system is methodical and represents good practice. The documentation is comprehensive and the review panels provide detailed critical analysis of the discipline being reviewed. The ITR process will be redesigned in light of the new ACR and APR procedures with the expectation that it will continue to be a reflective process which is more enhancement focused.

## 4.2 Management of assessment

63 The University is managing its assessment practices effectively. The Academic Quality Handbook describes in detail the assessment policies and practices for taught programmes. The University seeks to follow, where appropriate, a mixed method of assessment and, as part of Curriculum Reform, the use of different forms of assessment has been encouraged. Students confirmed that a variety of assessments is used and staff indicated that the introduction of a new academic year structure in September 2014 will provide a further opportunity to reconsider assessment practices.

64 A 21-point Common Assessment Scale (CAS) containing descriptors of standards of achievement has been in place since 1992 supported since 1996 by Grade Spectra schemes for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. The CAS and Grade Spectra were developed to encourage parity in assessment procedure across the University. They have nonetheless attracted criticism from both students and external examiners and were reviewed by a UCTL working group. The University indicated that it intends to bring forward recommendations for revisions to CAS and Grade Spectra in 2013-14, implementation of which would be introduced as part of the OneSource Student Lifecycle Project (see paragraph 24). At the time of the 2010 ELIR, a CAS working group had made proposals for modifying the system. The ELIR team noted that those proposals had not been implemented, and would urge the University to progress the intended revisions to CAS without further delay.

## 4.3 Use of external reference points in managing academic standards

65 Overall, the University makes effective use of a wide range of external reference points in managing its academic standards. The Advance Information Set provided for the current ELIR contained an extensive mapping of the University's policies and practices against the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code). The SENAS forms are designed to ensure conformity with the SCQF and European Qualifications Framework. All new programme proposals must identify the subject benchmark statement to which the programme is aligned. *Chapter B8: Programme monitoring and review* of the Quality Code influenced the development of the recently introduced Annual Programme Review procedures. In considering course and programme proposals, QAC checks for adherence with the Quality Code and the SCQF. ITR panels refer to relevant QAA subject benchmark statements and to external examiners' reports. Schools are responsible for managing PSRB accreditations but, from 2013-14, in order to assure matters at an institutional level PSRB reports will also be considered by QAC.

66 The University confirmed that external examiners play a significant role in verifying academic standards and monitoring quality. Their remit is clearly defined and the external examining procedures are in line with sector expectations as defined in the Quality Code. A range of information and resources is made available to support external examiners, including a direct web link to the Higher Education Academy's External Examiners Handbook. At the time of the current ELIR visit, there was no face-to-face induction for external examiners but CAD was considering developing an online induction pack. That is likely to help strengthen the University's relationship with its external examiners.



#### **4.4 Effectiveness of the arrangements for securing academic standards**

67 The University has an effective approach to securing academic standards. The processes and procedures in place for securing academic standards are thorough and are likely to be strengthened further by the changes being implemented.

68 The University has a reflective approach to its quality assurance processes. QAC reviewed the ACR procedures at the end of their first year of use in May 2013 following which it provided feedback to schools, amended the ACR proforma, and concluded that ACRs should in future be considered by the colleges who will, in turn, provide QAC with an analysis of salient points. In addition, responding to the fact that some ACR proformas had not been correctly completed, training was provided and guidance notes were developed to help complete proforma associated with the proposed launch in 2013-14 of the APR process.

69 The University is encouraged to progress its intention of promoting more explicit links between its assurance and enhancement activities. The ITR process serves well as a vehicle for assuring quality. As the University recognised, a revised ITR system could take a more reflective, enhancement-orientated approach and, in so doing, could also address the 2010 ELIR report's recommendation that there would be benefit in reviewing the volume of documentary evidence required for ITR. Similarly, in highlighting the strengths of its system for scrutinising external examiners' reports, the University acknowledged that it will continue to seek opportunities to introduce a greater role for external examiners in identifying innovative approaches to the design and delivery of the curricula.

### **5 Self-evaluation and management of information**

#### **5.1 Key features of the institution's approach**

70 Overall, the University has an effective approach to self-evaluation and the management of information. Defined procedures are in place for the evaluation, monitoring and review of courses and programmes, including the consideration of management information. These procedures are widely understood and respected by staff.

71 Self-evaluation as a routine internal process is central to the way in which the University determines its priorities for action in the context of achieving the objectives set out in its Strategic Plan. The University values student involvement and feedback in its reflective processes, and provides an extensive range of opportunities for the student voice to be heard.

72 The University makes use of a wide variety of approaches to conducting self-evaluation including: institution-wide consultation and deliberation on proposed significant innovations (for example the Strategic Plan, Curriculum Reform and the Academic Year); targeted reviews of specific areas; staff and student surveys; performance against key performance indicators; and risk management. The University also makes use of a variety of structures to support these reviews including: formal programme boards, individual project teams, short-term committee sub-groups, working groups, external consultants, and Kaizen Blitz techniques.

73 During the current ELIR, the University was at various stages of implementing significant transformational projects such as Curriculum Reform, OneSource and the Academic Year Restructure. It is evident that the decision to embark on each of these initiatives was the result of significant critical self-evaluation and consultation across the University. The ELIR team noted that criteria and systems for evaluating the progress and

overall success of these projects were not universally in place. In part, this may be a reflection of the scale and nature of individual projects where overall outcomes can only be fully evaluated over the course of a longer timeframe. It may also be a reflection of the way in which the processes by which the University undertakes self-evaluation have proliferated in recent years. Senior staff raised the valid point that it can be difficult to be certain of the precise cause and effect of selected indicators. The ELIR team considered that the University would benefit from giving more explicit and detailed consideration to ways of evaluating the effectiveness of its major initiatives prior to, or at the early stages of, their implementation in order to provide a clearer baseline against which the effectiveness of implementation could be gauged.

74 At the time of the current ELIR, the University's senior management had recently embarked on a Review of the Operation and Structure of the University Governance & Advisory Committees. This was intended to: support the delivery of the Strategic Plan priority areas; improve integration between institution and college-level committees; and achieve greater efficiency and transparency in the operation of committee business. The University intended to implement the revised arrangements in 2014-15. The outcomes of the review were expected to inform a subsequent review of college committee structures which play a pivotal role in the University's quality assurance arrangements. The University has identified the intention to develop its quality assurance processes to promote quality enhancement (see paragraphs 49 & 69). The ELIR team considered that revised committee remits at University and college level would have the potential to promote a more explicit link between existing quality assurance processes and the variety of enhancement activities offered, notably those relating to the dissemination of good practice (see paragraphs 49 & 50). The University is encouraged to consider this as part of its committee review.

75 The University has a Records Management Policy, dating from May 2007. The University acknowledged that the availability and accessibility of both institutional and college committee minutes and papers in electronic form can be variable. University committee minutes and Internal Teaching Review reports are not always uploaded to the staff intranet in a timely manner and college and school committee minutes relating to teaching and learning are not routinely available in electronic form. From discussions with staff it was clear that some parts of the University are considering introducing electronic record-keeping, but it is not currently a priority for the institution as a whole, for example in the context of the Review of the Operation and Structure of the University Governance & Advisory Committees. The ELIR team would encourage the University to strengthen its arrangements for making committee minutes and papers at all levels of the institution available to, and easily accessible by, staff. This would promote transparency and communication, and help to ensure that staff have access to the information they need to support decision-making.

## **5.2 Commentary on the advance information set**

76 The material submitted in the advance information set provides reassurance that the University is meeting sector expectations. The University's mapping of its policies and practices against the Quality Code is clear and comprehensive. Similarly, the University's reports to the Scottish Funding Council on institution-led review provided the ELIR team with an overview of key developments since the 2010 ELIR.

## **5.3 Use of external reference points in self-evaluation**

77 The University's approach to the use of external reference points in self-evaluation has many positive and effective features, but there are also areas for potential improvements. The positive features include the extent to which the University considers the

practice of its comparator institutions in the context of significant transformational projects, such as curriculum reform and the academic year restructure. Particularly positive is the University's use of external members on programme advisory boards (PABs). The University has a well established record of working with employers who, through their membership of PABs, are able to make a significant contribution to the development of the curriculum, especially in relation to graduate attributes. External members of PABs act as 'critical friends' to programme areas and their contribution to programme design and development provides a valuable source of external advice and expertise on an ongoing basis.

78 The University seeks the views of relevant PAB members and external examiners in relation to programme approval, but the institution confirmed that it has no plans to introduce approval events. The ELIR team considered there would be value in the University reflecting on its approach to programme approval, in line with practice identified in the Quality Code.

79 Since 2010-11, all new programme proposals have been required to identify the subject benchmark statement(s) to which the programme is aligned. SENAS guidance also refers to PSRB accreditation or similar practice at other institutions as examples of possible external reference points. The ELIR team's consideration of completed SENAS forms showed general adherence to this guidance, although at a rather minimal level. For example, the forms named the subject benchmark without providing further information to identify which section(s) of the subject benchmark statement(s) are relevant to the proposal. Similarly, the programme specifications published in the University Calendar do not include details of learning outcomes and their alignment with subject benchmark statements. In the case of accredited programmes published in the Calendar, those parts of the programme which satisfy PSRB accreditation requirements are not routinely indicated. There would be benefit in the University developing its practice in this area and promoting more explicit engagement by staff with the appropriate sections of subject benchmark statements and other reference points.

## **5.4 Management of public information**

80 The University's approach to managing public information meets sector expectations including Scottish Funding Council Guidance and the Quality Code.

81 The University publishes a large volume of information in print and web-based formats for staff, students and the external community. This includes information of primary interest to staff, such as the Academic Quality Handbook and minutes of various University-level committees, but which is also available to members of the public through the University website. There is central oversight of the University website including a webpage template to ensure consistency. Responsibility for some material on the website has been devolved to schools, for example prospectus checking.

82 Collaborative partners must seek University approval for their public information relating to their collaboration prior to publication.

## **5.5 Effectiveness of the approach to self-evaluation and management of information**

83 Overall, the University has an effective approach to self-evaluation and the management of information. There is an institutional culture of reflection and critical self-evaluation leading to a readiness to initiate and support major transformational projects for the benefit of the entire University community. Students are engaged in these reflective activities through a wide variety of opportunities, and their views influence the shape of developments.

84 The University is asked to give more explicit consideration to ways of evaluating the implementation of these significant initiatives. Identifying measures at an early stage would provide a clearer baseline for evaluating the effect of implementation. In the context of its Review of the Operation and Structure of the University Governance & Advisory Committees, the University is to review its approach to making available to staff, its committee minutes and papers at university, college and school levels.

85 The University generally meets sector expectations in the use of external reference points, but there would be benefit in the institution developing its practice and promoting more explicit engagement by staff with subject benchmark statements and other reference points during programme approval.

## **6 Collaborative activity**

### **6.1 Key features of the institution's strategic approach**

86 A strategic objective of the University is to continue to promote partnership working and to engage fully with its regional, national and international partners. The University is committed to growing its work with further education partners, mainly in terms of articulation agreements. At the time of the current ELIR, the University was exploring potential new 2+2 articulation partners in India, Sri Lanka, China, Kazakhstan and Malaysia. The University indicated that it does not normally enter into franchise agreements, and, at the time of the current ELIR, did not have any.

87 The University has six agreements whereby joint supervision of a single student leads to award of a dual PhD degree. It has a long-standing accreditation agreement with the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) which enables UHI to deliver research Masters and PhDs in certain defined areas. It has a validation agreement with the International Christian College covering undergraduate and postgraduate taught provision in Theology and Ministry. The University has a number of articulation agreements with further education colleges to enable students to gain advanced entry to some of the University's undergraduate programmes. A 2+2 agreement with Wuhan University in China enables students to join year 3 of a business-related undergraduate programme.

### **6.2 Securing academic standards of collaborative provision**

88 The University has effective arrangements in place for securing the academic standards of its collaborative provision.

89 New collaborative provision procedures implemented in 2012 are detailed in the Academic Quality Handbook and meet the Expectations of the Quality Code. All proposed collaborative partnerships are assessed in terms of their strategic fit and associated risk and require submission of a Collaborative Partnership Proposal proforma comprising a business case, risk assessment, partnership appraisal, and resource considerations. Sponsoring schools and colleges complete the business case and risk assessment elements of the documentation. Proposals then follow one of three routes depending on the type of collaboration and the assessed level of risk.

90 QAC is responsible for overseeing the academic standards of collaborative provision and is involved in all stages of the process. All Collaborative Partnership Proposal proforma are considered by QAC. Proposals involving a potential partner from outside the UK are subject to additional scrutiny. All proposed validation and accreditation partnerships require a visit to the institution concerned by a QAC-appointed validation panel and QAC considers the validation panel's report. All proposals for accreditation, validation and joint

degrees also require the final approval of the University Committee on Teaching and Learning, the Senate and the University Court before an agreement can be signed. All validated and accredited partners are required to submit an annual report which is scrutinised by QAC.

### **6.3 Enhancing the student learning experience on collaborative programmes**

91 The procedures now in place enable the University to enhance the student learning experience on its collaborative programmes.

92 The Collaborative Partnership Proposal proforma require all proposals to describe a potential partner's capability to provide and assure a student learning experience comparable to that of the University. Validation visits to prospective partners place a strong emphasis on the student learning experience. Similarly, the student learning experience features strongly in revalidation reports. In addition, QAC maintains oversight as all validated and accredited partners are required to provide an annual report which includes commentary on a range of issues related to the student learning experience.

93 The University indicated that lessons have been learned from collaborative arrangements put in place prior to the development of its new procedures. Consequently, there was a recognition that work may be needed to map Higher National provision (delivered in further education colleges) with University curricula. Similarly, the University will seek to develop closer links with students in partner colleges prior to their progressing to the University.

### **6.4 Effectiveness of the approach to managing collaborative activity**

94 The University has an effective approach to managing its collaborative activity. It seeks to grow such activity not least because articulation agreements with further education colleges are a key element in the University's widening participation strategy. The University emphasised its commitment to supporting students on collaborative programmes and indicated its preparedness to take steps to enhance their learning experience.

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