

Thematic Report on the Outcomes of Enhancement-led Institutional Reviews (ELIRs) Conducted in 2013

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to inform future dissemination and development work in the sector. In particular, it aims to inform future SHEEC and QAA Scotland activities.

This report sets out the themes identified in the ELIR Outcome reports for reviews of the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, Queen Margaret University, the University of Aberdeen, and the University of Dundee.

This paper marks the first in a series of Thematic reports on the outcomes of the ELIR 3 cycle of reviews.

The areas of positive practice and the areas for development which are included within the four ELIR 3 reports prepared to date are covered within this report. The areas are summarised under the heading 'What are we learning about the sector from ELIR reports?' The areas are set out in full (as the points appear in the ELIR Outcome Reports) in the subsequent sections of the report. The annex to the report summarises the learning points identified in the Sector Overview report for 2012-13, which was submitted to the Scottish Funding Council in November 2013.

What are we learning about the sector from ELIR reports?

Areas of positive practice identified in the first four ELIR 3 reports

1 The following themes were identified as positive practice in at least two of the ELIR 3 reports:

- Institutional evaluation and dissemination of positive practice
- Engaging students in partnership and in their learning
- Graduate attributes and employability
- Academic and staff development
- Student support
- Curriculum design and implementation
- Institutional strategies and strategic framework

2 The following areas were identified once each in the group of ELIR reports:

- Engagement with the Enhancement Themes
- Management of collaborative provision
- Activities to promote Widening Participation
- Effective use of the virtual learning environment

Areas for development identified in the first four ELIR 3 reports

3 The following themes were identified as areas for development in at least two of the ELIR 3 reports:

- Evaluative practices and effectiveness of committees
- Quality Code and external reference points
- Institutional strategies and variation in institutional oversight
- Support for postgraduates who teach
- Personal tutor arrangements
- Management of data and performance indicators
- Assessment policy and practice

4 The following areas were identified once each in the group of ELIR reports:

- Public information
- Staff and student mobility
- Support for a more diverse student population
- Accessibility of the virtual learning environment

Areas for development identified in ELIR 1 and ELIR 2

5 In 2006 we published a 'raising the bar' report which analysed the impact of the enhancement-led approach across the first two ELIR cycles, and identified the following areas for development.

- Variation within institutions - in the implementation of policy and practice.
- More demanding students - this was emphasised in discussion with the Teaching Quality Forum where members indicated that students were becoming increasingly interested in what institutions were offering in addition to the core tuition, notably the availability of student support services and co-curricular opportunities.
- Student mobility - the challenge of encouraging Scottish students to study abroad was highlighted in a number of ELIR reports.
- Enhancement of collaborative activity - ELIR 2 reports identified that most institutions were at a very early stage in giving explicit consideration to enhancing the student experience on collaborative provision; this applied to international and UK-based collaborations.
- Sharing positive practice - institutions themselves often indicate that they struggle to find effective **systematic** approaches for ensuring that positive practice in one area can be picked up in other parts of the institution and this was confirmed by the ELIR2 reports.

Areas of positive practice identified in Outcome report of ELIRs conducted in 2013

This section sets out the areas of positive practice as included in the ELIR Outcome reports for the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, Queen Margaret University, the University of Aberdeen, and the University of Dundee.

Institutional evaluation and dissemination of positive practice

Institutional context and culture - The University has a culture of reflection and continuous improvement. This can be seen by the engagement of staff and students in strategic development, the sharing of good practice, and support for enhancement activities at all levels (Queen Margaret University).

Self-evaluation and information about quality - There is a strong culture of institutional self-reflection, drawing on the outcomes of quality assurance processes to enhance the student experience. For example, the Student Experience Committee takes an evaluative overview of the outcomes from a variety of key processes, including annual monitoring and review. The Learning and Teaching Panel is effective in assuring quality and maintaining academic standards on behalf of the Student Experience Committee. Information about the quality assurance arrangements is provided through the 'Quality at QMU' website, which is well structured, comprehensive and informative (Queen Margaret University).

Enhancement from quality assurance processes - The University has been successful in ensuring that the design of its quality assurance processes contributes to enhancement of the student learning experience by, for example, including quality enhancement as a standard heading in templates for annual monitoring reporting and the external examiner system. The quality assurance processes, alongside the committee structures and college roles, also facilitate the deliberate and systematic sharing of good practice across the institution (University of Dundee).

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 (University of Aberdeen).

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 (University of Aberdeen).

Engaging students in partnership and in their learning

Staff-student partnership - There is a strong staff-student partnership and a clear practitioner community, into which students are fully integrated. A powerful learning experience is delivered through the use of 'vertical' opportunities in which students from different years perform alongside professional practitioners (Royal Conservatoire of Scotland).

Enhancing the student learning experience - There is an institutional culture of accessibility and responsiveness to students, by both academic and professional services staff. The collaborative approach taken between different support services and with the

academic staff is effective in enhancing the student learning experience (Queen Margaret University).

Student engagement - Students are very positive about their experience of the University. There is a strong partnership with the Dundee University Students' Association, and student representation is embedded at all levels of the institution. During the review students confirmed that their views are actively sought and contribute to the University's enhancement agenda (University of Dundee).

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 (University of Aberdeen).

Graduate attributes and employability

Graduate attributes and employability - Students are encouraged in the development of graduate attributes through the range of opportunities for them to engage in professional settings within and outside the formal programmes, and by being treated as professionals from their arrival at the institution. The Conservatoire is highly supportive of students who gain relevant employment during their study, adopting a variety of flexible approaches to ensure students can complete their intended awards (Royal Conservatoire of Scotland).

Employability - There is a strong commitment to promoting student employability. Work-related learning is embedded within the curriculum, and there is positive employer engagement. Support and opportunities for developing employment-related skills are provided by the Careers and the Student Employability services (Queen Margaret University).

Employability - The University provides a comprehensive range of opportunities for students to develop their employability skills. During the review students commented positively about the range and relevance of the initiatives provided, including the Enterprise Gym and the Placement Base (University of Dundee).

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 (University of Aberdeen).

Academic and staff development

Staff development - The Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Arts Education (PgCert) continues to be successful in supporting staff to deliver the curriculum and by creating a group of influential staff with the skills to promote interdisciplinary developments and create research-teaching links (Royal Conservatoire of Scotland).

Enhancement in learning and teaching - The Centre for Academic Practice makes a significant contribution to enhancing the student learning experience through its work in developing and supporting learning and teaching (Queen Margaret University).

Staff support and development - There is an integrated approach to staff support and development, with clear linkages between induction, the Objective Setting and Review process, and the range of learning and development opportunities provided by the Library and Learning Centre's Educational Development Division and Organisational and Professional Development (University of Dundee).

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 (University of Aberdeen).

Student support

Student support - There is a holistic approach to providing support for individual students, including academic and pastoral support. This enables students to achieve their potential. Student support services are managed centrally and student access to them is coordinated through a single enquiry desk (Royal Conservatoire of Scotland).

Proactive student support - The University is successful in supporting a diverse student population. Academic and professional services provide integrated support across individual services for all students, both pre and post enrolment, as well as effectively targeting support for particular student groups. Feedback from students is particularly positive in relation to Disability Services, the Careers Service and the Library and Learning Centre. There is a proactive approach to supporting the progression and development of postgraduate research students. In particular, these students are very positive about the support provided by thesis monitoring committees and the generic skills training delivered by Organisational and Professional Development (University of Dundee).

Systematic student support - the University has systematic arrangements in place for providing student support, notably for full time undergraduates, 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 (University of Dundee).

Curriculum design and implementation

Undergraduate curriculum - The Conservatoire has successfully developed a new undergraduate curriculum which is having a transformational effect on the culture of the institution and which is distinctive and innovative among conservatoires in the UK and internationally. The core specialist curriculum includes opportunities for students to make choices which develop interdisciplinary working. This broadens the student experience and provides opportunities for students to become co-creators of their own learning. In addition,

the careful mapping of learning outcomes onto the assessment matrix will support students to become self-critical in reflecting on their own and their peers' achievements (Royal Conservatoire of Scotland).

Curriculum Reform project - The design of the curriculum was informed by engaging external peers, including those from outside the performing arts disciplines, and there was significant use of national and international reference points throughout the Curriculum Reform project. Implementation of Curriculum Reform was inclusive of staff and student opinion through extensive internal consultation (Royal Conservatoire of Scotland).

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 (University of Aberdeen).

Institutional strategies and strategic framework

Coherent strategic framework - There are coherent and well understood connections between the University's Strategic Plan, the Student Experience Strategy, the Quality Enhancement in Learning, Teaching and Assessment (QELTA) strategy, and the operational plans of schools, divisions and services. Individual objectives of all staff members align to these strategies and plans through the Performance Enhancement Review process. The delivery of the strategies and plans is well supported by an effective committee structure and an inclusive approach to communication (Queen Margaret University).

Effective development and implementation of Vision and Strategy - The University has been reflective and self-evaluative in developing its new Vision and Strategy. This has involved effective consultation and communication with staff and students, who have a clear understanding of the strategic direction and objectives of the institution. There is an effective approach to the implementation of strategy through strategic leadership and the committee structure, and operational planning is clearly linked to institutional strategy (University of Dundee).

Engagement with the Enhancement Themes

Engagement with the national Enhancement Themes - Strategy, policy and practice are informed by significant engagement with the national Enhancement Themes, in particular Graduates for the 21st Century and the current Theme, Developing and Supporting the Curriculum (Royal Conservatoire of Scotland).

Management of collaborative provision

Collaborative activity - The University maintains careful oversight of its collaborative provision through effective quality assurance processes and detailed risk assessment arrangements (Queen Margaret University).

Activities to promote Widening Participation

Widening Participation - The University has an effective approach to recruiting and supporting the entry of students from non-traditional backgrounds. It provides a range of opportunities including articulation routes and the Dundee University Access to Learning (DUAL) Summer School. This programme provides academic and study skills support for students, particularly those from non-traditional backgrounds, who may lack the standard qualifications for entry into the University. Students accessing the University via the DUAL Summer School commented positively on the effectiveness of the programme in preparing them for study at the higher education level (University of Dundee).

Effective use of the virtual learning environment

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

Areas for development identified in Outcome reports of ELIRs conducted in 2013

This section sets out the areas for development as included in the ELIR Outcome reports for the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, Queen Margaret University, the University of Aberdeen, and the University of Dundee.

Evaluative practices and effectiveness of committees

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, amongst other things, provide a clearer baseline against which the University could consider the effects of implementation (University of Aberdeen).

Committee roles - Ensure the roles, remits and reporting relationships of the institutional and programme committees are clearly defined and understood across the institution. The Conservatoire should ensure that it achieves its objective of increasing institutional oversight and accountability through the revised committee structure and the operation of key processes, such as annual programme reporting. This should include the systematic use of data to inform decisions and the careful monitoring of the issues that are identified, along with the impact of actions taken (Royal Conservatoire of Scotland).

Institutional committees - Continue to actively manage the business and operation of the Student Experience Committee to ensure that it remains focused on strategic matters and institutional self-evaluation (Queen Margaret University).

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 (University of Aberdeen).

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 (University of Aberdeen).

Annual monitoring - Clarify the purpose and benefits of the proposed online continuous monitoring arrangements, and consider how the new system will complement the current, effective, Annual Monitoring and Review process (Queen Margaret University).

Scope and analysis of student surveys - Continue to review the University's strategic approach to the management and use of student surveys. The University is asked to review the number and scope of the surveys that it uses. It is also asked to develop an effective system for analysing the survey outcomes, linking the outcomes to action plans (Queen Margaret University).

UK Quality Code for Higher Education and external reference points

UK Quality Code for Higher Education - Progress with the planned mapping of institutional policies and practices against the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, in parallel with producing the revised version of the Quality Assurance Handbook (Royal Conservatoire of Scotland).

Detailed use of external reference points - Ensure a rigorous approach is always adopted to the use and scrutiny of external reference points, especially subject benchmark

statements, in the programme proposal and approval processes. This is in the context of the University, overall, meeting sector expectations in its use of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (University of Aberdeen).

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 (University of Aberdeen).

Institutional strategies and variation in institutional oversight

Institutional strategies - Progress the development of strategies to complement the Strategic Plan in the areas of IT, internationalisation and research. The Conservatoire should prioritise the finalisation of its IT Strategy to support the intended developments in data management (Royal Conservatoire of Scotland).

Institutional oversight - Consider the impact of variability of policy and practice on the student experience, ensuring the University has oversight of policy development and implementation across the colleges. The University has highly devolved structures which provide flexibility so that policy can be developed in a manner appropriate to each college. This can have positive benefits but the local determination and implementation of policy can also lead to variability of practice, for example policies regarding extensions to assessment deadlines and the recognition of prior learning are not consistent across colleges. The University is asked to consider the extent to which this impacts on the student experience, particularly for students studying across colleges (University of Aberdeen).

Support for postgraduates who teach

Support for postgraduate students who teach - Ensure that appropriate training and support is in place for all postgraduate students who are involved in teaching and assessment (University of Dundee).

Support for teaching role - Ensure that all postgraduate research students involved in teaching access appropriate training and support for this role (Queen Margaret University).

Personal tutor arrangements

Personal tutor system - Evaluate the revised Personal Academic Tutor system as a mechanism for delivering personal development planning, in line with the University's intentions (Queen Margaret University).

New curriculum - In the context of a range of positive developments relating to the new undergraduate curriculum, ensure the purpose and role of transitions tutors is clearly defined and understood by staff and students. In particular, the Conservatoire should clarify the role of transitions tutors in providing advice to support students in fulfilling their learning contracts. There would also be benefit in the Conservatoire considering the ways it can work to manage the likely increase in student demand for elements of the new curriculum including Bridge Week projects and popular 'Choice' modules (Royal Conservatoire of Scotland).

Management of data and performance indicators

Use of data - Develop the Management Information System further, and promote the active use of data to underpin quality assurance and enhancement-related decisions. This would also enable the Conservatoire to measure the impact of the new curriculum and to track progress in implementing the Strategic Plan 2012-15, Creating the Future for Performance, more readily (Royal Conservatoire of Scotland).

Performance indicators - Evaluate the developing set of performance indicators to ensure meaningful indicators are identified to fit the institutional context and priorities. The Conservatoire should ensure the performance indicators it develops will be used systematically and proactively by programme teams (Royal Conservatoire of Scotland).

Assessment policy and practice

Recognition of prior learning - Progress the planned review of assessment policy including the policy for the recognition of prior learning. In particular, the University should ensure that, following the review, policy relating to exemptions granted for the award of second taught postgraduate master's degrees meets sector expectations (University of Dundee).

Assessment feedback - Ensure that the University's requirements for the timely return of feedback to students on their assessed work are implemented consistently (Queen Margaret University).

Public information

Public information - Review the processes for assuring the accuracy of public information, especially that which is published on the web, to ensure that appropriate controls are in place (Royal Conservatoire of Scotland).

Staff and student mobility

Staff and student mobility - Continue to develop arrangements to facilitate and promote student and staff mobility, including ensuring the benefits of mobility are recognised and highlighted across the Conservatoire (Royal Conservatoire of Scotland).

Support for a more diverse student population

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. The University is also asked to monitor the progression rates for specific student groups and to review the access provided for part-time students to student support services, such as the Student Learning Service (University of Aberdeen).

Accessibility of the virtual learning environment

Virtual learning environment - Address student concerns about the accessibility and extent of module information on the University's virtual learning environment, the Hub (Queen Margaret University).

Annex

What does QAA Scotland's work tell us about the university sector?

This annex is the one-page summary from the 2012-13 Sector Overview report submitted to the Scottish Funding Council in November 2013. It should be noted that the Sector Overview reports have a wider data source including ELIR and the Enhancement Themes synoptic reports.

Areas of positive practice identified in the 2012-13 sector overview report

- 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

What are the challenging areas?

- Feedback on assessment
- Management of data on the student experience
- Widening participation and student transitions
- Retention and progression
- Recognising leadership in learning and teaching

How do we know the enhancement approach is working?

- Responsiveness of the university sector
- Impact of our work
- International recognition and evidence of others adopting an enhancement-led approach

What are the areas of activity for next year?

- Flexible curriculum and student transitions
- Curriculum for Excellence
- Identifying effective indicators of enhancement
- Working with employers
- Discipline focus
- Student engagement with learning
- Online learning and MOOCs
- Disseminating and embedding learning from earlier work

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