



Thematic Report on Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) Technical Reports 2013-14: Assessment and Feedback

Introduction

As part of the ELIR 3 method, QAA Scotland produces regular Thematic reports to support the sector learning from the outcomes of individual ELIR reports. The purpose of the Thematic reports is to inform future development work in the sector and, in particular, to inform future QAA activity including work carried out in collaboration with the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC).

Scope and structure of this report

This report identifies material relating to Assessment and Feedback within the first four reports published in the ELIR 3 cycle. The institutions included in this report are: the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland; Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh; University of Aberdeen; and University of Dundee.

This report draws on the text of the ELIR Technical reports relating to these four institutions only. It is possible that good practice or areas of development are present in other institutions. It is also possible that additional practice takes place in these four institutions, but only those elements of practice included within the ELIR Technical reports is included here.

Assessment and Feedback: activity to promote good practice

This section identifies current practice at the four institutions.

Assessment policy: All four of the institutions have assessment policies (or other documents) identifying the timeframe within which students will be provided with feedback on their assessed work. Queen Margaret University communicated to students that they should expect to receive feedback within 20 days of submission.ⁱ The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland indicated a 14 day turnaround.ⁱⁱ For the University of Aberdeen and the University of Dundee, the turnaround time is three weeks.^{iii iv}

Written information: The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland developed a Quality Assurance Handbook articulating the underpinning philosophies and expectations for students by mapping their expected learning outcomes to the criteria and modes of assessment.^v Queen Margaret University 'has a comprehensive and well-structured set of assessment regulations which includes policy and principles. The Programme Leaders Handbook also gives clear guidance on the management of assessment.'^{vi}

Guidance and support: The Personal Tutor System at the University of Aberdeen allows for ongoing contact through the year and has a focus on student assessment.^{vii} The 'Enhancing Feedback' website, a dedicated site on the University's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), known as My Aberdeen, offers support and advice for both students and staff.^{viii} The University of Dundee worked in

collaboration with its student association and Student Participation in Quality Scotland (sparqs) to produce a structured 'Toolkit on Feedback and Assessment for Staff'.

Research into assessment and feedback: The University of Dundee participated in a number of research projects, including participation in an evaluation of the Higher Education Academy, *Transforming the Experiences of Students Through Assessment* (TESTA) methodology, and a project led by the University of Dundee Students' Association to explore student views of assessment practices.^x

Strategic key performance indicators: The University of Dundee Learning and Teaching Strategy 2017 includes student satisfaction in assessment and feedback as a key performance indicator.^x

Assessment and Feedback: areas for development

This section sets out the areas for development identified within the Technical reports for the four institutions.

Implementation of Assessment and Feedback Policy: Although all of the institutions identify a timeframe for giving students feedback on their assessed work, discussions with students during a number of the ELIR visits indicated that these timescales are not always met.^{xi}

Assessment Submission Extensions: During the University of Dundee ELIR visits, students identified varied practice across the institution in relation to granting extensions to submission deadlines.^{xii}

Revising key policy documents: the University of Aberdeen was asked to progress the implementation of a set of intended modifications to its assessment documentation including the Common Assessment Scale and Grade Spectra.^{xiii}

What happens next?

QAA Scotland follows up the ELIR outcomes with institutions individually through annual discussion visits and each institution is required to produce a Follow-up report indicating how they have addressed their own ELIR outcomes. QAA Scotland also promotes collaborative working between institutions to share good practice and to find collection solutions to common areas for development. Each institution is invited to participate in a Follow-up event to engage with the ways other institutions who were reviewed at around the same point of the ELIR have addressed their review outcomes.

In relation to Assessment and Feedback, QAA Scotland is funding a short-life project to run during 2014-15, Focus on Assessment and Feedback. Further information will become available during the current session.

References

The paragraph numbers in this section refer to the original ELIR Technical reports.

Queen Margaret University

32 The University's assessment regulations indicate that students should expect to receive assessment feedback in a timely manner and no later than 20 working days following the submission deadline. They are to be informed if there are delays in providing feedback. Meetings with students, staff and minutes of student staff consultative committees (SSCCs) show that there is still significant variability in return of student feedback and in informing students of delays. The University is encouraged to ensure that its requirements for the timely return of assessment feedback are implemented consistently.

59 There is a comprehensive and well-structured set of assessment regulations which includes policy and principles. The Programme Leaders Handbook also gives clear guidance on the management of assessment.

Royal Conservatoire of Scotland

25 The small cohort sizes and high contact hours mean that students receive regular oral feedback on their performances. However, the results of an internal survey using the National Student Survey (NSS) questions indicated that a substantial proportion of students were not content with the feedback they receive on their assessed work. In discussion with the ELIR team, student representatives indicated that this was likely to have been a reaction to delays in students receiving written feedback on their formal assessed work. Staff confirmed that, in response to the student survey, a two-week turnaround time had been introduced for written feedback to be provided. However, it was indicated that it can be difficult to meet this deadline in practice, especially in view of the large numbers of part-time staff. The ELIR team noted that the Conservatoire was conscious of this challenge and that the institution would keep the matter under review. Through the introduction of the learning contracts in the undergraduate curriculum, the Conservatoire is developing a thorough approach to identifying the intended learning outcomes and sharing with students the extent to which these are being achieved. It is likely that, as this approach becomes embedded, students will become increasingly aware of, and engage with, the feedback they are receiving on all of their assessed work. The ELIR team recognised the Conservatoire's intention to keep monitoring this area.

48 The processes for programme approval, validation, monitoring and review are described fully in the Quality Assurance Handbook. The Handbook pre-dates the identification of a revised committee structure which is due to be introduced in 2013-14. As the Conservatoire has recognised, the Handbook would benefit from being updated to reflect the revised structures. It is positive that programme handbooks clearly articulate the underpinning philosophies and expectations for students and map the expected learning outcomes to the criteria and modes of assessment.

51 As part of the new curriculum, the Conservatoire has developed a common academic framework with a supporting common assessment scale and assessment matrix. The documentation is clearly student focussed and intended to assist students to develop their understanding of the academic standards expected, including helping them to evaluate their own achievements through self-critical reflection.

52 Much of the assessment is based upon performance and often in public, adding an additional layer of complexity to managing the assessment process. In response to the 2009 ELIR, greater clarity has been introduced to the role of those external examiners who are directly involved in assessing student performance, including giving them the distinct title of external assessors. This level of externality is a critical component of assessing performance. The external assessor role is now fully defined and explained in the assessment handbooks.

University of Aberdeen

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.

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.

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.

University Of Dundee

34 The University has a proactive approach to supporting the progression and development of postgraduate research students. All schools have thesis monitoring committees, consisting of at least two members of academic staff other than the student's supervisor, which provide an opportunity for the independent assessment of a student's progress and the quality of their research supervision. Students have to write a short report and give a fifteen minute talk to their thesis monitoring committee every six months, and they value the role of the committee in 'keeping them on track'. Thesis monitoring committees also provide students with a forum to express any difficulties in the student-supervisor relationship and to discuss their development needs.

44 Students who met the ELIR team commented that while schools each have a policy relating to turnaround times for providing feedback on assessed work, these are not consistently implemented in line with the University's expectation of three weeks.

45 The University has recently undertaken a number of interrelated initiatives to enhance its approach to assessment and feedback. These include participation in an evaluation of the Higher Education Academy *Transforming the Experiences of Students Through Assessment* (TESTA) methodology, a Dundee University Students Association (DUSA)-led project to explore student views of policies and processes in relation to assessment practices, and the provision of a structured 'Toolkit on Feedback and Assessment' for staff, which was developed with consultancy support from student participation in quality Scotland (sparqs). The impact and effectiveness of these initiatives will be monitored by the Quality Forum, which includes assessment and feedback as a standing item on its agenda, and the Learning and Teaching Committee, as well as through the Learning and Teaching Strategy to 2017, which includes student satisfaction in assessment and feedback as a key performance indicator.

48 The TESTA project and the DUSA-led project on assessment and feedback (see paragraph 45) arose as a response to NSS scores in the area of assessment and feedback. NSS matters, a joint publication produced by the University and DUSA, contains a 'you said, we did' section to highlight action taken in relation to feedback from the NSS. Students were able give positive examples of action taken as a result of the feedback they had provided and confirmed that their views are actively sought and contribute to the University's enhancement agenda.

74 The University's assessment policy applies to all undergraduate and taught postgraduate students and allows for local college interpretation. Although the University's assessment policy requires schools to ensure that appropriate and timely feedback is provided on students' assessed work, there is variability of practice in relation to feedback on assessment, particularly in relation to turnaround times.

75 There is also variability of policy and practice across colleges in relation to extensions to the submission dates for assessed work, varying from no extensions being permitted in one school to a process of locally-agreed email requests made directly with the relevant member of academic staff in another school. Where practices differ across colleges, such as extensions to the submission date for assessed work, these are detailed in student handbooks. Students who met the ELIR team were aware of differences in policy and practice across schools, and commented negatively about it.

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- ⁱ ELIR Technical Report, Queen Margaret University (2013), paragraph 32, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/provider?UKPRN=10005337#.VF1cUHhFBaQ.
- ⁱⁱ ELIR Technical Report, Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (2013), paragraph 25, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/provider?UKPRN=10005561#.VF1cs3hFBaQ.
- ⁱⁱⁱ ELIR Technical Report, University of Aberdeen (2013), paragraph 40, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/provider?UKPRN=10007783#.VF1dWnhFBaQ.
- ^{iv} ELIR Technical Report, University of Dundee (2013), paragraph 44, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/provider?UKPRN=10007852#.VF1d8XhFBaQ.
- ^v ELIR Technical Report of Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (2013), paragraph 48, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/provider?UKPRN=10005561#.VF1qIHhFBaQ.
- ^{vi} ELIR Technical Report, Queen Margaret University (2013), paragraph 59, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/provider?UKPRN=10005337#.VF1f2XhFBaQ.
- ^{vii} ELIR Technical Report, University of Aberdeen (2013), paragraph 30, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/provider?UKPRN=10007783#.VF1qN3hFBaQ.
- ^{viii} ELIR Technical Report, University of Aberdeen (2013), paragraph 40, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/provider?UKPRN=10007783#.VF1qN3hFBaQ.
- ^{ix} ELIR Technical Report, University of Dundee (2013), paragraph 45, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/provider?UKPRN=10007852#.VF1qYXhFBaQ.
- ^x ELIR Technical Report, University of Dundee (2013), paragraph 45, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/provider?UKPRN=10007852#.VF1qYXhFBaQ.
- ^{xi} ELIR Technical Report, Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (2013), paragraph 25, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/provider?UKPRN=10005561#.VF1qIHhFBaQ.
- ^{xii} ELIR Technical Report, University of Dundee (2013), paragraph 75, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/provider?UKPRN=10007852#.VF1qYXhFBaQ.
- ^{xiii} ELIR Technical Report, University of Aberdeen (2013), paragraph 64, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/provider?UKPRN=10007783#.VF1qN3hFBaQ.

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