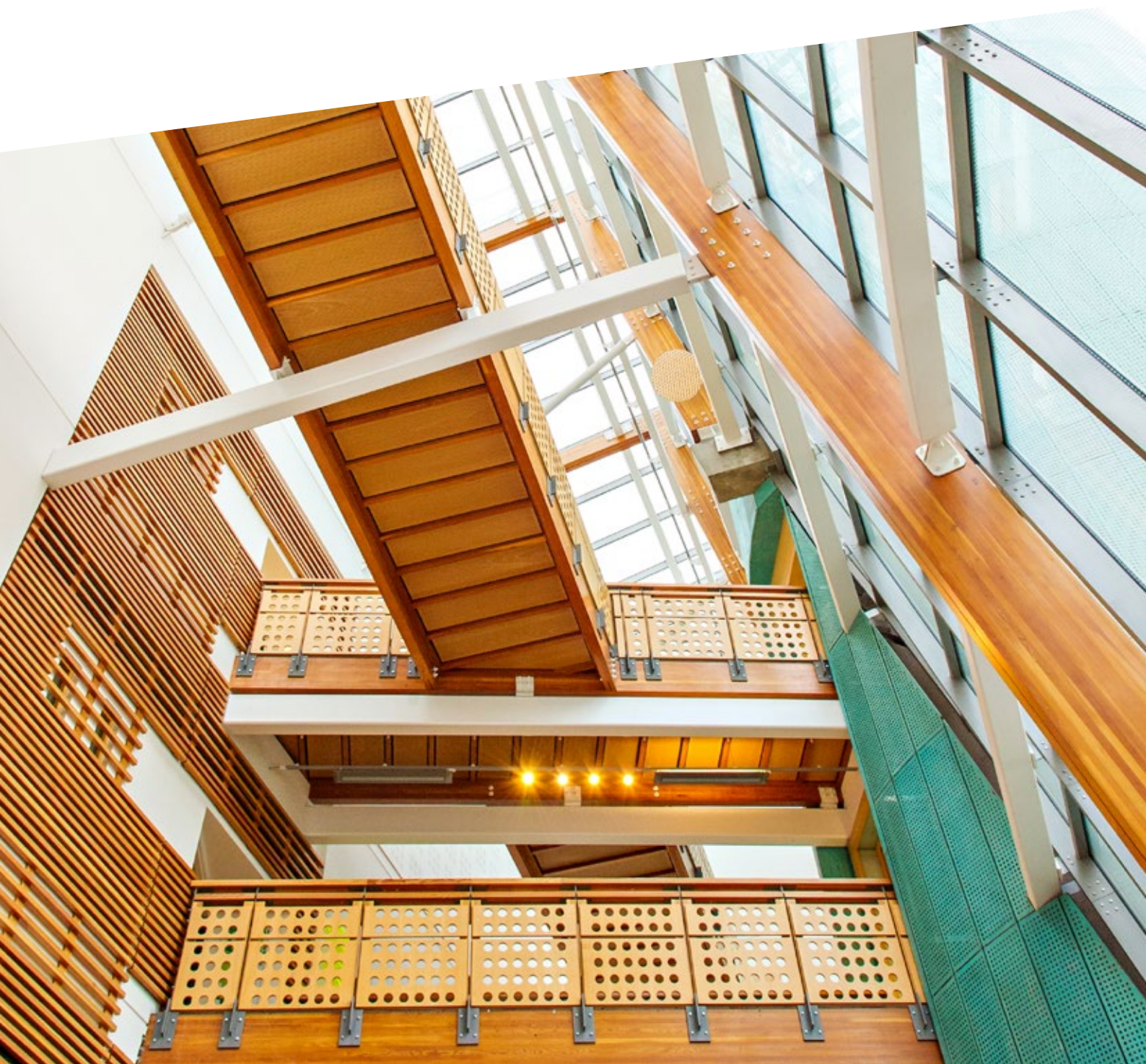




QAA
Scotland

Annual Report

2014-15



Foreword

Professor Philip Winn, Chair



In the foreword to last year's Annual Review I wrote that we had experienced a year of transition and that 'the next year promises to be challenging and exciting'. So far so good in fulfilling that promise.

At QAA Scotland, Rowena Pelik has established a new dynamic, leading the move to new premises that are a better fit for a collegiate way of working. Reviews have been successfully completed and the Student Transitions Enhancement Theme continues to deliver its objectives. The second International Enhancement Themes Conference in Glasgow was an organisational and educational triumph, again with visitors from around the globe. Small but significant changes have taken place in the way the QAA Scotland Committee operates. We have broad representation on the Committee and must use our range of knowledge and expertise to best advantage, to ensure good governance of the work of QAA Scotland, and to develop critical thinking. We have developed a leaner approach to our Committee work to give us time for discussion within the Committee and with invited experts.

The work of quality assurance and enhancement is under review in Scotland. There has been a wide consultation on the approach to be taken over the coming years that, whatever the outcome, is indicative of a belief that we must not just continue to do what we do, but should reflect and consider what adaptations we might make. This has taken place in a year when QAA elsewhere

in the UK has faced challenges. As is widely known, there is a discussion taking place, led by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, towards the creation of a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) for England, with an expected introduction in 2017-18. The nature of future approaches to quality assurance across the UK remains unclear and, although the TEF may not operate in Scotland, such a potentially seismic shift cannot be ignored.

At a time of radical change it is important to do two things: to be positive, so that one can help shape a new environment to best effect; and to reflect on and communicate our principles. QAA – all of it, throughout the UK – operates to a common UK Quality Code for Higher Education that is recognised and benchmarked internationally; is independent, open and transparent in its work, and in its judgements – judgements made impartially, with integrity and without fear; and works on a basis of co-regulation: institutions working with QAA to assure and enhance quality and standards in higher education to the benefit of students, staff and stakeholders. In Scotland we are proud of our enhancement-led approach and will work continually to develop and improve it – one cannot promote an enhancement approach for others without turning it on oneself – and we remain committed to the fundamental principles of QAA across the UK.

Introduction

Rowena Pelik, Director, QAA Scotland



Looking back over my first year as Director of QAA Scotland it is clear that it has been a year of significant achievement, and also one that has seen considerable change. As I look ahead it is equally clear that change will continue. The new challenges change brings encourages us to ensure that what we do is better, not simply different, as well as to affirm what is most important and what we value: our students and their learning, and the strengths of our university sector here in Scotland.

Politics have been a dominant theme in 2014-15. The year began with the Scottish Referendum and closed with the new government in Westminster initiating discussion around measures of teaching excellence. The Green Paper consulting on this, and other aspects of higher education policy in England, was published in November 2015. In Scotland the Government published its Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Bill in June. This has provoked considerable discussion around questions of autonomy and the governance structures that are appropriate for universities in the 21st century.

The Scottish Funding Council formally initiated the planned review of the Quality Enhancement Framework in autumn 2014. The strong continuing commitment and support for the enhancement-led approach is clear from both higher education institutions and the supporting agencies and organisations. Meanwhile, the quality assessment review launched by the funding bodies in the rest of the UK has led to extended debate about the future shape and style of quality assessment outwith Scotland, with more emphasis likely in future on risk-based approaches.

There has also been change within the office. We have welcomed new staff and seen others take on new roles; we moved in August 2015 to newly refurbished office space in Bothwell Street, delivering cost savings as well as a modern and flexible working environment. As to the achievements of the team over the year, read on...

The Annual Review

The QAA Scotland Annual Review 2014-15 has three principal sections. The first provides highlights from our review and enhancement work in Scotland, identifies trends emerging and takes a look at the policy environment within which our work is situated; the second section provides an outline of the work of QAA Scotland as part of the wider Quality Enhancement Framework; the final section provides some information about the wider work of QAA across the UK. At the end are links to selected publications and resources we have produced over the year.

Our work in 2014-15

Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR)

We continue to innovate in our approaches, and this year saw the first ELIR Follow-up event and the Focus On project, a new way to support development areas arising from reviews by exploring one particular topic identified in review reports in depth. Both saw us working creatively and in close collaboration with the whole sector, to deliver really successful events and a range of resources.

2014-15 was the third year of the current cycle of Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR). We conducted five reviews: at the University of the West of Scotland, St Andrews University, Edinburgh Napier University, Glasgow Caledonian University and Heriot Watt University. All review reports were published to schedule. In each case, the ELIR teams concluded that the institution had effective systems in place for managing academic standards and enhancing the student learning experience. In line with the ELIR method, each review also identified positive practice and areas for development.

Our Thematic Reports analyse topics identified in ELIR reports. In addition to identifying the themes arising among the areas of positive practice and the areas for development, we published thematic analyses this year on External Examining, Employability and Graduate Attributes, and Assessment and Feedback.

Annual discussions were held at all 18 higher education institutions. These annual discussion meetings form a key part of the ELIR method, providing an opportunity for QAA Scotland officers to meet student representatives and senior staff to discuss institutional approaches to engaging students, and the ways in which institutions are working to address the outcomes from ELIR and institution-led reviews, including themes raised by professional, statutory or regulatory bodies.

As part of the ELIR process, Follow-up reports are produced by institutions one year after publication of their ELIR reports. The Follow-up reports from Aberdeen, Dundee and Strathclyde were produced and published during 2014-15. An innovation within the ELIR 3 method is the introduction of Follow-up events. Following two pilots last year, a first, very successful, Follow-up event took place in May 2015. Students and staff from Queen Margaret University, the Royal Conservatoire Scotland and the University of Aberdeen came together to discuss – and constructively challenge – their progress since the ELIR visit. The feedback was very positive, and it is clear that this is a valuable addition to the review method for institutions. Delegates valued the opportunity to share challenges and learn about good practice. Discussions explored topics ranging from data management to students as co-creators of modules.

Key trends arising from review reports

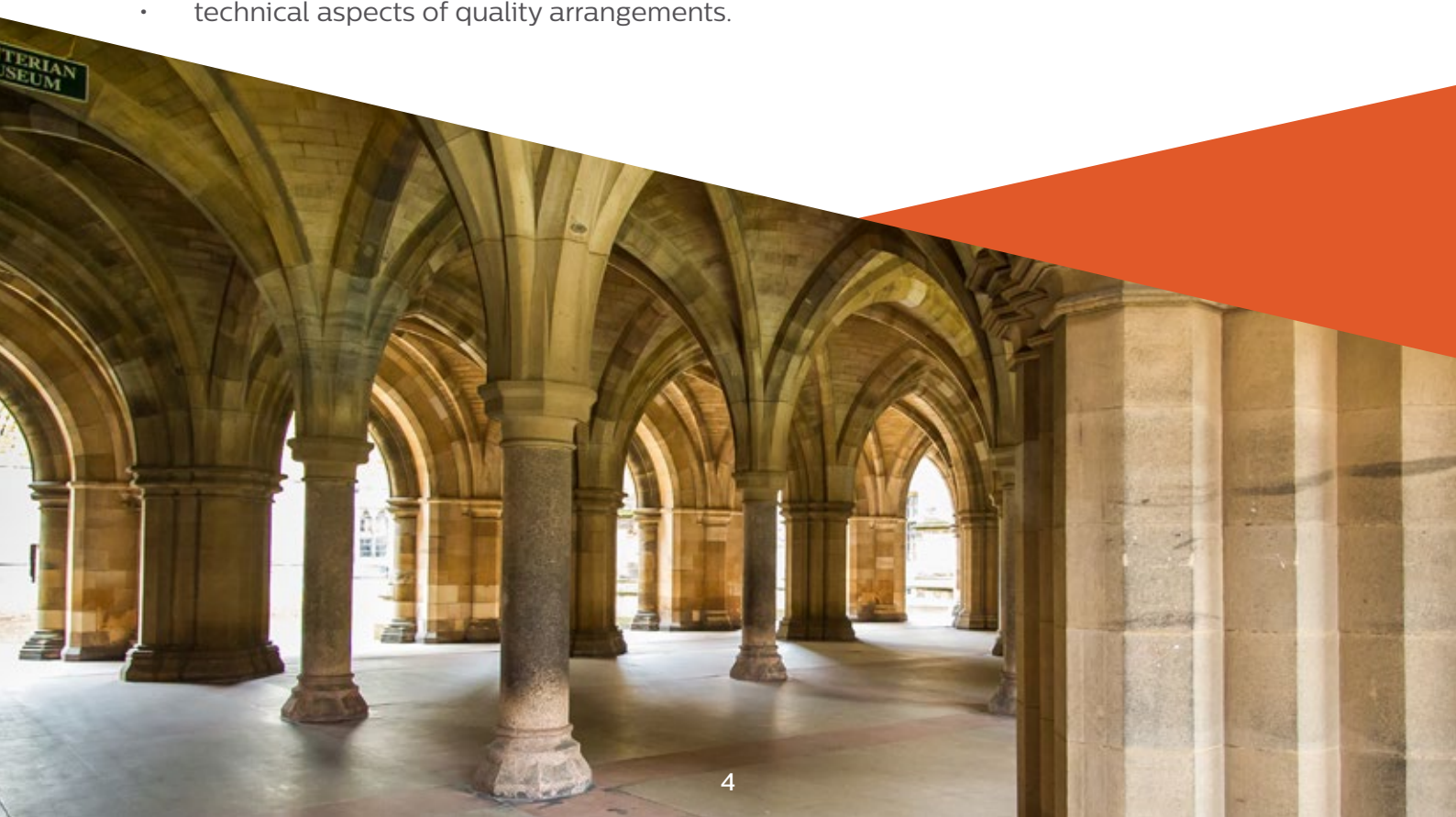
QAA provides an annual overview report to the Scottish Funding Council in which we seek to identify key trends in the sector emerging from our enhancement and review work. Generic strengths, such as working in collaboration, remain characteristic of the sector and our approach. Above all, our ELIR work continues to confirm the effectiveness of the Scottish university sector in securing academic standards and providing a high quality student experience that is responsive to changing needs and expectations.

The following emerged as areas where the sector demonstrated positive practice:

- clarity of institutional vision and strategy for delivering an enhanced student learning experience
- student support, in particular that which is integrated and personalised
- provision of positive learning experiences
- effective approaches to quality management, which, in a number of cases specifically identifying the institution, have processes that are integrated, reflective and responsive
- student engagement and representation
- activities to promote widening participation
- approaches supporting equality and diversity
- staff development to support institutional strategy and pedagogical approaches
- internationalisation of the student experience, and opportunities and support for student mobility.

The following were identified as areas for development in ELIR 3 reports:

- representation of students from all modes of study
- work to improve the research student experience, including support for research students who teach
- feedback on assessment
- consistency in the implementation of strategy and practices
- optimising and enhancing the use of technology
- ensuring adequate support for anticipated increase in international student numbers
- technical aspects of quality arrangements.



Focus On project: Assessment and Feedback

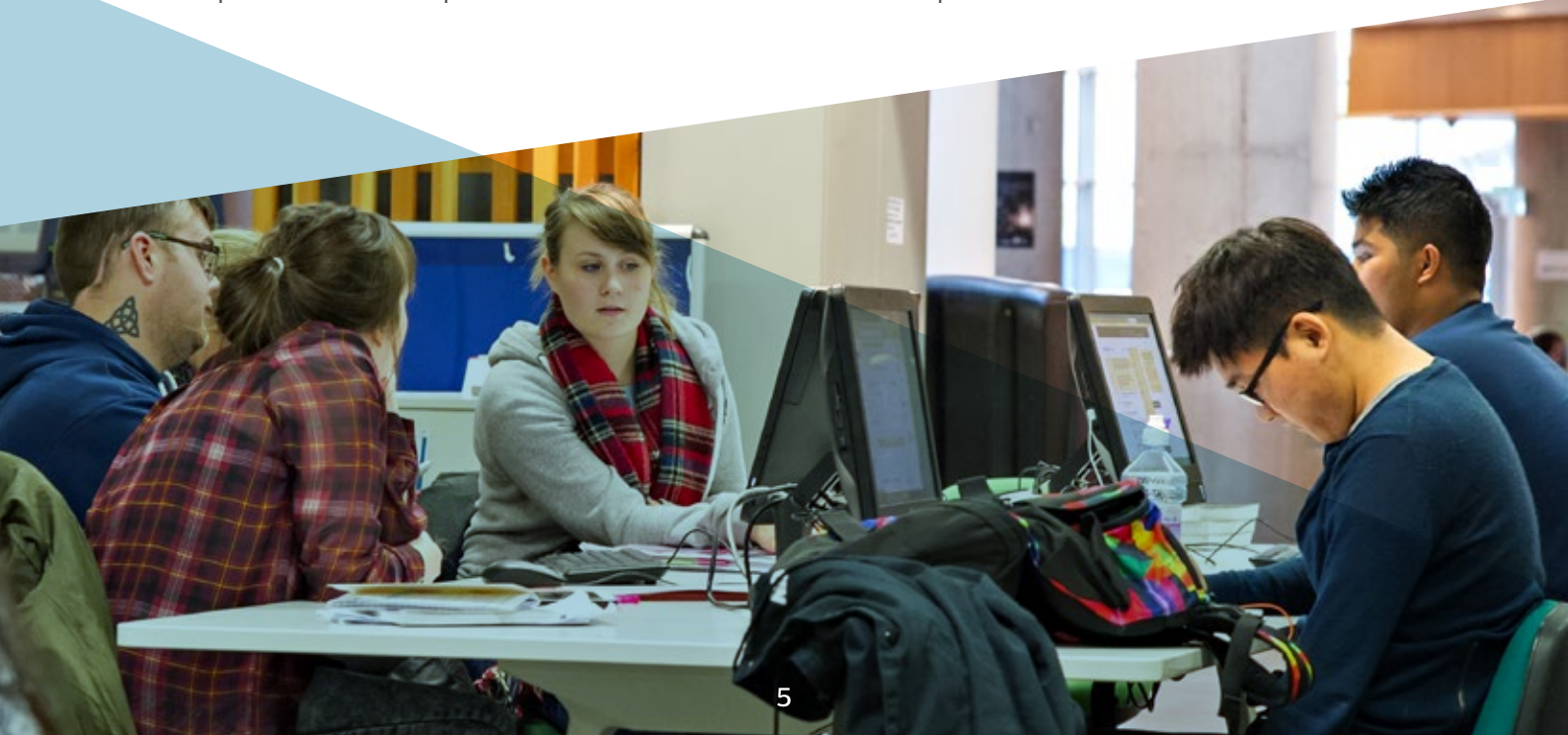
2014-15 saw the introduction of our first Focus On project, where themes identified from analysis of ELIR reports are explored in a developmental manner with the sector. Topics are chosen in partnership with the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee, and the first topic selected was Assessment and Feedback. With perennial interest in improving feedback on assessment, there was excellent engagement with the project from practitioners, senior managers, policy makers and, of course, students. The opening event on the use of technology to support assessment and feedback attracted a large audience of practitioners, and identified '10 key messages' for senior managers. A policy and practice summit brought together staff and students from every Scottish higher education institution to share challenges and positive approaches, considering what improvement in assessment and feedback would look like in their own institutions. The final strand explored 'student-friendly' feedback, drawing together examples of student-led initiatives to promote feedback on assessment and identifying 'five principles of student-friendly feedback'.

Enhancement Themes

Work rapidly got underway on QAA's new Enhancement Theme, Student Transitions, with a lively consultation event in October. The enthusiasm for this Theme was evident from the beginning; the consultation event, with 80 places, was oversubscribed, and produced a wealth of ideas and actions, helping to shape the extensive programme of activity and set priorities for the whole year.

Early in the year institutions shared their plans for the Theme and examples of practice. Institutional teams have since been working on a wide range of transitions, many initially focusing on entry point transitions. By the end of the year it is clear that there has been learning within and between institutions, learning together with students and from staff in many different roles. While collaborative work is set to be a feature of the second year of the Theme, it is evident that teams are already learning from each other and expect to gain more from the external evaluation of the first year of the Theme. More than this, benefits are already emerging showing how focused attention paid to transitions can make a difference to students' progress and achievement. There is a strong sense of students and staff enjoying this Theme, and of positive anticipation of what will be achieved in years two and three.

A collective early output is the draft transitions map: the ambition of which is to capture the rich complexity of transitions in an interactive web-based resource. Examples of practice from all institutions and the Student Network, along with conference resources, have been incorporated. The map will continue to evolve and develop over the life of the Theme.





This year saw our second International Enhancement Themes Conference, Enhancement and Innovation in Higher Education. The conference ran over three days and saw a record 600 delegates attending. Eleven countries outside the UK were represented from across the globe: Australia, Belgium, Finland, Hong Kong, Ireland, New Zealand, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Sweden and the USA. Our international conference is the culmination of two years of planning and preparation: undoubtedly the achievement of the year and yet another testament to the value of effective team working within the office and partnership with sector colleagues – as well as a fine illustration of the collaborative, collegiate ethos that is characteristic of the enhancement-led approach in Scotland.

We were delighted with the success of the conference and the energy it generated; every aspect of the conference was a success, from inspiring keynote speakers, through moving presentations and performances from students, to the packed programme of posters, presentations and workshops. Evaluation showed very high satisfaction with the event (92 per cent had their expectations met; 97 per cent found it useful). Delegates clearly welcomed the organisation of the conference; the venue; the variety of sessions on offer, with the many different breakout options; as well as the substantial input from students and the opportunities to learn from each other and to network.

We delivered a wide range of other outputs over the year. Work was commissioned on Student Transitions Skills and Strategies. Five short informative reports have been produced covering: models and theories for understanding Student Transitions; a set of evidence-based transitions skills; whether certain skills were needed at different transition points; self-efficacy skills; and critical self-reflection skills. The Enhancement Theme Student Network gathered and published case studies on Student Transitions to postgraduate studies, and ran an event focusing on cared-for students on the day new legislation on corporate parenting came into effect, and the Theme supported a corporate parenting training session at the University of Edinburgh, delivered by Who Cares? Scotland.

Self-evaluation is central to the Quality Enhancement Framework in Scotland; it underlies our enhancement-led approach to both review and the Enhancement Themes, and consequently we continue to commission independent evaluations of our work and working methods. This year we have commissioned a short evaluation of the Theme during its first year, and will do the same next year before conducting a fuller evaluation of the whole Theme as part of the final year, learning and building on each.

Descriptors of Enhancement

In December we published the outcome of a major piece of work commissioned from the Centre for Higher Education Research and Evaluation at the University of Lancaster.

It re-evaluated the indicators of enhancement developed in 2008 to produce six defining characteristics of enhancement practice. These are: collaborative practice; the use of national quality Enhancement Themes; learning from international experience; alignment and coherence; evaluative practice; and students as partners (embracing both student engagement in learning and student engagement in decisions).

These Descriptors encapsulate the university sector in Scotland's way of working and the values they represent. As with the Quality Enhancement Framework itself, which is a coherent and partnership-based approach, the importance of alignment and of collaboration should not be underestimated; without these, effort can be dissipated and far fewer benefits – especially whole sector change – would be realised.

Recognition of prior learning

QAA Scotland continued to support the Scottish higher education sector in promoting more flexible approaches to teaching, learning and assessment. In support of continued work with the sector on the recognition of prior learning, a draft toolkit was been piloted and is being finalised. This will be published and disseminated in autumn 2015.



The policy environment

There continues to be significant divergence of government policy for higher education in the different countries of the UK. QAA is committed to developing and delivering services that meet the needs of each part of the UK (as it does, for example, through different approaches to institutional review) while maintaining and supporting the framework that supports the whole UK, such as the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, and a consistent approach to academic standards. QAA will continue to address both the UK-wide and country-specific aspects of quality assurance and enhancement into the future.

Decisions made elsewhere in the UK continue to impact on work in Scotland. The divergence between more market-led policies – with higher education in England open to ‘alternative providers’, renewed encouragement of ‘challenger institutions’ and the removal of student number controls – contrasts sharply with the continued strong philosophical commitment in Scotland to education as a public good, accessible by all, and the belief that universities and university-level education have a strong societal benefit far beyond that to the individual.

The outcome of the independence referendum in September 2014 did not halt discussion around devolution and devolved powers, discussions which have only had further impetus with the outcome – north and south of the border – of the Westminster elections in May 2015. The change in First Minister brought us a new Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, and we have since seen the introduction of the Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Bill; the establishment of a Commission on Widening Access, under Dame Ruth Silver; and the active implementation of the recommendations on Developing the Young Workforce, an ambitious seven-year programme that aims to better prepare children and young people in Scotland for the world of work.



QAA in Scotland

QAA Scotland has devolved responsibilities for the work of QAA in Scotland. Our work is overseen by the QAA Scotland Committee, which is a committee of the QAA Board. Much of our work relates to the distinctive Scottish approach to quality – the Quality Enhancement Framework – which has been developed since 2003 under the aegis of the Universities Quality Working Group (UQWG). UQWG represents and embodies the partnership approach that defines the distinctive nature of the Quality Enhancement Framework in Scotland. We work in close association with the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC), which, since 2005, has helped oversee the progress of core strands of work, including the Enhancement Themes and projects seeking to learn from international practice.

The Quality Enhancement Framework: An integrated approach

The Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework is based on the principle that quality activities in a mature, effective higher education system should not focus solely or primarily on threshold issues of quality assurance, but on the sector's determination to continue to enhance the quality and excellence of provision.

The framework has five elements, each of them involving QAA Scotland in particular ways, as follows.

- **Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR)** – This incorporates periodic institutional reviews, published reports, annual discussions and a series of Follow-up activities. ELIR is managed by QAA Scotland. It is based on a four-year cycle, during which each Scottish university-sector provider is reviewed. We devise the handbook that defines the method; recruit, train and support ELIR reviewers; organise and manage review visits; produce published reports on the effectiveness of each institution's management of academic standards, and the assurance and enhancement of the student learning experience; conduct an annual discussion with each provider; and organise a series of Follow-up events.
- **Scotland's Enhancement Themes** – Organised and managed by QAA Scotland, the Enhancement Themes bring all Scottish higher education institutions together to participate in a programme of activities designed to deliver change around an agreed strategic topic. Themes enable the sector to work in depth on complex and challenging issues; they incorporate a number of strands, a series of deliverables each year (such as toolkits, case studies, events and workshops) and a major conference. The Themes are overseen by SHEEC.
- **Institution-led quality reviews at the level of disciplines and service areas** – QAA Scotland engages with each institution on an annual basis to reflect on the outcomes of these reviews and compiles an annual report to the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) summarising these activities for the whole Scottish higher education sector. Considering the effectiveness of the approach in place at each institution is a core part of the ELIR method.
- **Student engagement in quality** – In Scotland, we believe that students are at the heart of the system and thus our approach involves students as partners. After over 10 years, this is a mature and embedded part of our culture and an assumed part of what we do. QAA Scotland plays an active role in supporting student engagement, including through the inclusion of student members in all ELIR review teams, through student involvement in the Enhancement Themes and as members of our committees and working groups.
- **Public information about quality** – QAA Scotland produces public information on quality, particularly through publication of the outcomes of ELIR reviews and other strategic reporting. We also draw on public information in the conduct of ELIR reviews.

A partnership approach

The approach to quality in the university sector in Scotland is based on close and effective partnership working between the SFC, Universities Scotland, QAA Scotland and NUS Scotland. Together with students and staff from across the sector and sparqs (Student Partnership in Quality Scotland, the agency set up to support students in engaging with quality and representation systems) we work to assure the academic standards and enhance the quality of higher education provision in Scotland.

Partnership is integral to the structures and ways in which we work. There are regular liaison meetings at officer level between QAA Scotland and colleagues at the SFC, NUS and sparqs, the Higher Education Academy in Scotland, and Education Scotland. These meetings enable us to share views on areas of common interest and potential collaboration. We work alongside representatives of the Scottish Government through our work with the Scottish Bologna stakeholders group, our regular liaison with senior staff in the Scottish Government's Higher Education Division, and in providing expert advice to Scottish Ministers on relevant matters, including the award of university title and degree awarding powers.

More broadly, we work with the wider education sector in Scotland, including with the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework Partnership, and in collaboration with educational bodies in the health and social care sectors, and with the school and college sectors around Developing the Young Workforce and Curriculum for Excellence. The QAA Scotland Committee draws its membership from employers and professional bodies, as well as sector agencies and institutions.

We work closely with vice-principals learning and teaching or equivalent senior staff through our support for SHEEC, and with heads of quality/academic registrars on the Teaching Quality Forum. We are in regular liaison with the sector through annual discussions with each institution, as well as through joint involvement with committees.



Our role in the Scottish higher education sector

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

QAA Scotland proactively supports the dissemination and exchange of good practice, through mechanisms including institutional reviews, our national enhancement work and the provision of extensive web resources. ELIR explores institutions' engagement with the Enhancement Themes and the institutions' individual strategic approach to enhancement; positive practice and areas for development emerging from ELIR reports shape developmental activities that we provide for the sector as a whole.

We are committed to building and maintaining strong and effective relationships with our partners in the sector, with student representative bodies, and with other agencies. We are confident that the Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework continues to represent world-leading practice, and we will continue to work in partnership to ensure it remains fit for purpose, responsive and innovative.



About QAA across the UK

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is the independent body entrusted with monitoring and advising on standards and quality in UK higher education. QAA is independent of government and higher education providers and acts in the public interest, for the benefit of students and to protect the standing and reputation of UK higher education qualifications and awards. We are dedicated to ensuring that the three million students working towards a UK qualification get the higher education experience they are entitled to expect.

Our work is highly respected throughout the world; it is also formally recognised through acceptance on the European Quality Assurance Register and through our work, and Memoranda of Understanding, with quality assurance agencies across the globe. QAA's work reviewing UK higher education in other countries provides assurance in the quality of the education and awards for students, governments and other organisations.

QAA develops and maintains the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code).¹ This defines and sets out the expectations that all providers of UK higher education are required to meet. The Quality Code is used by higher education providers in setting, describing and assuring the academic standards of their higher education awards and programmes, and the quality of the learning opportunities they provide. The Quality Code is developed by QAA through consultation with the higher education sector and key stakeholders including students and employers.

UK higher education continues to grow and diversify. QAA's approach enables us to respond to the differing education policies across the home nations of the UK, safeguarding standards and supporting the improvement of quality for students – whether they study in Scotland, England, Wales or Northern Ireland, at a university or college in the UK, or in any other location worldwide where courses lead to UK higher education qualifications.

The scale, shape, structure and purpose of learning provision are changing in the UK and around the world. QAA remains uniquely placed to anticipate and respond to change in order to continue to safeguard the reputation of UK higher education wherever it is delivered, support economic opportunity for the UK, and provide assurance to those who invest in and undertake learning.

QAA's UK-wide work of particular relevance to Scotland

During 2014–15 QAA published the updated and revised version of the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications. This brings together the framework for Scotland and that for England, Wales and Northern Ireland into a single document, and completes the Quality Code, Part A: Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards. Considerable work has been done continuing to review Subject Benchmark Statements.

¹ The UK Quality Code for Higher Education, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code.

Resources

A wide range of resources are available for download from our [Enhancement Themes website](#).² The website has a good search facility and acts as a searchable open educational resource for the current and past Themes. It also houses other resources developed or commissioned by QAA Scotland, such as toolkits and case studies.

Selected QAA Scotland publications 2014–15

We produced a new guide to our work: QAA Scotland: Who we are and what we do.³

A wealth of [resources](#) are available from the second International Enhancement Themes Conference: Enhancement and Innovation in Higher Education:

- post-conference publication
- videos
- posters
- presentations
- papers
- workshops
- photos.

[Student Transitions Enhancement Theme](#) resources⁴ to date include:

- publications on Student Transitions Skills and Strategies
- case studies from the Student Network's project on postgraduate transitions.

The materials from the [Focus On: Assessment and Feedback project](#)⁵ include:

- the use of technology to support assessment and feedback practice
- the consistent implementation of assessment and feedback policy and practice
- how students' associations work in partnership to improve feedback on assessment
- the Assessment and Feedback: Policy and Practice event.

Over the year we produced four further [Thematic Reports](#)⁶ on ELIR:

- Thematic Report on the Outcomes of ELIRs conducted in 2014
- Thematic Report on ELIR Reports 2013–15: Employability and Graduate Attributes
- Thematic Report on ELIR Reports 2013–15: External Examiners
- Thematic Report on ELIR Reports 2013–14: Assessment and Feedback.

[A major analysis](#) of the maturity of the enhancement-led approach in Scotland was produced:

- From Quality Indicators to Enhancement Descriptors: Towards a New Framework (2014).

We continue to commission [evaluations](#) of our work. The major output this year was:

- Evaluation of the Enhancement Themes 2014 – Full Report
- Evaluation of the Enhancement Themes 2014 – Executive Summary.

² Enhancement Themes website, available at: www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk.

³ QAA Scotland: Who we are and what we do, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=2946

⁴ Student Transitions Enhancement Theme, available at: www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/enhancement-themes/current-enhancement-theme.

⁵ Focus On: Assessment and Feedback project, available at: www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/focus-on-assessment-and-feedback.

⁶ Thematic Reports, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/how-we-review-higher-education/enhancement-led-institutional-review.

Our year in numbers

Enhancement Themes website

Audience numbers

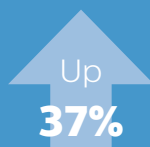
129,448

PAGE VIEWS

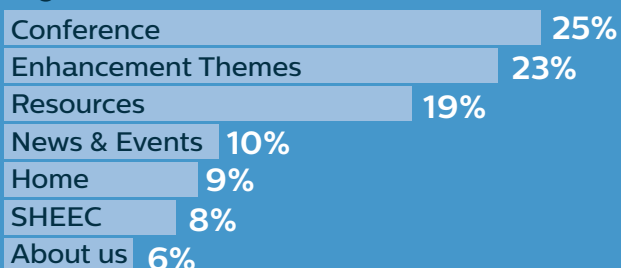


32,007

INDIVIDUAL USERS



Page views



Publications

Enhancement Themes

197 Presentations

122 Case studies

118 Papers

79 Resources

34 Posters

31 Workshops

20 Videos

12 Publications

9 Tipzone articles

6 Reports

Enhancement-led Institutional Review

5 Review reports

4 Thematic reports

3 Follow-up reports

640
New
resources

Events

962

TOTAL DELEGATES

LARGEST EVENT:

International Enhancement Conference

3 days

600 individual delegates

11 countries represented

97% satisfaction

386 tweets **#ETconf15**

Newsletters

Enhancement Themes

2,658 subscribers

4 editions

16 articles from external
contributors, including
5 international

Social media

@QAAScotland

193 followers

97 tweets

@THEMESTweets

555 followers

1,181 tweets



Our year in pictures



ELIR
training
and
briefings

International
Enhancement
Conference

Herald HE
Awards

Focus On
events

New office

QAA 1411 - Dec 15

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