

# Enhancement-led Institutional Review Handbook

April 2017

## Fourth edition

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## Introduction

This is the fourth edition of the Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) Handbook. It sets out the review method that will be applied to Scottish higher education institutions in the period 2017-22 (ELIR 4).

ELIR 4 builds on previous versions of the review method that have been running in Scotland since 2003. ELIR is a distinctive approach to institutional review, developed to address the particular context of the Scottish higher education sector. It also has points of tangency with review methods operating in other parts of the UK and beyond.

ELIR 4 was developed by QAA Scotland with the support of an External Institutional Review Advisory Group comprising members from the sector with experience of being reviewed and being reviewers, including student reviewers. Early proposals were the subject of written consultation to which all higher education institutions in Scotland responded. Developments in the method were also discussed in sector groups such as the Universities Quality Working Group, and the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee and the Teaching Quality Forum. QAA Scotland is grateful to all of these individuals and groups for their time and constructive engagement.

## Key developments for ELIR 4: continuity and change

The most significant change in the method for this fourth cycle is the emphasis ELIR 4 places on the contextualisation of each review. The intention behind this change is to maximise the value of the exercise to individual institutions and to the sector, building on the strength of support for ELIR to continue being enhancement-led, and acknowledging the importance placed on evidence-based self-evaluation.

ELIR 4 enables a range of outcomes to be achieved.

- Promoting holistic, evidence-based evaluation by institutions and the opportunity to engage in discussion on the outcomes of that evaluation with a team of peers.
- Delivering a clear statement on baseline quality and academic standards, and beyond that providing a suite of differentiated commendations and recommendations.
- Enabling whole-sector enhancement and developmental activity to be conducted, drawing on thematic information about strengths and challenges of the institutions reviewed.

ELIR 4 introduces a number of changes in the process, many of which relate to contextualisation:

- more detailed discussions about the scope and focus of the review at an early stage
- feedback from the ELIR team on the contextualisation decisions in advance of the Planning Visit
- a one-day Planning Visit rather than a two-day Part 1 Visit
- adjustments to the Technical report structure and style, including much greater emphasis on the institution's approach to using data to inform its decision-making and the analysis of its strengths, challenges and priorities.

There will be greater flexibility between reviews in a number of respects:

- the size and composition of the ELIR team can be varied to fit the institutional context
- the duration of the Review Visit can be adjusted

- the gap between the Planning Visit and the Review Visit can be adjusted during the date-setting stage.

Institutions will continue to prepare and submit a Reflective Analysis (RA) and an Advance Information Set (AIS). Case studies will no longer be required, although institutions may submit them if they wish to present information to their ELIR team in that format. The AIS will continue to contain a mapping of the institution's policy and practice against the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code) - this can be an update to the mapping submitted in ELIR 3.

The nature of Follow-up activity will be aligned more closely with the Focus On projects, with the intention of facilitating cross-institutional learning.

Throughout the development of ELIR 4, universal support has been expressed for the method to continue being enhancement-led. The developments being introduced are intended to strengthen its enhancement focus and to continue championing student engagement at all stages including through the ongoing annual discussion meetings. The role of student views in the decisions taken around contextualisation of ELIRs will be explored by the ELIR teams in each review.

## **Quality Enhancement Framework**

ELIR continues to fulfil a key role as one of the five interrelated elements of the Quality Enhancement Framework in Scotland:

- Enhancement Themes
- institution-led review
- student engagement in quality
- public information
- Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR).

## **Operational Guidance**

This Handbook is accompanied by a suite of Operational Guidance, which is intended to support institutions and reviewers participating with the method. In line with previous practice, the Operational Guidance is updated throughout the cycle and is made available on the [QAA website](https://www.qaa.ac.uk).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> QAA website, available at: [www.qaa.ac.uk](https://www.qaa.ac.uk).

## Section 1: The enhancement-led approach

### Defining enhancement

1 The Scottish sector has defined enhancement as **taking deliberate steps to bring about improvement in the effectiveness of the learning experiences of students.**

2 ELIR has a focus on the institution's strategic approach to enhancement, which will be implemented at multiple levels within the institution. The resulting enhancement may involve continuous improvement and/or more significant step-changes in policy and practice.

3 ELIR is particularly interested in the institution's strategic intentions and its plans for the composition of the student population. ELIR explores the impact of institutional strategy and any changes in the student population on the institution's approach to managing quality. For example, if the institution intends to expand its postgraduate research student population, ELIR will be interested in the steps the institution has taken to ensure its quality policy and practices are effective for that expansion. Once the expansion has taken place, ELIR will be interested in the outcomes of the institution's evaluation of its policy and practices, and in the institution's response to that evaluation.

### Enhancement includes assurance through self-evaluation

4 In order to take deliberate steps, it is expected that the institution will have a clear strategic vision of the enhancement it is seeking to bring about. It is also expected that the institution will evaluate its current strengths and areas for development. In doing so, the institution may make use of a framework of questions:

- where are we now?
- where do we want to be in the future?
- how are we going to get there?
- how will we know when we get there?

5 The approach the institution takes to self-evaluation forms a significant focus in ELIR. This is because considerable confidence can be derived from an institution that has systematic arrangements in place for evaluating its strengths, and identifying and addressing potential risks to quality and academic standards. In an enhancement-led approach, institutions identify ways in which the student learning experience could be improved, even when threshold quality is secure. The enhancement culture in Scotland places emphasis on engaging well beyond the threshold, inspiring excellence.

6 The institution prepares a specific evaluative document for ELIR, the RA (this is covered in more detail in Section 4), but institutions also undertake evaluative activity on an ongoing basis, and careful attention will be paid to the range and overall effectiveness of those ongoing evaluative activities.

### External reference points

7 As part of identifying its strategic approach to enhancement and evaluating its current policy and practice, the institution is expected to make use of a variety of external reference points. Some of these reference points will be common to all Scottish institutions, such as the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) guidance to institutions on quality and the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF). Some reference points will be UK-wide, such as the Quality Code, and others will be international, such as those developed through the Bologna process.

8 While institutions have flexibility to identify the full suite of reference points that are relevant to their strategic vision, context and student population, there are a number of specific references that Scottish higher education institutions are expected to address. These include the Quality Code, incorporating Subject Benchmark Statements, and the higher education qualifications framework that, in Scotland, is established within the SCQF. Institutions will also have regard to Part 1 of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) (see Appendix 4) and to the UK Professional Standards Framework for Teaching and Supporting Learning. The SFC publishes guidance on its expectations for the Scottish higher education institutions. In a number of cases, institutional adherence with that guidance is explored during ELIR, for example the extent to which the institution meets the SFC guidance on institution-led quality review.

9 One of the elements of the Quality Enhancement Framework is the programme of Enhancement Themes and related activities coordinated under the auspices of the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee. It is expected that Scottish higher education institutions engage with that work, although the precise way in which they engage is for each institution to determine. The Enhancement Themes have produced outcomes that are potentially valuable reference points and that have impacted on policy and practice across the sector. While there is no expectation that an institution should comply with specific outcomes, certain practices have become common across the sector: for example identifying and embedding graduate attributes. It is appropriate for an ELIR team to explore with an institution why it has, or has not, chosen to adopt a particular approach. This will be carried out in the context of ELIR seeking to support diversity across the sector.

10 It is recognised that higher education institutions operate in a dynamic environment in which the possible suite of reference points is evolving. The ELIR team will consider the extent to which the institution has systematic arrangements for:

- identifying the reference points that are most relevant to the institution's strategic direction and student population
- identifying changes in the Quality Code, SFC guidance and related key reference points, and updating institutional policy and practice accordingly
- using these reference points in setting, managing and evaluating institutional strategy, policy and practice.

11 The ELIR team will recognise appropriate lead times for the institution to undertake this activity. Information on current expectations in the sector is available from QAA Scotland officers.

## **Enhancement, innovation and risk**

12 Fundamental to enhancement is the management of change. Enhancement involves doing new things or doing established things in different ways. Both of these involve the need to manage a process of change from current to future activity. A key element for institutions will be the ability to identify and manage the risks associated with the change process. ELIR supports institutions adopting an ambitious approach to their enhancement activity and promotes managed risk taking.

## **Student engagement**

13 Student engagement is one of the five elements of the Quality Enhancement Framework, and the effectiveness of student engagement is a significant focus of ELIR. Since the inception of the enhancement-led approach, it has become established practice that students should be partners in the formulation, operation and evaluation of the

institution's approach to enhancement. The ELIR team will explore the extent and effectiveness of that partnership. The ELIR team will also be interested in the approach institutions take to engaging students in their own learning.

## **Internationalisation**

14 Scottish higher education institutions continue to have a strong focus on internationalisation and this is reflected in the Quality Enhancement Framework. The Enhancement Themes and related activity draw extensively on international practice. Institutions increasingly make use of international reference points and networks in formulating and evaluating their strategies, policies and practices. In ELIR, the institution's approach to internationalisation is explored through a number of dimensions, including: student recruitment, the student experience (for example student and staff mobility), the curriculum, and international partnerships (for example collaborative provision). In addition, the ELIR team can include an international reviewer.

## **Comparability of ELIR in the UK and internationally**

15 Although the ELIR method is particular to the Scottish sector, it provides opportunities for comparability between methods and institutions. Comparability with the rest of the UK is provided through a range of mechanisms, including:

- the use of UK-wide reference points
- reviewers being drawn from across the UK
- broad comparability of ELIR outcomes with those in review methods in other parts of the UK.

16 International comparability is provided through:

- institutions' use of international reference points in formulating and evaluating strategy and practice, including the ESG
- QAA's engagement with networks and agencies in other countries, which influences our development of the review method and related activity
- drawing on international practice, for example through the Enhancement Themes
- the ELIR team's inclusion of reviewers with international experience and/or a reviewer based outside the UK.

## **Section 2: Nature and scope of ELIR**

17 The ELIR method seeks to:

- be open and transparent, forward-looking and conducted in a collaborative spirit
- support the sector to secure academic standards and enhance the student learning experience
- reflect the principles of self-evaluation
- relate to the wider Quality Enhancement Framework in Scotland.

## **Scope of ELIR**

18 The scope of ELIR includes all of the institution's credit-bearing provision. ELIR is concerned with the learning experience of all students on credit-bearing provision irrespective of their level, mode or location of study. This will include: undergraduate and postgraduate students; taught and research students; full-time and part-time students, including those involved in credit-bearing continuing professional development; and

campus-based, work-based and distance-learning students. It will include students entering the institution through the full variety of routes and pathways. It will include home, European and international students, irrespective of funding.

19 ELIR considers how effectively the institution manages equality and diversity within its student population. This will include the arrangements for identifying and responding to student needs.

20 The scope of ELIR includes collaborative provision wherever and however it is delivered, such as through partnership with a further education college or employer organisation. In cases where the delivering institution is itself a Scottish higher education institution, the delivering institution will receive an ELIR review in its own right. Responsibility for the academic standards of awards offered through such arrangements remains unambiguously with the awarding institution. Where provision is made in conjunction with an overseas partner, ELIR will relate to the arrangements in place in the Scottish institution for managing the quality of the student learning experience and the academic standards of the awards. Scottish institutions will continue to participate in review of their transnational education (TNE) and related activity organised by QAA from time to time. The outcomes from that work will form useful reference points in ELIR.

21 ELIR has a focus on the student learning experience. This comprises two main aspects: the learning opportunities the institution provides for its students and the extent to which students are engaged with the management of quality, and are, therefore, engaged as partners in shaping their learning.

### **Section 3: Contextualisation of ELIR**

22 ELIR 4 places much greater emphasis on contextualising the review than previous versions of the method. This means that, while the institution can still begin its preparation with a holistic evaluation of its strategy, policy and practice in relation to quality assurance and enhancement, the review itself will focus on those areas where there is likely to be greatest benefit. The identification of the areas of focus will involve the institution drawing on information about the nature and quality of its provision, both qualitative and quantitative. The sources of such information will, to a large extent, include existing forms of reporting, such as to the SFC and to the Higher Education Statistics Agency.

23 The institution will discuss the contextualisation of its review with the QAA Scotland officer managing the review. These discussions will begin at an early stage in the institution's preparations. The institution will set out and evaluate its contextualisation decisions in the RA it submits to the ELIR team; the early Planning Visit provides an opportunity for the institution and the ELIR team to discuss those decisions, including the possibility of the ELIR team seeking additional information from the institution if necessary in order to inform the threshold judgement. The outcome of contextualisation, therefore, will affect the nature of the RA the institution produces, the composition of the ELIR team, the focus of the topics included in the review visit and, to a certain extent, the topics included in the ELIR report.

24 The intention is that contextualisation ensures the institution gains optimal value from its preparatory evaluation and the ELIR itself because it allows the review to be responsive to the nature of the institution, including the composition of the student population and its strategic priorities. The contextualisation process ensures the themes of the ELIR are the institution's priority areas. There also needs to be an opportunity for the ELIR team to comment on the institution's contextualisation decisions to ensure the team has enough evidence to support the threshold judgement, for example adequate demonstration of ELIR 3 outcomes and key reference points being addressed. Key reference points here would include the SFC guidance and the expectations of the Quality Code.

25 The table below sets out how contextualisation operates in ELIR 4.

<b>Stage in process</b>	<b>Information</b>	<b>How is information used?</b>
Early liaison with QAA Scotland	<p>Size and scale of the higher education institution (HEI):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• how many study/delivery locations</li> <li>• scale of collaborative activity</li> <li>• range and complexity of provision (for example, work-based learning).</li> </ul> <p>HEI early views on composition and characteristics of the ELIR team.</p> <p>Nature of ELIR 3 outcomes.</p> <p>Any significant changes in strategy, student population or other key context since ELIR 3 or planned.</p>	<p>Informs composition of the ELIR team (size and any characteristics/expertise HEI wishes to see reflected in team).</p> <p>Informs exact length of gap between Planning Visit and main Review Visits (6-8 weeks) to allow Visit dates to be identified.</p>
ELIR preparation and RA drafting	<p>Outcomes of previous ELIR: good practice and development points - any follow-up remaining?</p> <p>Evaluation of student feedback: key points arising and matters highlighted in the Student Partnership Agreement or related document.</p> <p>Evaluation of the outcomes and experience of operating: institution-led review, as well as PSRB accreditation activity and external examiners reports.</p> <p>Quality Code mapping - an update to the ELIR 3 mapping highlighting good practice and challenge points, as well as any key changes.</p> <p>The HEI should draw on the reports it makes to the SFC on institution-led review and through the Outcome Agreement arrangements.</p>	<p>Informs HEI self-evaluation leading to its view of its quality and enhancement priorities, and therefore the key focal points of the ELIR.</p> <p>This is discussed with the QAA Scotland officer to inform drafting of the RA and completion of the AIS.</p> <p>Student engagement in the decisions around the focal points is important.</p>



	The HEI should also draw on the range of data arising from external surveys and related reporting, such as the NSS, DLHE and Teaching Excellence Framework. What is the HEI learning from its analysis of this data? How has this affected (or how will it affect) the HEI's strategy, policy and/or practice?	
In the final version of the RA (and AIS)	<p>The nature of the contextualisation and its rationale are set out for the ELIR team in the RA.</p> <p>Good practice points are identified and evidenced by the HEI in the RA.</p> <p>Challenges/development areas are identified and evidenced by the HEI: what is planned and what is underway, with an indication of their level of priority/timescale for action.</p>	<p>The ELIR team uses this to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• agree the main focal points of the ELIR</li> <li>• request inclusion of additional areas (request made in advance of, or immediately following, Planning Visit).</li> </ul>
Planning Visit	ELIR team confirms the focal points identified by the HEI or requests areas to add.	Any areas for adding will be explored during the Visit and will be confirmed no more than one week after the Planning Visit.

## Peer engagement with contextualisation

26 As with ELIR 3, early discussions are between the institution and QAA Scotland officer. For ELIR 4 there is additional emphasis on student engagement in determining the focal points for the ELIR and there is a recognition that SFC might request for topics to be included in the ELIR, for example to support greater alignment of the Outcome Agreement and ELIR processes. The institution is able to draw on the evaluation it undertakes in the Outcome Agreement process, recognising this analysis might not reflect the whole student population.

27 When the ELIR team receives the RA and AIS, they will be asked to submit their comments to QAA Scotland. For ELIR 4, reviewers will be asked for these comments earlier than was the case for ELIR 3 and reviewers' comments must identify their view on the institution's contextualisation decisions. Specifically, the ELIR team must agree through electronic discussion whether there are additional areas that the institution might be asked to include as one of the focal points of the ELIR.

28 The ELIR team's view is shared with the institution by the QAA Scotland officer around two weeks before the Planning Visit. This view is discussed between the ELIR team and the institution at the one-day Planning Visit.

29 One week after the Planning Visit, the QAA Scotland officer provides the institution with the key themes, draft programme and additional material request(s) for the main Review Visit. This will clearly identify any areas the ELIR team believes need to be included in the review that were not previously covered in the institution's RA or where the team is requesting additional detail. This detail might include further analysis of the topic by the institution and/or pre-existing information. It is not anticipated that this should involve substantial requests across the broad scope of ELIR because it should be possible for the team to agree, for the most part, the institution's view of the contextualisation. However, we must allow for the possibility that an ELIR team will need further detail in order to inform its judgements. The institution provides the material around two weeks before the main Review Visit.

## **Section 4: ELIR method**

30 The ELIR method has a number of interrelated elements.

### **A Annual discussions**

31 Annual discussions facilitate the review process and provide an important opportunity for information sharing between QAA Scotland and the institution. These annual meetings are held between a QAA Scotland officer and a small group of staff and student representatives from the institution. In order to support student engagement, student association staff members are also often included. Following the meeting, the QAA officer writes to the institution to confirm any action points and, briefly, outline the key topics explored.

32 In ELIR 4, there is an increased emphasis on student involvement in the annual discussions. It is expected that the institution will consult with the student representatives to ensure there is understanding of the purpose of the meeting and that students are able to inform the agenda topics to ensure the matters discussed include those that are relevant to student interests. This is likely to involve discussing matters on which the students and the institution are working jointly, for example those matters included in the Student Partnership Agreement or equivalent.

33 The institution is not expected to prepare bespoke material for the annual discussions. It is anticipated that the meetings will be supported by a set of existing material, or information already prepared for other purposes, such as:

- the ELIR Follow-up report and any institutional action plan(s)
- information about institution-led review including the method used and any evaluation of that method, the review schedule, the outcomes of recent reviews and the response to those reviews
- information relating to changes in the institution's approach to quality enhancement, including changes arising from developments in the Quality code and from new activity at the institution
- information relating to developments in student partnership and engagement at the institution
- the most recent annual institutional report to the SFC relating to institution-led reviews.

## **B Reflective Analysis (RA)**

34 The institution submits a RA in advance of the ELIR visit. The RA should act as a demonstration of the institution's capacity for self-reflection and critical evaluation. The evaluation will be evidence-based and the RA should include the evidence, or clear reference to the evidence, on which the RA is based. It is expected that students will be involved in preparing the RA, and the institution is expected to identify the nature and impact of that involvement within the text of the RA itself.

35 The institution is asked to identify the outcomes of its contextualisation in the RA, along with the evidence on which those contextualisation decisions have been reached. If it is not apparent from the contextualisation information, the institution should identify which topics it would like to explore, in particular, with the ELIR team. These topics are likely to include current and/or planned strategic initiatives, areas of challenge and areas of good practice. In all cases, the institution should make the supporting evidence explicit.

36 As in previous iterations of the ELIR method, the final selection of themes to be explored in the ELIR visits is determined by the ELIR team on the basis of the material submitted by the institution and the discussions held during the visits themselves. However, the emphasis on contextualisation means that the team should be able to adopt the institution's selection of topics, provided there is adequate information to support the threshold judgement and the contextualisation decisions are adequately evidenced.

37 Unlike previous versions of the method, case studies are not a compulsory part of ELIR 4. The institution is able to submit information in case study format if it wishes, but it is not a requirement.

38 More information on the content of the RA is set out in Annex 2.

## **C Advance Information Set (AIS)**

39 The institution submits an AIS to accompany the RA. This provides the ELIR team with direct access to information about the institution's key processes for securing academic standards and assuring quality at an early stage in the review. This enables the ELIR team to see how the institution's key processes function in practice and supports the team's ability to reach the threshold judgement. Having this information at an early stage allows more time during the review visits for discussions relating to quality enhancement.

40 The precise suite of information to be included in the AIS will be agreed between QAA Scotland and the institution. The AIS is expected to comprise the following kinds of information:

- a mapping of the institution's policies and practices to the Quality Code
- a sample of recent institution-led review reports and the responses to them
- SFC annual returns for the period since the previous ELIR
- a sample of annual monitoring reports
- an analysis of the external examiner comments for the preceding academic year
- an analysis of student feedback for the preceding academic year.

## **D Planning Visit**

41 The Planning Visit involves the whole ELIR team attending the institution for a single day of meetings with agreed groups of staff and student representatives. The main focus of the Planning Visit is to agree the scope of the review, specifically to determine

whether the reviewers think it necessary to explore any matters that the institution had not included in its contextualised RA or in the AIS.

42 The Planning Visit is likely to involve three meetings with colleagues from the institution. There will be a working meeting with the main contact from the institution, who is likely to be the senior member of staff with responsibility for leading the institution's preparations for ELIR. The ELIR team will meet with a group of student representatives, a key aim of which will be to establish the students' views of the topics that should be explored during the main Review Visit. There will be a further meeting with a group of staff involved at the discipline level.

43 One week after the Planning Visit the QAA Scotland officer, on behalf of the ELIR team, will provide the institution with a note of the themes to be explored during the main Review Visit, together with a draft programme for that visit and a note of any further documentation the team would like to access.

## E Review Visit

44 The main Review Visit will last between three and five days, depending on the themes emerging from the RA and Planning Visit. During the visit, the ELIR team will consider a range of the institution's documentation and hold meetings with staff and students. The Review Visit will address the matters raised by the contextualisation evidence. This means the team may pursue matters relating to assurance or the management of academic standards, but it is likely that the visit will be enhancement-led to focus on the topics or themes identified by the institution. As with previous versions of the method, the visit will include opportunities for the ELIR team and the main contact from the institution to clarify matters relating to the progress of the review.

45 On the final day of the visit, the ELIR team will meet with the QAA officer managing the review to agree its conclusions and to compile an outline of the draft Outcome report.

46 Reviewers are expected to draft structured notes using a QAA template for the Technical report as the main Review Visit progresses. These notes are shared with the QAA officer at the end of the visit to underpin discussions on the final day.

47 At the end of the Review Visit, the QAA Scotland officer provides the institutional contact with non-binding oral feedback on the threshold judgement and an outline of the good practice points and recommendations that the ELIR team has identified. One week after the visit, the QAA Scotland officer provides the institution with an early draft of the Outcome report (in line with ELIR 3 practice). Further detail on the reporting arrangements is provided in the ELIR outcomes section below.

48 This table summarises the ELIR process.

Timing	Activity	Comments
12 months +	QAA Scotland officer discussion with HEI (including student engagement) around broad themes and HEI views of ELIR team composition.	<p>Early themes for the review come from:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• previous ELIR outcomes</li> <li>• HEI strategy (for example, key changes in student population, mode of delivery)</li> <li>• analysis/evaluation produced for the Outcome Agreement</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• HEI's analysis of its data (including what it is learning from sources such as the NSS, Teaching Excellence Framework)</li> <li>• student views/voice, for example topics in the Student Partnership Agreement or equivalent.</li> </ul> <p>This is a combination of previously established HEI context, what data tells the HEI/SFC, and the HEI's own preferences around the focus of the review.</p>
8 weeks prior to the planning Visit	HEI submits a contextualised RA (based on the early themes identified for the review) and an updated AIS, which addresses the broader scope of ELIR.	<p>The AIS includes an update of the mapping to the Quality Code. This ensures currency for ELIR 4.</p> <p>The RA includes a rationale for the form of its contextualisation, including links to trends in published data.</p>
2 weeks prior to the planning Visit	<p>QAA officer provides HEI with early feedback from the ELIR team on the RA and AIS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• questions and/or themes for exploration in the planning Visit</li> <li>• any areas where the team think they need additional information.</li> </ul>	This builds on previous ELIR practice around transparency and openness. In ELIR 4 this stage is key to ensure the ELIR team supports the HEI approach to contextualising its RA.
6-8 weeks before main Visit (precise length negotiated with HEI at date-setting stage)	Planning Visit - a single day at the HEI involving meetings with a predetermined set of colleagues and student representatives.	<p>The purpose of this Visit is to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• consider the scope of the review, specifically to determine whether the reviewers think it necessary to explore any matters that the HEI has not included in its contextualised RA or in the AIS.</li> </ul> <p>The gap between Visits enables the HEI to provide additional analysis on the small number of topics the team might identify.</p> <p>The outcome of the Visit is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• an agreed set of themes to be explored during the main Visit</li> </ul>

		<p>plus a draft programme for that Visit</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a note of any additional information the team would like to receive in advance of, or during, the main Visit.</li> </ul> <p>Note: with a Visit of a single day, these outcomes are provided to the HEI within a week of the Planning Visit rather than at the end of the Visit itself.</p>
2-3 weeks before main Review Visit	HEI submits any additional material requested at the Planning Visit.	
Main Review Visit	Up to five days at the HEI.	

## F Follow-up activity

49 The institution submits a Follow-up report, the arrangements for which are set out in Section 5.

50 During the ELIR 3 cycle, each institution was expected to engage in a specific ELIR Follow-up event. For ELIR 4, the institution will be expected to engage in Follow-up activity delivered through the Focus On projects. The precise nature of the events and activities associated with Focus On is agreed during the cycle with the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee and the institutions. Events are generally topic-based, to focus on matters that arise in several ELIR reports. This provides greater flexibility for institutions to discuss their ELIR outcomes and actions with institutions who are addressing similar topics.

51 Follow-up activity continues to be an important element of ELIR 4, as is the engagement of students in institutional Follow-up plans and actions. Follow-up is intended to promote the enhancement-led nature of ELIR by contributing to the dissemination of information about the ELIR outcomes and sharing institutional practice. Over the course of the ELIR 4 cycle, it is anticipated that each institution will have actively engaged with at least one Follow-up event or Focus On project.

## Section 5: ELIR Outcomes, judgements and reporting

52 ELIR acts as an integrating force for the Quality Enhancement Framework, commenting on the institution's engagement with each element of the Framework. In doing so, ELIR provides a portfolio of outcomes for individual institutions and the Scottish higher education sector as a whole, as follows.

- A clear statement of threshold/baseline effectiveness in quality and academic standards at each institution, along with areas for each institution to develop and areas where each institution demonstrates good practice.
- The opportunity for each institution to carry out a holistic evaluation of its policy and practice - an activity that has been highly evaluated by institutions consistently since the introduction of the enhancement-led approach - along with the opportunity to have that self-evaluation peer reviewed and to receive evidence-based feedback

on the institution's approach to securing academic standards and enhancing the student learning experience.

- An intelligence base on which to build a programme of development and enhancement activity across the higher education sector, for example ELIR reports provide the information on which Thematic reports are based, which, in turn, support the sharing of practice through activity such as Focus On projects.

## ELIR judgements

53 ELIR 4 judgements contain two elements:

- a clear statement on the effectiveness of the institution's arrangements for quality and academic standards (the threshold or baseline judgement)
- a suite of differentiated outcomes identifying good practice (commendations) and areas where the institution is asked to improve, or to review its approach (recommendations).

54 As with ELIR 3, there are three categories of effectiveness, the definitions of which are set out below.

**Effectiveness** indicates there is evidence that overall:

- the institution has rigorous arrangements, in line with sector expectations, for assuring and enhancing the quality of the student learning experience and for securing the academic standards of its awards, and is using these arrangements systematically

and

- the institution has the capacity and commitment to identify and address situations that have the potential to threaten the academic standards of its awards or the quality of the student learning experience

and

- the institution is meeting sector expectations in having a clearly identified, strategic approach to enhancing the student learning experience, which it is implementing systematically, drawing on student views and external reference points to inform strategy formulation, implementation and evaluation.

**Limited effectiveness** indicates there is evidence that:

- the institution's arrangements for managing the quality of the student learning experience and/or securing the academic standards of its awards are limited currently or are likely to become limited in the future, such that the quality of the student learning experience and/or the academic standards would be placed at risk if the institution did not take action

and/or

- the institution's capacity and/or commitment to identify and address potential risks to the quality of the student learning experience or the academic standards of its award is limited, or is likely to become limited in the future - the limitation may relate to the identification of weaknesses in the institution's procedures or in the implementation of the procedures

and/or

- the institution is not meeting the full range of sector expectations in relation to having a clearly identified, strategic approach to enhancing the student learning experience, and/or the arrangements in place for implementing its strategic approach are not fully systematic such that the institution's capacity or commitment to enhance the quality of the student learning experience is limited.

**Not effective** indicates there is evidence that:

- there are serious and fundamental weaknesses in the institution's arrangements for managing the quality of the student learning experience and/or securing the academic standards of its awards such that quality and/or academic standards are at immediate risk

and/or

- the institution does not have the capacity and/or the commitment to identify and address risks to the quality of the student learning experience or the academic standards of its awards. There are likely to be serious absences or flaws in the institution's procedures themselves and/or serious weaknesses in their implementation

and/or

- the institution does not meet sector expectations in relation to having a clearly identified, strategic approach to enhancing the student learning experience, and/or does not have systematic arrangements in place for implementing its strategic approach such that the institution does not have the capacity or commitment to enhance the quality of the student learning experience.

## **Differentiated outcomes**

55 Where there is an overarching judgement in the effective category, it will be possible for the ELIR team to identify priority action that it considers the institution should take. The wording for this will be identified alongside the judgement itself.

56 In addition to the threshold or baseline judgement, each ELIR will produce a suite of differentiated outcomes, specific to the institution, identifying good practice (commendations) and areas where the institution is asked to improve (recommendations).

57 The wording adopted for the commendations and recommendations will be flexible to reflect the nature of the institution and the findings of the ELIR team. The language of the commendations can be suitably celebratory and the recommendations can be time-identified (in line with the available evidence).

## **Nature of ELIR judgements**

58 ELIR judgements are evidence-based, formed by the ELIR team:

- reading and considering the institution's RA, the AIS and any related material
- discussing topics with staff and students during the Review Visits
- analysing and reflecting on those documents and discussions.

59 The judgements are based on the balance of probability, supported by the sample of information available to the ELIR team at the time of the review.



## Report formats

60 In line with previous practice, four main types of report are produced for ELIR 4: Outcome reports, Technical reports, Follow-up reports and Thematic reports. All of these are published on the QAA website.

### Outcome reports

61 Outcome reports are the main reports in the ELIR method. They are concise, and aimed at an informed lay audience such as lay members of governing bodies and student representatives.

62 Outcome reports:

- set out the threshold judgement
- set out the differentiated commendations and recommendations
- provide outline information about the nature of the institution.

### Technical reports

63 A Technical report is produced for each ELIR to set out the evidence underpinning the Outcome report. Technical reports are written in the style of structured notes rather than narrative prose. They are written primarily for the institution that was reviewed, and they may also be of interest to quality assurance contacts at other institutions and key agencies within the sector. In addition, they provide an evidence base to inform the suite of Thematic reports and developmental activity with the sector.

64 Technical reports:

- are structured around the main areas of enquiry within ELIR
- include a statement of the ELIR team's view in relation to each area, accompanied by an indication of the main supporting evidence for that view
- highlight good practice and areas in which the institution is being asked to take action - in doing so there is explicit acknowledgement of action the institution has identified for itself
- set out the basis for the threshold or baseline judgement.

65 The headings to be covered by Technical reports are set out in Annex 1.

### Follow-up reports

66 One year after publication of the ELIR Outcome and Technical reports, the institution submits a Follow-up report. Institutions should engage their student representatives in the preparation of the reports and the reports themselves should indicate the ways in which students are involved in the Follow-up activity.

67 Follow-up reports indicate the actions taken (or in progress) by the institution to address the outcomes of the ELIR, and are required to be endorsed by the institution's governing body. Follow-up reports are published on the QAA website.

### Thematic reports

68 QAA Scotland will continue to draw on the content of individual ELIR reports to inform Thematic or sector-wide reports. In particular, QAA produces a suite of Thematic reports with the aim of promoting the sharing of information, including providing institutions with information that they can use to compare their policy and practice with that across

the sector. Thematic reports also provide information that supports development and enhancement activity, such as Focus On projects and the Enhancement Themes.

## **Complaints and appeals**

69 The institution can make use of the QAA complaints and appeals procedures. Details of the current arrangements are available on the QAA website.

## **Section 6: ELIR team**

### **Allocating reviewers to teams**

70 QAA Scotland allocates reviewers to ELIR teams. The precise composition of the ELIR team is flexible and should address the nature of the institution and the scope of the review, in line with contextualisation (see Section 3).

71 The minimum ELIR team size is four peer reviewers, to include: a student reviewer, two UK-based academic reviewers, and a coordinating reviewer. The maximum team size is six. Following discussion with QAA Scotland, institutions can opt to include an international reviewer, an additional student reviewer, and/or additional UK-based academic reviewers.

72 Of the UK-based academic reviewers, one is drawn from the Scottish higher education sector and one from outside Scotland. In addition, the academic reviewers can have gained their experience in the professional services.

73 Reviewers are not allocated to the ELIR team for their own institution or to an institution with which they have a conflict of interest. Conflicts include, but are not limited to: having acted as an external examiner at the institution in the preceding three years, having a close family member work or study at the institution, or having recently applied for a role at the institution.

### **Reviewer roles**

74 Some reviewer roles have specific responsibilities for gathering and analysing information during the review visits but the conclusions are evidence-based and represent the collective view of the ELIR team.

75 All reviewers have responsibility for:

- reading and analysing the RA and the AIS provided by the institution
- participating in the review visits
- reaching conclusions on the basis of the information gathered during the review
- contributing to and commenting on the review reports.

76 The student reviewer brings a learner perspective to the review. Their responsibilities during the review are likely to focus on lines of enquiry relating to the institution's management of the student learning experience, including the learner journey, and student engagement.

77 The coordinating reviewer has responsibility for maintaining an overview of the review progress and its outcomes. They have particular responsibility for proactively managing the review and the ELIR team. This will involve:

- liaising with QAA Scotland throughout the review and with the institution during the review visits
- facilitating the ELIR team's identification and evaluation of the key themes to be explored during the review
- ensuring alignment between the key themes and the Technical report headings (these are set out in Annex 1)
- ensuring the ELIR team has access to appropriate documentation during the visits
- maintaining a record of the ELIR team's decisions, and its discussions with staff and students
- supporting the ELIR team in identifying the evidence on which its views and conclusions are based.

78 The coordinating reviewer maintains an ongoing record of the ELIR team's emerging conclusions and supporting evidence. At the end of the Review Visit, the coordinating reviewer uses the ongoing record to support the ELIR team and the QAA officer in preparing an outline draft of the Outcome report, and identifying the team views and main evidence to be included in the Technical report.

79 Reviewers have responsibility for preparing draft text to cover particular sections of the Technical report. All reviewers have responsibility for supporting the QAA officer in editing the review reports, providing additional information and evidence as necessary.

80 An international reviewer can bring an added external perspective to the ELIR team's consideration of the institution's approach to quality assurance and the enhancement of the student learning experience. International reviewers are expected to have a range of knowledge and experience that will benefit the institution, the ELIR process, and the wider Scottish higher education sector, including comparative international knowledge and experience. International reviewers are senior peers, selected from appropriate higher education institutions or related agencies. Their selection to an ELIR team for the review of any particular institution is informed by their expertise and experience, with the aim of achieving a suitable match to the strategic approach and enhancement priorities of the institution.

81 Each ELIR is managed by a senior QAA officer, who provides advice to the institution on its preparations for the review and supports the ELIR team in its initial analysis of documentation. The QAA officer accompanies the ELIR team during the Planning Visit and for selected parts of the main Review Visit, providing advice as appropriate. The QAA officer, supported by the coordinating reviewer, is responsible for testing that the ELIR team's findings are based on adequate and identifiable evidence, and for editing the ELIR reports.

## **Selection criteria for reviewers**

82 All members of ELIR teams are selected by QAA Scotland according to the criteria identified in Annex 3 and having regard to the timetable for reviews in Scotland.

83 QAA Scotland seeks student reviewer nominations from students' associations and Scottish higher education institutions. Student reviewers are eligible to undertake reviews for as long as they continue to meet the selection criteria, in particular provided it is not more than three years since they undertook study in a Scottish higher education institution.

84 International reviewers are drawn from outside the UK. Scottish higher education institutions are invited to nominate one or more international reviewers to the reviewer pool. In addition, QAA Scotland seeks nominations through its contact with institutions and relevant organisations in other countries.

85 QAA Scotland considers nominations from all UK higher education institutions for senior academic reviewers and coordinating reviewers. Every Scottish higher education institution is encouraged to nominate at least one candidate for each role.

## **ELIR reviewer training**

86 All ELIR reviewers, including those trained in other review methods, are required to undertake ELIR 4 training. Reviewers are also expected to participate in continuing development and reviewer events as appropriate. Training and continuing development may be targeted to specific groups of reviewers, such as students or coordinating reviewers. ELIR training and/or development activities are provided regularly in order to enhance reviewers' effectiveness by minimising the gap between training and reviews taking place.

87 Prior to attending full ELIR training, student reviewers are required to attend a one-day briefing event. This is intended to help student reviewers contextualise ELIR in the wider Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework and introduce them to key reviewing skills.

88 To support international reviewers, 'orientation' materials are provided in advance of training. These include: information on the characteristics of the Scottish higher education sector, the Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework, and the Quality Code. In addition, there is an induction meeting for international reviewers with QAA Scotland officers, immediately prior to ELIR training.

## **Continuing development and reviewer events**

89 In order to share experience of the ELIR method and to maintain the knowledge of experienced reviewers, continuing professional development are held, usually on an annual basis. All reviewers who have participated in an ELIR team during the cycle, together with those allocated to teams for the following year, will be invited to attend.

# **Section 7: Monitoring and evaluation**

## **Purpose and principles of monitoring and evaluation**

90 QAA Scotland monitors the operation of ELIR on an ongoing basis, and undertakes regular evaluation of the effectiveness of the method, including our own role in its implementation. This is intended to:

- support QAA Scotland in delivering the ELIR method effectively
- inform the ongoing development of ELIR in the wider context of the Quality Enhancement Framework.

91 Monitoring and evaluation activity should:

- be regular and timely
- ensure higher education institutions and reviewers can provide structured feedback
- support the training and continuing development of reviewers
- encourage active reflection and dialogue on the design and development of ELIR to ensure it continues to be fit for purpose.

## Monitoring

92 Monitoring activities encompass all stages of the ELIR process as follows:

- annual discussions
- preparation for ELIR
- review visits
- judgement and reporting arrangements
- Follow-up reports and related activities.

93 All those engaging in ELIR are invited to be involved in the monitoring process: the institution, reviewers, and the QAA officer responsible for managing the review. Feedback is sought through monitoring questionnaires, which all participants in ELIR are asked to complete. The questionnaires seek comment on operational aspects of the review as well as broader questions relating to the effectiveness of the method. Information gathered through the monitoring questionnaires is accumulated to inform the wider process of evaluation.

## Evaluation

94 Building on the monitoring activity, QAA Scotland evaluates the effectiveness of ELIR in achieving its objectives as an enhancement-led review method within the wider perspective of the Quality Enhancement Framework. Reviewers and institutions are invited to participate in evaluation events. These events provide an opportunity for reviewers and institutions to reflect on the effectiveness of the ELIR approach, and to share information on the outcomes of QAA Scotland's monitoring and evaluation.

95 The findings from monitoring and evaluation activity help to inform the training and development provided for ELIR reviewers to ensure that they are effectively prepared and supported in undertaking their roles. It also informs the future development of the Quality Enhancement Framework, including the Enhancement Themes and related activity.

# **Annex 1: Content of the Technical report**

## **Contextual information about the institution, student population and the review**

- Summary information about the institution, including strategic framework, organisational structure.
- Composition, key trends and anticipated changes in the student population, including information on retention, progression and outcomes.
- Commentary on the preparation for the ELIR, including confirmation of the nature and rationale for the contextualised range of topics included in the self-evaluation.
- Summary of the institution's follow-up to the previous ELIR.
- Impact of the institution's approach to engaging students in ELIR preparations.

## **Enhancing the student learning experience**

- Student representation and engagement, including responding to student views.
- Recognising and responding to equality and diversity in the student population, including widening access and mode and location of study.
- Supporting students in their learning at each stage of the learner journey from pre-admission to post-graduation, including outreach, admissions, articulation, graduate attributes, assessment, employability, and enterprise and entrepreneurship.
- Postgraduate taught and research student experience.
- Learning environment, including the use of technology.
- Effectiveness of the approach to enhancing the student learning experience.

## **Strategy and practice for enhancing learning and teaching**

- Strategic approach to enhancement.
- Impact of the national Enhancement Themes and related activity on policy and practice.
- Approaches to identifying and sharing good practice.
- Engaging, developing and supporting staff.
- Effectiveness of the approach to implementing institutional strategies and enhancing learning and teaching.

## **Academic standards and quality processes**

- Key features of the institution's approach to managing quality and setting, maintaining, reviewing and assessing academic standards.
- Use of external reference points in quality processes.
- Commentary on action taken since ELIR 3 and identification of matters arising from the AIS not otherwise explored.
- Approach to using data to inform decision-making and evaluation.
- Effectiveness of the arrangements for securing academic standards.
- Effectiveness of the institution's approach to self-evaluation, including the effective use of data to inform decision-making.

## **Collaborative provision**

- Key features of the institution's strategic approach (to include collaborative activity, online and distance learning where delivered with others and work-based learning).
- Effectiveness of the approach to managing collaborative provision including arrangements for securing academic standards and enhancing the student learning experience.

## Annex 2: Content of the Reflective Analysis (RA)

96 The RA should be structured around the headings of the Technical report. Its preparation should involve staff and students. The RA should identify:

- how it was prepared and approved, including the impact of student engagement in the ELIR preparations
- brief background information about the size and scale of the institution
- the institution's overarching strategic priorities.

97 The RA should provide information about the contextualisation of the ELIR, to include: areas where the institution considers it demonstrates good practice, areas prioritised for development and/or enhancement, and areas that continue to present a challenge. This information should be summarised in the opening section of the RA, cross-referenced to later sections to provide greater detail as appropriate. The institution should refer to the data it uses in identifying its strengths and challenges, including highlighting any instances where the institution considers its view differs from that suggested by externally reported data.

98 Because ELIR 4 reviews are contextualised, it is understood that the themes explored in each review will reflect the strategy, priorities, strengths and challenges of the institution concerned. Institutions are expected to address each of the six sections and subheadings of the Technical report, but it is recognised that the volume and focus of the content provided by each institution will vary.

99 In the context of each of the Technical report headings, the RA should indicate:

- what is distinctive and what is typical about the institution
- what are the key areas of strength and challenge
- how the institution has evaluated its policy and practice, including the ways in which the institution uses data to inform its decision-making and identification of priorities
- current and future plans for building on good practice and addressing areas for development.

100 Institutions are strongly encouraged to be open and honest in the RA. The balance should be on evaluation with supporting evidence rather than lengthy description of processes.

101 Where there are areas for development, the ELIR team will explore:

- the extent to which quality or academic standards are potentially at risk
- the extent to which the institution has identified the issue(s)
- the plans for addressing the issue, including any wider development work planned and the anticipated timeframe for completing it
- the likelihood of the issue recurring in future.

102 Where there are areas of strength, the ELIR team will explore:

- the extent to which all of the institution's students can benefit
- the arrangements for disseminating the good practice
- the plans for evaluating and promoting the good practice.

103 In all cases, the ELIR team will explore the institution's approach to using qualitative and quantitative information to inform its evaluation of its policy and practice.

## **Annex 3: Criteria for the selection of reviewers**

All ELIR reviewers are selected by QAA Scotland on the basis of the criteria set out below. Nominations are welcomed from institutions across the UK, with every Scottish institution encouraged to make at least one nomination to each reviewer role. Student reviewers may be nominated by Scottish student representative bodies, or Scottish higher education institutions. International reviewers are selected on the basis of nominations from the Scottish higher education institutions and from QAA Scotland's contacts with relevant institutions and agencies in other countries.

The qualities required in ELIR reviewers are detailed below. Student reviewers are required to have current or recent direct experience of study at a Scottish higher education institution. International reviewers are recruited for the wider external perspective they bring to ELIR. Coordinating reviewers and UK-based academic reviewers are drawn from across the UK. Every attempt is made to ensure that the total pool of ELIR reviewers reflects the characteristics of the Scottish higher education sector, including taking account of equality and diversity strands.

All reviewers are given training by QAA Scotland to ensure that they are familiar with the ELIR method and the wider enhancement-led approach.

### **Qualities required in all reviewers**

All reviewers are expected to demonstrate the ability to:

- understand a range of perspectives
- relate to a range of individuals, including students and senior managers
- lead discussions about strategic and operational approaches to the management of quality and academic standards in general, and the enhancement of the student learning experience in particular
- assimilate a large amount of disparate information and analyse it to form reliable, evidence-based conclusions
- communicate clearly, orally and in writing
- work productively and cooperatively in small teams delivering to tight deadlines
- maintain the confidentiality of sensitive matters.

### **Additional qualities required in UK-based academic reviewers**

In addition to the qualities required in all reviewers, UK-based academic reviewers are expected to demonstrate the following.

- UK-based academic reviewers are expected to have current or recent (within three years) wide experience of academic management at the institutional level in the UK, preferably relating to quality assurance and enhancement of the student learning experience. Consideration will also be given to candidates with substantial experience of working in a senior capacity in a professional support service within a higher education provider. For these purposes we are seeking individuals with at least five years' experience of working in a role that gives them an institution-wide perspective.
- Personal and professional credibility with staff, including senior managers, heads of institutions, and staff currently engaged in learning and teaching.
- Knowledge and understanding of the Quality Code and other key reference points, including the SCQF and the Enhancement Themes.
- Awareness of the distinctive features of the Scottish higher education system in general, and the enhancement-led approach in particular (ELIR training will seek to emphasise this but some initial awareness is expected).



### **Additional qualities required in international reviewers**

In addition to the qualities required in all reviewers, international reviewers are expected to demonstrate a number of the following attributes:

- current or recent (within three years) wide experience of academic management at the institutional level outside the UK, preferably relating to quality assurance and enhancement of the student learning experience
- current or recent (within three years) experience of external review of higher education institutions outside the UK, either as a panel member or through senior involvement with a quality assurance or enhancement organisation
- peer-acknowledged expertise in the development of good practice in learning and teaching, and the wider student experience (it will be highly desirable to have such recognition at an international level)
- knowledge and experience of practice in a minimum of one country in addition to the UK (it will be highly desirable to have wide-ranging international comparative knowledge and experience)
- an awareness of the distinctive features of the Scottish higher education system in general, and the enhancement-led approach in particular (ELIR training will emphasise this but some initial awareness is expected).

### **Additional qualities required in student reviewers**

QAA Scotland actively encourages applications from students from all backgrounds and with experience of a wide variety of study modes and levels. In addition to the qualities required in all reviewers, student reviewers are expected to demonstrate:

- current or recent (within three years) experience of study at a Scottish higher education institution, equivalent to a minimum of one year's full-time education
- experience of representing students' interests at institutional (including faculty or school) level
- general awareness of the diversity of the Scottish higher education sector beyond their 'home' institution, and awareness of the arrangements for quality assurance and enhancement in Scotland (ELIR training will provide further information on this and QAA Scotland is looking for applicants who have the ability to build on their existing experience).

### **Additional qualities required in ELIR coordinating reviewers**

In addition to the qualities required in all reviewers, coordinating reviewers are expected to demonstrate:

- current or recent (within three years) experience of senior academic administration at institutional (including faculty or school) level in UK higher education
- wide experience of working with senior committees in UK higher education
- awareness of the distinctive features of the Scottish higher education system in general, and the enhancement-led approach in particular (ELIR training will seek to emphasise this but some initial awareness is expected)
- ability to retain an effective overview of complex tasks, and to proactively support and manage a small team in achieving those tasks
- ability to keep a reliable record of discussions, summarise the key outcomes, and produce coherent text in a specified format to tight deadlines
- experience of drafting, collating and editing complex reports.

## **Annex 4: Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)**

The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) were adopted by the Ministers responsible for higher education in 2005 following a proposal prepared by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) in co-operation with the European Students' Union (ESU), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) and the European University Association (EUA).

Since 2005, considerable progress has been made in quality assurance as well as in other Bologna action lines such as qualification frameworks, recognition and the promotion of the use of learning outcomes, all these contributing to a paradigm shift towards student-centred learning and teaching.

Given this changing context, in 2012 a process to update the guidelines was begun with the intention of improving their 'clarity, applicability and usefulness, including their scope'. This resulted in a revised set of guidelines being produced in 2015. This new version reflects a consensus among all the organisations involved on how to take forward quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

The full guidelines and related information can be found on the [ENQA website](#).<sup>2</sup>

The standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the EHEA comprise three parts, of which Parts 1 and 2 are the most relevant to the ELIR process:

- Part 1: Standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance
- Part 2: Standards and guidelines for external quality assurance.

The following text is an extract from the 2015 edition of the ESC, and the numbering of the headings is as contained in the original document.

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<sup>2</sup> Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), available at: [www.enqa.eu/index.php/home/esg/](http://www.enqa.eu/index.php/home/esg/).

# 1 Standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance

## 1.1 Policy for quality assurance

### **Standard:**

Institutions should have a policy for quality assurance that is made public and forms part of their strategic management. Internal stakeholders should develop and implement this policy through appropriate structures and processes, while involving external stakeholders.

### **Guidelines:**

Policies and processes are the main pillars of a coherent institutional quality assurance system that forms a cycle for continuous improvement and contributes to the accountability of the institution. It supports the development of quality culture in which all internal stakeholders assume responsibility for quality and engage in quality assurance at all levels of the institution. In order to facilitate this, the policy has a formal status and is publicly available.

Quality assurance policies are most effective when they reflect the relationship between research and learning and teaching and take account of both the national context in which the institution operates, the institutional context and its strategic approach.

Such a policy supports:

- the organisation of the quality assurance system
- departments, schools, faculties and other organisational units as well as those of institutional leadership, individual staff members and students to take on their responsibilities in quality assurance
- academic integrity and freedom and is vigilant against academic fraud
- guarding against intolerance of any kind or discrimination against the students or staff
- the involvement of external stakeholders in quality assurance.

The policy translates into practice through a variety of internal quality assurance processes that allow participation across the institution. How the policy is implemented, monitored and revised is the institution's decision.

The quality assurance policy also covers any elements of an institution's activities that are subcontracted to or carried out by other parties.

## 1.2 Design and approval of programmes

### **Standard:**

Institutions should have processes for the design and approval of their programmes. The programmes should be designed so that they meet the objectives set for them, including the intended learning outcomes. The qualification resulting from a programme should be clearly specified and communicated, and refer to the correct level of the national qualifications framework for higher education and, consequently, to the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area.

### **Guidelines:**

Study programmes are at the core of the higher education institutions' teaching mission. They provide students with both academic knowledge and skills including those that are transferable, which may influence their personal development and may be applied in their future careers.

Programmes:

- are designed with overall programme objectives that are in line with the institutional strategy and have explicit intended learning outcomes
- are designed by involving students and other stakeholders in the work
- benefit from external expertise and reference points
- reflect the four purposes of higher education of the Council of Europe (cf. Scope and Concepts)
- are designed so that they enable smooth student progression
- define the expected student workload, e.g. in ECTS
- include well-structured placement opportunities where appropriate<sup>3</sup>
- are subject to a formal institutional approval process.

### 1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment

#### **Standard:**

Institutions should ensure that the programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process, and that the assessment of students reflects this approach.

#### **Guidelines:**

Student-centred learning and teaching plays an important role in stimulating students' motivation, self-reflection and engagement in the learning process. This means careful consideration of the design and delivery of study programmes and the assessment of outcomes.

The implementation of student-centred learning and teaching:

- respects and attends to the diversity of students and their needs, enabling flexible learning paths
- considers and uses different modes of delivery, where appropriate
- flexibly uses a variety of pedagogical methods
- regularly evaluates and adjusts the modes of delivery and pedagogical methods
- encourages a sense of autonomy in the learner, while ensuring adequate guidance and support from the teacher
- promotes mutual respect within the learner-teacher relationship
- has appropriate procedures for dealing with students' complaints.

Considering the importance of assessment for the students' progression and their future careers, quality assurance processes for assessment take into account the following.

- Assessors are familiar with existing testing and examination methods and receive support in developing their own skills in this field.
- The criteria for and method of assessment as well as criteria for marking are published in advance.
- The assessment allows students to demonstrate the extent to which the intended learning outcomes have been achieved. Students are given feedback, which, if necessary, is linked to advice on the learning process.
- Where possible, assessment is carried out by more than one examiner.
- The regulations for assessment take into account mitigating circumstances.
- Assessment is consistent, fairly applied to all students and carried out in accordance with the stated procedures.

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<sup>3</sup> Placements include traineeships, internships and other periods of the programme that are not spent in the institution but that allow the student to gain experience in an area related to their studies.

- A formal procedure for student appeals is in place.

## **1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification**

### **Standard:**

Institutions should consistently apply pre-defined and published regulations covering all phases of the student 'life cycle', e.g. student admission, progression, recognition and certification.

### **Guidelines:**

Providing conditions and support that are necessary for students to make progress in their academic career is in the best interest of the individual students, programmes, institutions and systems. It is vital to have fit-for-purpose admission, recognition and completion procedures, particularly when students are mobile within and across higher education systems.

It is important that access policies, admission processes and criteria are implemented consistently and in a transparent manner. Induction to the institution and the programme is provided.

Institutions need to put in place both processes and tools to collect, monitor and act on information on student progression.

Fair recognition of higher education qualifications, periods of study and prior learning, including the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, are essential components for ensuring the students' progress in their studies, while promoting mobility. Appropriate recognition procedures rely on:

- institutional practice for recognition being in line with the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention
- cooperation with other institutions, quality assurance agencies and the national ENIC/NARIC centre with a view to ensuring coherent recognition across the country.

Graduation represents the culmination of the students' period of study. Students need to receive documentation explaining the qualification gained, including achieved learning outcomes and the context, level, content and status of the studies that were pursued and successfully completed.

## **1.5 Teaching staff**

### **Standard:**

Institutions should assure themselves of the competence of their teachers. They should apply fair and transparent processes for the recruitment and development of the staff.

### **Guidelines:**

The teacher's role is essential in creating a high-quality student experience and enabling the acquisition of knowledge, competences and skills. The diversifying student population and stronger focus on learning outcomes require student-centred learning and teaching and the role of the teacher is, therefore, also changing (cf. Standard 1.3).

Higher education institutions have primary responsibility for the quality of their staff and for providing them with a supportive environment that allows them to carry out their work effectively. Such an environment:

- sets up and follows clear, transparent and fair processes for staff recruitment and conditions of employment that recognise the importance of teaching
- offers opportunities for and promotes the professional development of teaching staff
- encourages scholarly activity to strengthen the link between education and research
- encourages innovation in teaching methods and the use of new technologies.

## 1.6 Learning resources and student support

### Standard:

Institutions should have appropriate funding for learning and teaching activities and ensure that adequate and readily accessible learning resources and student support are provided.

### Guidelines:

For a good higher education experience, institutions provide a range of resources to assist student learning. These vary from physical resources such as libraries, study facilities and IT infrastructure to human support in the form of tutors, counsellors and other advisers. The role of support services is of particular importance in facilitating the mobility of students within and across higher education systems.

The needs of a diverse student population (such as mature, part-time, employed and international students as well as students with disabilities), and the shift towards student-centred learning and flexible modes of learning and teaching, are taken into account when allocating, planning and providing the learning resources and student support.

Support activities and facilities may be organised in a variety of ways depending on the institutional context. However, the internal quality assurance ensures that all resources are fit for purpose, accessible, and that students are informed about the services available to them.

In delivering support services the role of support and administrative staff is crucial and therefore they need to be qualified and have opportunities to develop their competences.

## 1.7 Information management

### Standard:

Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes and other activities.

### Guidelines:

Reliable data is crucial for informed decision-making and for knowing what is working well and what needs attention. Effective processes to collect and analyse information about study programmes and other activities feed into the internal quality assurance system.

The information gathered depends, to some extent, on the type and mission of the institution. The following are of interest:

- key performance indicators
- profile of the student population
- student progression, success and drop-out rates
- students' satisfaction with their programmes
- learning resources and student support available
- career paths of graduates.

Various methods of collecting information may be used. It is important that students and staff are involved in providing and analysing information and planning follow-up activities.

## 1.8 Public information

### **Standard:**

Institutions should publish information about their activities, including programmes, which is clear, accurate, objective, up-to-date and readily accessible.

### **Guidelines:**

Information on institutions' activities is useful for prospective and current students as well as for graduates, other stakeholders and the public. Therefore, institutions provide information about their activities, including the programmes they offer and the selection criteria for them, the intended learning outcomes of these programmes, the qualifications they award, the teaching, learning and assessment procedures used, the pass rates and the learning opportunities available to their students as well as graduate employment information.

## 1.9 On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes

### **Standard:**

Institutions should monitor and periodically review their programmes to ensure that they achieve the objectives set for them and respond to the needs of students and society. These reviews should lead to continuous improvement of the programme. Any action planned or taken as a result should be communicated to all those concerned.

### **Guidelines:**

Regular monitoring, review and revision of study programmes aim to ensure that the provision remains appropriate and to create a supportive and effective learning environment for students.

They include the evaluation of:

- the content of the programme in the light of the latest research in the given discipline thus ensuring that the programme is up to date
- the changing needs of society
- the students' workload, progression and completion
- the effectiveness of procedures for assessment of students
- the student expectations, needs and satisfaction in relation to the programme
- the learning environment and support services and their fitness for purpose for the programme.

Programmes are reviewed and revised regularly involving students and other stakeholders. The information collected is analysed and the programme is adapted to ensure that it is up-to-date. Revised programme specifications are published.

## 1.10 Cyclical external quality assurance

### **Standard:**

Institutions should undergo external quality assurance in line with the ESG on a cyclical basis.

### **Guidelines:**

External quality assurance in its various forms can verify the effectiveness of institutions' internal quality assurance, act as a catalyst for improvement and offer the institution new perspectives. It will also provide information to assure the institution and the public of the quality of the institution's activities.

Institutions participate in cyclical external quality assurance that takes account, where relevant, of the requirements of the legislative framework in which they operate.

Therefore, depending on the framework, this external quality assurance may take different forms and focus at different organisational levels (such as programme, faculty or institution).

Quality assurance is a continuous process that does not end with the external feedback or report or its follow-up process within the institution. Therefore, institutions ensure that the progress made since the last external quality assurance activity is taken into consideration when preparing for the next one.

## **2 Standards and guidelines for external quality assurance**

### **2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance**

#### **Standard:**

External quality assurance should address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the ESG.

#### **Guidelines:**

Quality assurance in higher education is based on the institutions' responsibility for the quality of their programmes and other provision; therefore it is important that external quality assurance recognises and supports institutional responsibility for quality assurance. To ensure the link between internal and external quality assurance, external quality assurance includes consideration of the standards of Part 1. These may be addressed differently, depending on the type of external quality assurance.

### **2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose**

#### **Standard:**

External quality assurance should be defined and designed specifically to ensure its fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for it, while taking into account relevant regulations. Stakeholders should be involved in its design and continuous improvement.

#### **Guidelines:**

In order to ensure effectiveness and objectivity it is vital for external quality assurance to have clear aims agreed by stakeholders.

The aims, objectives and implementation of the processes will:

- bear in mind the level of workload and cost that they will place on institutions
- take into account the need to support institutions to improve quality
- allow institutions to demonstrate this improvement
- result in clear information on the outcomes and the follow-up.

The system for external quality assurance might operate in a more flexible way if institutions are able to demonstrate the effectiveness of their own internal quality assurance.

### **2.3 Implementing processes**

#### **Standard:**

External quality assurance processes should be reliable, useful, pre-defined, implemented consistently and published. They include:

- a self-assessment or equivalent
- an external assessment normally including a site visit
- a report resulting from the external assessment
- a consistent follow-up.



**Guidelines:**

External quality assurance carried out professionally, consistently and transparently ensures its acceptance and impact. Depending on the design of the external quality assurance system, the institution provides the basis for the external quality assurance through a self-assessment or by collecting other material including supporting evidence. The written documentation is normally complemented by interviews with stakeholders during a site visit. The findings of the assessment are summarised in a report (see Standard 2.5) written by a group of external experts (cf. Standard 2.4).

External quality assurance does not end with the report by the experts. The report provides clear guidance for institutional action. Agencies have a consistent follow-up process for considering the action taken by the institution. The nature of the follow-up will depend on the design of the external quality assurance.

## 2.4 Peer-review experts

**Standard:**

External quality assurance should be carried out by groups of external experts that include (a) student member(s).

**Guidelines:**

At the core of external quality assurance is the wide range of expertise provided by peer experts, who contribute to the work of the agency through input from various perspectives, including those of institutions, academics, students and employers/professional practitioners.

In order to ensure the value and consistency of the work of the experts, they:

- are carefully selected
- have appropriate skills and are competent to perform their task
- are supported by appropriate training and/or briefing.

The agency ensures the independence of the experts by implementing a mechanism of no conflict of interest.

The involvement of international experts in external quality assurance, for example as members of peer panels, is desirable as it adds a further dimension to the development and implementation of processes.

## 2.5 Criteria for outcomes

**Standard:**

Any outcomes or judgements made as the result of external quality assurance should be based on explicit and published criteria that are applied consistently, irrespective of whether the process leads to a formal decision.

**Guidelines:**

External quality assurance and in particular its outcomes have a significant impact on institutions and programmes that are evaluated and judged.

In the interests of equity and reliability, outcomes of external quality assurance are based on pre-defined and published criteria, which are interpreted consistently and are evidence-based.

Depending on the external quality assurance system, outcomes may take different forms, for example, recommendations, judgements or formal decisions.

## 2.6 Reporting

### **Standard:**

Full reports by the experts should be published, clear and accessible to the academic community, external partners and other interested individuals. If the agency takes any formal decision based on the reports, the decision should be published together with the report.

### **Guidelines:**

The report by the experts is the basis for the institution's follow-up action of the external evaluation and it provides information to society regarding the activities of an institution. In order for the report to be used as the basis for action to be taken, it needs to be clear and concise in its structure and language and to cover:

- context description (to help locate the higher education institution in its specific context)
- description of the individual procedure, including experts involved;
- evidence, analysis and findings
- conclusions
- features of good practice, demonstrated by the institution
- recommendations for follow-up action.

The preparation of a summary report may be useful. The factual accuracy of a report is improved if the institution is given the opportunity to point out errors of fact before the report is finalised.

## 2.7 Complaints and appeals

### **Standard:**

Complaints and appeals processes should be clearly defined as part of the design of external quality assurance processes and communicated to the institutions.

### **Guidelines:**

In order to safeguard the rights of the institutions and ensure fair decision-making, external quality assurance is operated in an open and accountable way. Nevertheless, there may be misapprehensions or instances of dissatisfaction about the process or formal outcomes.

Institutions need to have access to processes that allow them to raise issues of concern with the agency; the agencies, need to handle such issues in a professional way by means of a clearly defined process that is consistently applied. A complaints procedure allows an institution to state its dissatisfaction about the conduct of the process or those carrying it out. In an appeals procedure, the institution questions the formal outcomes of the process, where it can demonstrate that the outcome is not based on sound evidence, that criteria have not been correctly applied or that the processes have not been consistently implemented.

QAA1848 - Apr 17

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Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

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