# Universities Scotland Teaching Quality Forum Project

## Good practice in internal subject review

### June 2009

Sharing good practice

# Contents

# Executive summary

1    As part of the quality enhancement activities for the university sector in the interim year 2007-08, the Universities Scotland Teaching Quality Forum (USTQF) commissioned a sector overview report on good practice in relation to internal subject review.

2    Internal review at the subject level is one of five interrelated elements of the Quality Enhancement Framework in Scotland. The nature of the reviews is determined by individual institutions but the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) provides guidance on the characteristics of internal review.

3    The aims of this project were to:

- identify, collate and disseminate elements of good practice in relation to internal subject review in the Scottish higher education sector

- allow institutions to reflect on their own process, and improve the linkage between institution-led and Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) review processes.

4    This report is the main outcome of the project which has been informed by:

- a review of existing research and published information on internal subject review

- a survey on institutional approaches to internal subject review

- a USTQF workshop on 20 June 2008.

5    The timing of this project coincided with the publication of a QAA report, *Learning from ELIR 2003-07, Emerging approaches to institution-led quality review at the subject level: combining assurance with enhancement.*[1] This report concludes:

> 'The ELIR reports confirm that institution-led quality review at the subject level is being operated effectively in Scottish higher education institutions as a peer review process with a high degree of externality. The process provides a robust system for the assurance of quality and maintenance of academic standards through the use of a number of external reference points, as well as affording a key vehicle for the promotion, monitoring and review of enhancement.'

6    Given the above conclusion on the effectiveness of internal review, this project focuses on identifying the range of approaches employed by higher education institutions for internal subject review, and the extent to which they operate.

7    The report provides evidence that institutions employ a range of approaches, practices and procedures for internal subject review and that a number of them are shared by institutions, providing an element of consistency between institutions. This sharing of approaches will in part result from SFC guidance on the characteristics of internal subject review but will also have arisen from the development of effective practices within individual institutions as quality processes have matured; and through

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[1]    *Learning from ELIR 2003-07 Emerging approaches to institution-led quality review at the subject level: combining assurance with enhancement.* QAA www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/ELIR/learningFromElir/Inst-led08.pdf

the transfer of practice between institutions as internal subject review, and the ELIR process, has developed and evolved across the sector.

8    Some definitions for 'good practice' used within the sector are considered, as is their relevance to the practices employed for internal subject review. Two definitions or conceptualisations of good practice which are most applicable to internal subject review are 'effectiveness in its context' and 'transferability' (Higher Education Academy, 2008). There is less evidence of 'innovative' or 'distinctive' practice. Consistency of practice between institutions also implies that the practices and procedures employed are tried and tested and 'fit for purpose' and that they are, in themselves, good practices. Adopting a wider range of approaches may also be considered good practice and improve effectiveness.

9    Because of the importance of context, no individual approaches or practices are highlighted as good practice. However, as the report identifies the range of approaches to internal subject review operating within Scotland, it constitutes a toolkit which institutions can use to:

- reflect on their own approaches to internal subject review, the effectiveness of these approaches and their degree of reliance on one approach or practice

- consider the range of approaches used by other institutions and their appropriateness and/or transferability to their own internal review process

- enhance their internal review process by adopting new approaches and/or adapting their existing practices and processes, if appropriate.

Reflecting and engaging in this way should result in enhancements to internal review procedures, and generate further debate and discussions within institutions and across the sector.

10   There is evidence to demonstrate:

- that institutions are addressing the characteristics in the SFC guidance and what it considers as 'good' practices

- that aspects identified for development in the *Learning from ELIR* report have been, or are being, addressed by the sector in Scotland.

## Background

1    In May 2007, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) wrote to all higher education institution principals, notifying of the quality enhancement activities for the university sector in the interim year 2007-08 (SFC circular SFC/07/76). The circular set out that, apart from no external Enhancement-led institutional review (ELIR) taking place in 2007-08, the expectation was that all other quality assurance and enhancement activity would continue as normal across the sector, and that the proposed activities for the interim year were additional to these ongoing activities.

2    The additional activities for the interim year included Universities Scotland Teaching Quality Forum (USTQF) commissioning sector overview reports, focusing on analyses of good practice in relation to (a) internal subject review and (b) reflective analysis. The overarching aim of these reports is to '…help institutions to make their own review processes more effective and improve the linkage between institution-led and QAA review processes'. This project is on internal subject review.

3    The consultant leading the internal subject review project, and author of this report, was Ms Wendy Muir, Assistant Director of the Senate Office, University of Glasgow.

## Introduction

### Internal review at the subject level

4    The Quality Enhancement Framework in Scotland consists of five interrelated elements, including a comprehensive framework of internal review at the subject level. While the nature of internal reviews is determined by individual institutions, they share certain agreed features, including the use of trained reviewers and externality within review teams. The SFC provides guidance on the characteristics of internal review,[2] which include:

- all provision should be reviewed on a cycle of not more than six years

- reviews should take full account of the *Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework*, of subject benchmarks and the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*, published by QAA

- reviews should provide an objective review of provision based on an understanding of national and international good practice; each review team should include at least one external member with a relevant background

- internal processes should take full account of student feedback, and include procedures to obtain student views of the provision being reviewed

- internal reviews should consider the effectiveness of annual monitoring arrangements and follow-up action for programmes covered by the review

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[2]  Scottish Higher Education Funding Council Circular HE/04/03 (Annex B - Guidance to institutions on the characteristics of internal (subject) review) (23 January 2003). This guidance was updated and re-issued in June 2008 as Circular SFC/30/2008. The characteristics are essentially unchanged but some of the associated guidance has been expanded plus there is a change in terminology from internal (subject) review to institution-led internal review. See paragraphs 12 and 13.

- while the primary purpose of internal reviews is the assurance of quality and academic standards, institutions are encouraged to develop internal review processes which also promote quality enhancement.

5    While the SFC provides generic guidance on the conduct of internal subject review, 'it is a matter for each institution to determine how precisely it organises its internal processes for reviewing provision'.

## Aims of the project

6    The aims of the project were to:

- identify, collate and disseminate elements of good practice in relation to internal subject review in the Scottish higher education sector

- allow institutions to reflect on their own process, and improve the linkage between institution-led and QAA review processes (see paragraph 2).

7    The project encompassed the following activities:

- reviewing, and drawing upon, existing research and published information on internal subject review, including previous work undertaken by/through USTQF, individual ELIR reports and relevant *Learning from ELIR* reports (see Appendix 1)

- a survey on institutional approaches to internal subject review (see Appendix 2)

- communication with a sample of individual institutions to obtain more detailed information on particular practices

- a USTQF workshop on 20 June 2008

- the production of a report on good practice in internal subject review.

8    Due to the timing and the short timescale allocated, it was unfortunately not possible to interview students as part of the project.

9    The project and associated survey was not an audit of institutional practice in relation to internal subject review against SFC guidance. The guidance does, however, identity practices that the SFC would consider 'good' and, conversely, provides some examples of approaches that would not be considered good practice. Where appropriate, reference has been made to that guidance with comments on the sector's approaches.

10  The timing of this project coincided with the publication of a QAA report, *Learning from ELIR 2003-07, Emerging approaches to institution-led quality review at the subject level: combining assurance with enhancement*. This report concludes:

'The ELIR reports confirm that institution-led quality review at the subject level is being operated effectively in Scottish higher education institutions as a peer review process with a high degree of externality. The process provides a robust system for the assurance of quality and maintenance of academic standards through the use of a number of external reference points, as well as affording a key vehicle for the promotion, monitoring and review of enhancement. The development of a more evaluative, self-reflective approach at subject level is the

basis for a dynamic engagement which can articulate with local and institutional strategies. As the focus on the student learning experience increases across institutional structures, systems and processes, institution-led subject review epitomises the change in emphasis, through deepening engagement with student representatives in the process and widespread student membership on review panels. Institution-led quality review is a lynch-pin in supporting the enhancement-led approach at the subject level.'

11   The *Learning from ELIR* report also indentifies 'a number of aspects in which the institution-led quality review process can be strengthened further', set out under six broad areas (scope, duration, review process, reporting process and follow up, focus on enhancement and links to institutional enhancement strategy). This project also asked about institutional approaches to these aspects with a view to establishing if processes had evolved or developed since the publication of ELIR reports (see paragraphs 14 to 16). Comment is made at various points within this report.

## Terminology

12   During 2007, the SFC reviewed arrangements for the quality assurance of learning and teaching led by the work of the Joint Quality Review Group. As a result of that review, the SFC issued revised and updated guidance on quality in June 2008 (Circular letter SFC/30/2008). Annex B of that letter contains 'revised guidance on the nature and scope of institution-led quality review', representing a change in terminology from earlier guidance which used the term 'internal (subject) review'.

13   The scope of periodic reviews within the revised guidance has been broadened and now applies also to the 'periodic review of the strategic and operational role of support services in relation to their impact on the student experience' as well as to 'internal (subject) review', hence the change in terminology to 'institution-led quality review'. While reference has been made to the revised SFC guidance during the project and in this report, the previous terminology ('internal (subject) review') has been retained, to reflect the scope and focus, and the timing, of the project.

## Survey on institutional approaches to internal subject review

14   One of the main activities undertaken for the project was a survey of the Scottish higher education sector on institutional approaches to internal subject review. All institutions in Scotland were invited to participate, including the Open University, and 16 institutions completed the survey in full. The survey built on a similar but smaller one conducted for a USTQF workshop in 2005, which provides a useful baseline for comparative purposes. The survey also drew upon SFC guidance and on the QAA report, *Learning from ELIR*.

15  The survey sought to identify higher education institutions' (HEIs) approaches to, and processes and practices adopted for, internal subject review (ISR) in a number of key areas:

- length of the ISR cycle
- focus, scope and purpose of ISR
- support for staff from the area to be reviewed
- the review panel
- engaging students from the area under review
- outcome of reviews
- identification and dissemination of good practice
- quality assurance and quality enhancement
- alignment between strategic planning and internal subject review.

16  Additionally, on the basis of the information provided, a small number of institutions were contacted to clarify specific points or to provide additional information.

## Universities Scotland Teaching Quality Forum workshop

17  A USTQF workshop was held at the University of Glasgow on 20 June 2008, at which the preliminary findings of the project were shared with the sector. The workshop included some group work and this focused on two aspects of internal subject review: engagement with students from the area under review; and the identification and dissemination of good practice from internal subject reviews. These were aspects which the survey had identified as areas where further guidance and the sharing of good practice were wanted by institutions. The group work generated new ideas and different approaches to these aspects and these have been incorporated within the relevant sections below.

## Length of cycle

18  The SFC guidance to institutions on the characteristics of internal (subject) review states that 'All provision should be reviewed on a cycle of not more than six years' and

> 'However, institutions may now wish to take advantage of the greater flexibility now available for aggregation and this may lead to a truncation of the cycle length. It would not be good practice to compress reviews into (say) a period of three years, followed by three further years of inactivity...We therefore propose that, however the timetable is constructed, there should normally be some form of internal review activity taking place within each academic session.'

19  The institutions that responded to the survey operate internal subject review on either a five or six-year review cycle, with an almost equal split between the two. One institution reported that its norm is a six-year cycle but for some subjects accredited by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs), reviews are conducted on a

five-yearly basis. Given the SFC guidance above, the survey provides evidence that there is good practice across the sector with reviews scheduled at the maximum end of the permitted cycle length and with no truncation of the cycle length.

# Focus, scope and purpose of internal subject review

## Focus

20   The primary focus of internal subject review is learning and teaching[3] in just over 50 per cent (nine out of 16) of institutions. Postgraduate research provision is included in addition to learning and teaching in three institutions and this, plus the school's management process, is reviewed in a fourth institution. Holistic reviews of departments/subjects (that is, a review of all departmental activities/functions) are conducted in three institutions. The results of the USTQF survey conducted in 2005 were similar.

### Postgraduate research student experience

21   There is variation across the sector in the review of postgraduate research (PGR) provision. As outlined above, three institutions' internal subject review processes comprise holistic reviews of a department or subject, so reviews of this nature incorporate the review of PGR provision. Four other institutions include the review of PGR provision within their internal subject review process. The majority of institutions, however, operate separate processes through, for example, their research degrees committee or graduate schools. In institutions with relatively few PGR student numbers, provision may only be reviewed annually on an individual student basis.

22   The postgraduate research student experience was explicitly brought within the scope of ELIR in 2003-04, and the 2003 Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC) guidance on internal subject review included the expectation that the supervision of research students would be included within review processes. Consequently, the variation between institutions reflects the fact that some institutions will have developed new processes or adapted existing ones for the review of PGR provision, or continued to operate pre-existing processes (which may have been as part of holisitic reviews or a separate review).

## Scope

23   SFC guidance to institutions on the characteristics of internal (subject) review[4] states

   'It is a matter for each institution to decide how to schedule and aggregate its provision. However, good practice would be to ensure that programmes and subjects are aggregated in ways which provide coherence (for example, reviewing

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[3]   It was assumed that this would also include the student experience, quality assurance and enhancement processes
[4]   Annex B of Circular SFC/30/2008 (6 June 2008) - www.sfc.ac.uk/information/info_circulars/sfc/2008/sfc3008/sfc3008.pdf

all programmes in a subject at the same time; reviewing all programmes within a department at the same time)…We suggest that the typical level of aggregation should be at Department level.'

24   The results of the survey show that the typical scope of internal subject review is:

- an academic department or school (over 60 per cent of institutions)
- a subject area, for example as defined by a QAA benchmark statement (around 30 per cent of institutions).

The review of a subject area may involve a single academic department or encompass two or more departments.

25   In addition, the scope of a review may cover a single taught programme or it may cover a cluster of programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

26   Institutions are likely to operate a degree of flexibility in determining the scope of internal subject reviews. Some flexibility may be needed to take account of the complexity of institutional structures and/or to provide greater coherence in aggregating programmes or subjects than a single approach might permit. That said, this level of flexibility may not be necessary where an institution operates an holistic departmental review process.

## Purpose

27   Internal subject review may serve a number of purposes but the primary purpose is the periodic review of programmes and/or a subject, and these are generally (but not in all cases) linked with the re-approval of programmes. The validation of new programmes is also a feature of internal subject review in six institutions. The accreditation/re-accreditation of programmes in joint review events with PSRBs operates in only a small number of institutions, where it is possible to combine these events.

### International good practice

28   The revised SFC guidance to institutions on the characteristics of internal (subject) review[5] states

'Reviews should provide an objective review of provision based on an understanding of national and international good practice. Each review team should include at least one external member with a relevant background.

We do not expect internal review teams to routinely include members from outside the UK (although, where this can be achieved, it may be valuable and we encourage institutions to actively consider scope for this option). However, review processes should be designed to include some element of reflection on international good practice, such as a reflective statement from the provider on how their provision compares with similar practice in some other countries.

[5]  Annex B of Circular SFC/30/2008 (6 June 2008) -
   www.sfc.ac.uk/information/info_circulars/sfc/2008/sfc3008/sfc3008.pdf

Institutions may wish to consider how they can support such informal 'benchmarking' at a central level.'

29  The extent to which review processes encourage the area under review to reflect on international good practice varies between institutions. Three institutions explicitly include an international perspective in their guidance on the preparation of the self-evaluation document (SED) and it may feature in discussions between the review team and staff from the area under review in relation to:

● how programmes compare with similar programmes abroad

● the influence of international developments on the subject development.

One of these three institutions has extensive overseas numbers and a large number of students who are receiving a transnational education.

30  Other institutions may touch upon internationalisation implicitly rather than explicitly, for example through reference to any international collaborative links or in terms of the institution's overall strategy and research quality, but not necessarily explicitly in relation to learning and teaching.

31  Internationalisation has not traditionally been a strong feature of internal subject review but this situation is likely to change in the future given:

● its increasing strategic importance across the sector

● the greater encouragement to use international reviewers, as reflected in the revised SFC guidance

● the inclusion of international reviewers on ELIR teams

● the Higher Education Academy's (HEA) work on internationalising the curriculum.

**Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies**

32  SFC Guidance to institutions on the characteristics of internal (subject) review[6] states

'Significant amounts of provision in Scottish HEIs is accredited by professional and statutory bodies (PSBs). We would encourage institutions to engage with PSBs to explore appropriate ways in which the burden of audit might be further reduced, for example through the use of common documentation, or through joint processes which meet the needs of both internal review and external accreditation. We would also look to institutions to reflect on the outcomes of relevant PSB accreditations within internal reviews.'

33  As noted above (see paragraph 27), only a small number of institutions employ joint PSRB accreditation reviews as part of their internal subject review.

34  Institutions that operate joint events with PSRBs have found that they can be successful in some subject areas (for example, nursing, health science subjects and social work), but through experience they have concluded that it is often not practical

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[6]  Annex B of Circular SFC/30/2008 (6 June 2008) -
   www.sfc.ac.uk/information/info_circulars/sfc/2008/sfc3008/sfc3008.pdf

and not possible to do so in others. Institutions have considered the possibility of running combined review events, but reasons for not wishing to pursue these include:

- differences in the focus of an internal review and that of a PSRB accreditation, making it unfeasible to combine the two, for example where the institution's subject review process is holistic in nature

- the impracticality of a joint event, as the scope of the internal subject review embraces several accredited programmes and different PSRBs

- disparity in the purposes, outcomes and reporting requirements of PRSB reviews and internal subject reviews

- variations in the length of review cycles, resulting in accreditation reviews being out of sequence with the internal review cycle.

35   The survey also asked institutions for their views on whether there was potential for joint institution-PSRB accreditation reviews. Responses were spread almost equally between 'yes', 'no' and 'possibly'. Those institutions willing to consider the possibility of combined review events would do so to reduce bureaucracy and gain in efficiency, and did not object in principle, but they are also aware of the constraining factors noted above.

36   While institutions may not operate combined events, the internal subject review process can be, and is, used by some institutions as preparation for PSRB accreditation reviews, or may follow them. Potentially, therefore, increasing efficiency may be possible through joint documentation or other ways of avoiding duplication. Similarly, reports of relevant PSRB accreditations will be reflected upon in SEDs and normally form part of the documentation considered by review panels. It should also be noted that some institutions have no PSRB accredited programmes.

## Support for staff from the area to be reviewed

37   Staff from the area due to be reviewed are supported in preparing for internal subject review in a number of ways (set out in order of prevalence within institutions):

- the provision of detailed guidelines (100 per cent)

- initial briefings which are held well in advance of review event (for example, at least six months) (87 per cent)

- encouraging the sharing of SEDs (81 per cent)

- through academic practice units providing direct support to staff in the preparation of the SED, encouraging a reflective approach and leading student focus groups to inform the SED (63 per cent)

- sharing the experience of staff from within the department or school who have served as internal panel members (50 per cent). Some institutions include on the panel a member of staff (for example, head of department) from a subject area due to be reviewed in a subsequent year(s). Others may allow staff members to observe or encourage school secretaries to take notes of events for other schools (where reviews are organised by a faculty rather than centrally)

- producing and providing summary data to the area to be reviewed in advance so that it can be considered as part of their SED.

38  All institutions use more than one of the above approaches, 13 institutions (81 per cent) use at least four methods and five institutions (31 per cent) use five or more.

# The review panel

## Internal panel members

39  As might be expected, given the diversity of the sector and institutional structures (organisational and management), there is variation in relation to who might act as internal panel members. This variation is appropriate to the needs and structure of the institution, and to the nature of the review. In addition, the number of internal members may be influenced by the number of external subject specialists included on the panel (some institutions include up to four externals) (see paragraph 43).

40  Those who may be included as internal members on review panels are:

- a member of Senate/Academic Board
- a member of the institution-level learning and teaching committee
- an academic from a subject/department within the same faculty/college/school
- an academic from a subject/department in a different faculty/college/school
- head of another faculty/college/school
- an associate dean with a learning and teaching remit
- a school/department learning enhancement coordinator
- a head of department not from a cognate discipline
- a representative from the academic practice unit
- a general academic and or senior curriculum/quality manager
- an administrator (who may also be clerk to the panel)
- a member who has never served on a panel before to give them experience
- a student (see paragraphs 46 to 48).

## Chair of the panel

41  There is variation across the sector in relation to who chairs the review panel but it is most commonly a vice-principal or equivalent. Otherwise it is normally a dean of faculty or college, a head of department or other senior academic.

## External panel members

42  The SFC guidance states: 'Each review team should include at least one external member with a relevant background'.

43  All institutions include external members on their review panels and, most commonly, at least two external members, but some institutions include three or four. In the latter case, the externals are likely to include a practitioner, an employer and/or an industrial representative. One institution appoints one external for each QAA benchmark statement covered, and in another, the number of external members is dependent on the scale of the provision and complexity of the area under review. The results are very similar to the 2005 survey. By implication, especially given the numbers engaged in some institutions, the inclusion of external members on the review panel must be beneficial.

44  External subject specialists are normally nominated by the area under review and appointed by a senior member of staff (for example, vice-principal, head of quality) and on the basis of selection criteria. The area under review normally provides summary biographical information and a declaration of any previous involvement with the area under review to ensure that there is appropriate distance and no conflicts of interest that might compromise objectivity.

45  The *Learning from ELIR* report identifies as an aspect for further development in a small number of institutions:

> '...ensuring appropriate distance and objectivity in external appointments, in addition to ensuring teams have requisite experience in quality assurance.'

This survey indicates that the majority of institutions maintain procedures and criteria for the appointment of external subject specialists which allow appropriate distance and objectivity in external appointments.

## Student panel members

46  Of the 16 institutions that participated[7] in the survey, 14 include a student member(s) on the review panel. Of the two institutions that do not include a student member on the panel, one has invited executive members of the students' association to serve on panels, but the take-up has been very limited. This institution is currently working with its students' association to find ways to improve the situation. The other institution will be introducing a student member to the panel from 2008-09.

47  In the majority of cases, the students' association is involved in nominating, identifying or acting as the student member of the panel.

48  Prior to the March 2005 USTQF survey, another survey specific to student membership of internal review panels was reported to the USTQF in December 2003. In comparing the results of these surveys, it is clear that there has been a significant shift in position since late 2003.

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[7]  The University of Glasgow undertook an informal survey in the summer of 2007 and, from the intelligence obtained from that survey, it is known that two institutions that did not participate in the current survey do include students on their internal review panels.

| Date | Institutions that include students as members of internal review panels |
|------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| December 2003 | 6 out of 16 institutions |
| March 2005 | 9 out of 15 institutions |
| February 2008 | 14 out of 16 institutions |

49  Over the same period there has been a strengthening of SFC guidance in this area.

**SHEFC guidance 2003**

'Specifically, we would encourage institutions to consider the potential merits of including student members on internal review teams, and also to put in place mechanisms to engage effectively with their student body during internal reviews.'

**SFC guidance 2008**

'We now expect institutions to develop and deploy mechanisms to directly involve students in processes of institution-led quality review (that is, student representatives should contribute directly to the review of evidence and to the deliberation of internal review teams) and the revised guidance will now look to institutions to devise appropriate mechanisms to achieve this.'

The majority of institutions meet the SFC's expectations in relation to the 2008 guidance and directly involve students in internal subject review (remembering that the revised terminology of 'institution-led quality review' also embraces reviews of student focused services). Institutions generally report positively on the experience of including student members on panels as it provides a greater focus on the student experience and on issues from the student point of view.

## Overall composition of the review panel

50  SFC guidance includes a statement on good practice in relation to the range of experience of the review panel:

'...good practice would be to ensure that review teams are able to bring a range of experience to the process and hence are able to act as "critical friends" to the institution. Team size and composition must also take account of the range and volume of provision to be reviewed. We suggest that institutions should consider more extensive use of external members, eg one from another Scottish institution and at least one from outside Scotland'.

Given the range of internal staff members who participate on review panels, together with external and student members, the overall composition of panels should, hence, bring a range of experience to the process.

# Support for panel members

## Briefings

51   All institutions provide some form of briefing for panel members. The approaches used are detailed below (set out in order of prevalence within institutions):

- guidelines, handbook or briefing document for panel members (100 per cent)
- briefing or training session, on an open or individual basis (70 per cent)
- panel members meet in advance of review event (30 per cent)
- advice from staff in unit organising reviews (20 per cent)
- panel members discuss task and role with experienced panel members.

All institutions adopt more than one form of briefing, and three institutions use three or more.

52   Briefings or training sessions may be held on an open or individual basis. These sessions do not always include external subject specialists, although a personal briefing is provided should they request one. This may be conducted remotely. The *Learning from ELIR* report identifies as an area for development the need to ensure that 'external reviewers are appropriately trained/briefed'. The survey results show that institutions do address this.

53   A meeting of panel members may also be held in advance of the review and may incorporate an element of training or briefing. The timescale for this meeting can vary from four weeks in advance to the evening before the review. Depending on the timing before the review, the meeting may be restricted to internal members (including student members) or may involve the whole panel.

## Additional support for student members

54   All institutions provide some form of additional support to student members beyond the briefings detailed above. The main forms of additional support are (set out in order of prevalence within institutions):

- sparqs training on internal review (80 per cent)
- support from the unit organising the review (73 per cent)
- support provided by students' association officers (60 per cent)
- peer support from student members who have completed a review (30 per cent)
- a member of students' association staff trains the students and is an observer at the review to provide continuous support (6 per cent).

One institution provides four forms of support from the above list and another institution provides one form of additional support. The remainder of institutions are positioned somewhere in-between.

## Engaging students from the area to be reviewed

55  An important aspect of internal subject review is the engagement of students from the area being reviewed. These engagements may take place prior to the review or during the review itself, and may involve graduates as well as current students. There may also be some indirect engagement with students through the documentation submitted for the review. Student engagement also continues after the review activity is completed.

56  The range of approaches that operate across the sector includes (set out in order of prevalence within institutions):

- briefing students about the review (100 per cent)
- meetings between the panel and students from the area under review (100 per cent)
- students contribute to the development of the SED (45 per cent)
- students from the subject to be reviewed can provide a student submission (20 per cent).

These approaches are explored in more detail below.

### Engagement prior to the review

**Briefings**

57  All institutions provide some form of briefing about the review to students from the subject to be reviewed. Most institutions use more than one method to brief or inform students from the subject about the review. The most common form of briefing is at staff-student liaison committee meetings (around 70 per cent of institutions). Around one-third of institutions provide a briefing or information sheet, or hold a meeting with student representatives from the subject to be reviewed. Most briefings are done by staff from the area under review; they may also be done by staff from the (normally central) unit organising the review or in some cases jointly. In one institution, the review secretary attends a meeting of the staff-student liaison committee to brief student representatives on the review process and on the opportunity to prepare a student submission.

**Contribution to the development of the self-evaluation document**

58  In just under 50 per cent of institutions, students can contribute to the development of the SED. This may be done by the following means:

- via student focus groups convened to discuss the provision under review and or the draft SED. The focus groups may be led by the department or may use a facilitator independent of the area under review (for example, a student or a member of staff from a service department)
- students may be consulted on a draft of the SED at a staff-student liaison committee.

The outcomes of these processes inform the development of the SED. In one institution, the students' comments are also included as an appendix to the SED, for the attention of the review panel.

59  At the USTQF workshop, additional suggestions were made for obtaining student views and included the use of the student portal, institutional e-learning systems or social networking websites (for example, Facebook) to collect student views to inform development of the SED and/or the review panel. This approach would be particularly useful to students studying at a distance and would allow all students to comment directly should they want to.

**Student submission**

60  In three institutions, students from the area to be reviewed can provide a student submission. These institutions have, however, had varied experiences and mixed results with this approach, and one will be bringing it to an end in 2008. There can be benefits in having student submissions (for example, helping panels in directing questions in sessions with students and staff) but there can also be practical difficulties, for example in gaining students' commitment and in the consistency of submissions. To aid consistency, students may be provided with a briefing (for example at a staff-student liaison committee) and with written guidance on topics to consider in preparing their submission.

61  Another of the institutions has found that the panel may give the student submission too much prominence at the expense of pursuing other or emerging issues on the day, and that the submission can place the student panel member in a compromising position as they may feel constrained by the student views rather than being able to form their own judgement.

62  The timing of reviews in the academic session can impact on students' opportunities to contribute to the development of the SED or provide a student submission, which is easier for reviews held later in the academic session. This point was also noted at the USTQF workshop.

63  Some stated benefits of students contributing to the development of the SED or in providing a student submission are:

- 'the deeper involvement of students in informing the agenda for internal review (and future priorities of the school concerned)'

- 'increased, school-based, engagement with students on teaching and learning issues which can inform both local and institutional developments'

- 'comments are, for the most part, anonymous 'so students can feel more open in expressing their views than they might to panel members face to face'

- 'it allows time for a considered response rather than an off the cuff reaction to a question during the event'.

## Engagement during the review

64  Engagement with students during the review comprises meetings between the review panel and students from the area under review, and these take place in all institutions. The way in which meetings are conducted varies between institutions:

- a single meeting of all students may be held
- meetings may be held with different student groups or combinations of student groups, for example:
  - all taught students (undergraduate and taught postgraduate)
  - undergraduate students only
  - postgraduate students only (research and taught)
  - separate meetings of undergraduate, taught postgraduate and postgraduate research students (where the latter are included in the review)
  - student representatives
  - distance-learning students.

It has been found that smaller groups generally aid better dialogue so students may be allocated to smaller groups led by a panel member but this may depend on the size of the review and how many students attend on the day. If on the day of the review student numbers are small, making smaller groupings unfeasible, then a single meeting is held.

65  The institutions' experiences of engaging graduates in internal review processes was discussed at the USTQF workshop. These engagements may take the form of:

- a small group of recent graduates which meets with the review team
- or include one or more recent graduates on the review team.

While engaging with graduates has its merits, some concerns expressed at the workshop included time out since graduation and, if only a small number of graduates is involved, limited perspectives might bias the review.

## Indirect engagement with students

66  Two institutions commented that the review panel also received student feedback via module/course evaluations and questionnaires and via minutes of staff-student liaison committees (or equivalent). These indirect sources of student feedback are useful in supplementing direct engagement with students and will typically inform reviews in most institutions.

## Engagement with students following the review

67  The matter of engagement with students following the review formed part of the USTQF workshop. These are some of the issues which were explored.

- What happens after the review?

- How is the feedback loop to students closed (ie reporting of review outcomes)?

- Do students receive the full review report or is a summary report produced for students?

- Is this done timeously?

68  Feedback to students on their engagement with the review is deemed important and should be done timeously. The latter was also identified as an aspect for further development in the *Learning from ELIR* report. The workshop highlighted that:

- there may be a time-lag in closing the loop back to students who engaged with the review, which could be due to the timing of the review in the academic year or in finalising the review report. The point was also made that the students might not receive the feedback as they may have completed their degree or no longer be studying the subject or with the department. The lack of feedback might support student views that their views are not taken on board or responded to

- the language used within review reports may not be accessible to the student body. It was suggested that reports should be targeted at a student readership, with accessible, jargon-free language. There was support for a short, summary report specifically for students (two sides of A4).

69  It was also suggested that the area under review should provide a report on the steps it has taken to close the feedback loop to students (for example, discussion at the staff-student liaison committee, a focus group to consider certain topics in more detail). Such a report could be provided at the same time as the progress report on actions taken in response to the review report.

## Student engagement and Scottish Funding Council guidance

70  The USTQF workshop highlighted that there are many demands on students. This makes engaging students in internal subject review challenging for institutions, who are having to think creatively about how they might achieve this at a time of growing expectations of the SFC. The revised guidance on quality *(SFC 2008)* includes the following statements:

'We also propose, as a separate measure, that each internal review process should gather additional specific information from students as part of the evidence base for reviews. An appropriate methodology would be one which:

- generated holistic evidence about student views of provision and of their learning experience;

- differentiated between the views of different categories of students where these are likely to be significant (for example part-time and full-time, junior and senior, entrants from school and entrants from FE, etc.);

- allowed identification of distinctive characteristics of major subsets of provision; and

- took account of the views of graduates on the relevance of provision for their careers.

Institution-led quality processes should also take account of the increasing diversity of the student body, in terms of race, gender, sexuality, faith, age or whether they are disabled, and of the range of modes and location of delivery. This does not mean that multiple parallel processes of review need be carried out, each addressing distinct groups of students. Rather, it is intended to ensure primarily that internal review processes do not exclude or impede categories of students from engaging with review because of the way in which review is defined or operated. More positively, there is scope to reflect on the opportunities which diversity provides for enriching the learning experience. It is up to each institution to decide how to address these issues, taking account of the specific demographics and characteristics of its own provision.'

71  Several participants at the USTQF workshop were of the view that, if fundamental processes for receiving and responding to student feedback operate well and systematically, and are seen by students to be effective and responsive, then student engagement in other processes, such as internal subject review, are likely to be successful. Consequently, the culture of the area under review and attitude towards quality processes, and the role of student feedback within that, may influence how willingly students engage with the internal subject review.

## Outcomes of reviews

### The report

#### Consideration of review reports

72  In around two-thirds of institutions, reports of internal review are received by institution-level quality committees which may then forward them to Senate or the Academic Board/Council. In one institution, where internal subject review is holistic in nature, the report is submitted to the institution-level committee with responsibility for strategy and resources, but learning and teaching sections of the report are also considered by its quality committee. In another institution, its learning and teaching committee receives the report. In two cases, an executive committee or group receives the report. In one of these cases, the report is also considered by the institution-level quality committee, then Senate or Academic Board/Council. Reports are considered at college/faculty level in three institutions, either by the college/faculty quality committee or by the college/faculty itself, with further upward reporting as appropriate.

### Availability of review reports

73  For the majority of institutions (75 per cent), internal review reports are available in full or in part on institutions' websites. Review reports are not available on the web in two institutions. In most cases the reports are accessible internally only and may be available:

- to staff only

- to staff and students

- to staff and or students in summary form, as an extract or via committee papers/minutes.

74  Reports are publicly available on the websites of four institutions.

- University of Edinburgh websiterepository.ed.ac.uk/qahandbook/tpr/reports.html

- University of Glasgow senate.gla.ac.uk/qa/review/complete.html

- Glasgow Caledonian University www.gcal.ac.uk/quality/strategy/elisr.html

- Heriot-Watt University www.hw.ac.uk/quality/InternalReview.htm

75  In six institutions, the report may contain a reserved section with restricted access (for example, a confidential annex). This is the case in two of the four institutions that make their reports and responses publicly available.

### Identification of good practice

76  All institutions aim to identify good practice within review reports. This is generally done by:

- the panel identifying the good practice (100 per cent)

- the subject or area under review providing examples of good practice in the SED and the panel confirming that it considers it good practice (60 per cent of institutions).

Around two-thirds of institutions, therefore, adopt both approaches.

### Judgements

77  In around two-thirds of institutions, the panel makes a judgement at the end of the review. The nature of that judgement varies across institutions:

- the continued operation of the programme(s) (five institutions)

- the validation/approval of programme(s) (four institutions[8])

- as used in QAA academic (subject) review methodology (confidence, limited confidence, no confidence) (two institutions)

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[8]  For two of the institutions, the validation or approval of programmes was one of the main purposes of internal subject review (see paragraph 27). The two institutions have validation arrangements with another HEI.

- as per the ELIR methodology (Handbook, 2003 edition) (broad confidence, limited confidence, no confidence) (one institution). Another institution used a variant of this; confidence and no confidence

- confirmation of appropriate health of the six themes of the review (one institution).

78  Two institutions used two judgements from the above list; both using 'continued operation of the programme(s)' plus one other form of judgement.

79  At the time of the 2005 USTQF survey, six institutions made some form of judgement and this has increased to 11 in 2008. The main change since 2005 is in an increase in the number of institutions using the judgement relating to the 'continued operation of the programme(s)'.

## Actions and follow-up

80  In all institutions, review panels make recommendations or identify action points where they believe that improvements should be made. In over 80 per cent of institutions, the recommendations or action points are prioritised in some way. This might include:

- the differentiation of actions between conditions and recommendations. Conditions must generally be met before the programme can be delivered and considered fully approved or validated

- the prioritisation of recommendations according to the urgency or seriousness of the issue to be addressed by the subject/area under review, relevant service areas or officers or committees

- the creation of an action plan by the subject/area under review with timings and person responsible for delivering action

- the text of the report indicating the importance of recommendations or action points.

81  Follow up, and the monitoring of actions are identified as areas for further development within the *Learning from ELIR* report:

- 'Giving greater focus to follow-up and action planning, with clear timelines specified, and responsibilities designated'

- 'Maintaining a transparent and timely monitoring process, especially for year-on reporting, including evidence of how specific conditions/recommendations have been met'.

82  The results of the survey have established that all institutions require some form of progress report, action plan or commentary on how conditions, recommendations or actions have been taken forward. In the majority, progress will be considered and monitored by the same body that initially receives the report. In three cases, the monitoring is done by a lower level committee or body and, in one case, the monitoring is done at an executive level by the dean and convener of the review. In one or two cases, a progress meeting will also be held with the subject/area that was reviewed.

83  There is considerable variation in the timescale for initial reporting on progress/action, ranging from one month to a year to no timescale being specified (one institution). In some cases, the timelines may vary as they are associated with an action plan. The most common reporting timescale is six months, followed closely, in equal measure, by three months and one year. The timescale can apply from the date of the review or from the date that the report is submitted to the relevant committee overseeing the process. Two institutions (with five and six-year review cycles, respectively) mentioned that they also asked for a mid-cycle update report.

84  Just over 50 per cent of institutions publish progress reports, responses to recommendations and other information on their websites. In the majority of cases, these are available internally only to staff and/or students. Three of the four institutions that make the review reports publicly available do the same for progress reports, which are normally co-located on their websites. The fourth institution publishes the report internally to staff.

## Overview reports

85  An area highlighted for further development within the *Learning from ELIR* report is in relation to overview reports and how these might inform institutional planning, that is, the analysis of all internal subject review reports from one year to help identify any matters of strategic importance that need to be addressed at a higher level, other common matters for improvement, and/or elements of good practice.

86  Just over 80 per cent of institutions prepare overview reports. The majority of these reports are produced on an annual basis, and may be a useful source of information for the annual report to the SFC on institution-led quality review.

# The dissemination of good practice identified through internal subject review

87  The SFC encourages institutions 'to develop internal review processes which…identify good practice for dissemination within the institution and beyond (such as quality enhancement engagements)'.

88  All institutions take steps to disseminate good practice more widely within the institution. The most common forms of dissemination are:

- through the academic development unit (for example, by its staff, through its website)

- specific web pages, which may be co-located with internal review reports and associated information

- consideration by quality assurance and quality enhancement committees

- at development or enhancement events.

Six institutions use a combination of these methods to disseminate good practice, with one using all four.

89  One institution highlighted that 'the inclusion of observers, learning enhancement coordinators and internal members on review panels also facilitates both intra and inter faculty sharing of good practice and feedback from colleagues participating via this route has been positive'.

90  Where development or enhancement events are held, these are often used to disseminate good practice identified by a range of processes, including internal subject review. The themes for these events are frequently linked with strategic priorities.

91  The dissemination of good practice was also one of the topics explored at the USTQF workshop. As was highlighted, identification and dissemination of good practice could be a workshop in its own right. These are some of the issues which were explored.

● How effective are your approaches to disseminating good practice?

● Are they likely to result in adoption and effect change?

● Are they quite passive in nature? Are more proactive approaches needed to engage staff?

92  Some key points made at the workshop included:

● indentifying good practice and recommending its wider dissemination can provide a boost for the area under review, plus it is a positive outcome from the review process which can tend to focus on weaknesses

● good practice should be expected as the norm. Concepts or definitions beyond 'normal good practice' were considered and included:

    ● effective practice

    ● distinctive practice

    ● innovative practice

    ● enhanced practice

    ● transferable practice.

● the importance of clarity regarding what is meant by 'good practice'

● development or enhancement events are more proactive approaches to engaging staff (academic and support) and can be successful, although achieving a good attendance can be challenging, given the other demands on staff time.

93  In view of the range of definitions for 'normal good practice' suggested above, it is perhaps worth noting the finding in the HEA report Quality enhancement and assurance - a changing picture? that 'Clear definitions and criteria of what constitutes "good practice" do not appear common' (see paragraph 100).

## Links between quality assurance and quality enhancement in internal subject review

94   The *Learning from ELIR* report identifies a number of aspects for further development in relation to the linkages between quality assurance and quality enhancement in internal subject review:

- 'Making explicit the link between quality assurance and quality enhancement in the process'

- 'Developing linked monitoring and review procedures to build a focus on enhancement'.

95   The SFC also encourages institutions 'to develop internal review processes which:

- promote dialogue on areas in which quality might be improved

- encourage and support providers' efforts to reflect critically on their practice'.

96   This project has established that institutions have taken steps to make the links between quality assurance and quality enhancement more explicit within review processes. These approaches can apply to annual monitoring processes as well as to periodic internal subject review, and include:

- promoting to academic staff a reflective practice approach to review processes (annual and periodic) and the preparation of the review process documentation (the SED and annual monitoring reports)

- encouraging the showcasing of new developments or innovations in the review process documentation

- demonstrating engagement with the enhancement themes in the SED

- identifying and reporting on quality enhancement arising from quality assurance processes (for example, annual monitoring process, external examiner reports) in the review process documentation

- adopting common topics for the preparation of evaluation documents for annual and internal subject review processes

- submitting quality enhancement action or development plans as part of the documentation for internal subject review (which may build upon plans arising from annual monitoring processes)

- demonstrating alignment with institutional or local strategic plans in the SED for internal subject review

- internal subject review panels making recommendations in the spirit of encouraging further enhancement

- promoting and showcasing good practice.

## Alignment between strategic planning and internal subject review

97 The *Learning from ELIR* report also identifies '…facilitating strategic discussions within quality review through closer alignment between institutional and local planning processes' as an aspect for further development. Consequently, this topic was also explored in the survey, the results of which have established that alignment between strategic planning and internal subject review is achieved in institutions by a variety of means:

- through specific commentary in the SED, addressing the context of the subject and its future development in the light of the institutional or local strategic plans. Other sections may relate to ongoing topics that are aligned with the strategic plan. This is the most commonly cited method

- by briefing review panels on strategic objectives for the subject/area under review and providing statistical metrics which allows panels to identify areas of weakness and strength

- using a standard agenda for review events, which can include a session on strategic issues

- actions arising from the review are linked into the annual planning process for the subject/area under review

- broader actions requiring attention at faculty/college or institutional level are fed into the relevant committee with strategic responsibility and or institutional learning and teaching strategy

- outcomes from subject review drive discussion on curricular development in subject networks, which may result in proposals for strategic change.

As the sector gains more experience further examples of the alignment between strategic planning and internal subject review will emerge in future.

98 Two case studies (University of the West of Scotland and Edinburgh College of Art) have been included in Appendix 4 to demonstrate in more detail the approaches taken in these institutions.

## Good practice in internal subject review

99 One of the key aims of the project was to identify 'good practice' in internal subject review. This section considers some of the definitions for 'good practice' used within the sector and how relevant they are to the practices employed for internal subject review.

100 As noted in paragraph 93 above, there is a range of definitions for 'normal good practice' which includes 'effective practice', 'transferrable practice', 'innovative practice' and 'distinctive practice'. The HEA report *Quality enhancement and assurance - a changing picture?* found a lack of 'Clear definitions and criteria of what constitutes "good practice" ' but the report also draws attention to 'two conceptualisations of "good practice" in common use in HE'. In the first of these 'good practice' may be

considered to be practice that is commendable, or excellent, through demonstrating **effectiveness in its context**, without any implication that it should be transferable and capable of improving learning opportunities and/or students' learning experiences in other contexts. In the second, **transferability** is the key feature in the meaning of 'good practice'. It implies that 'capability of dissemination' is a key feature of good practice. Perhaps these conceptualisations can be thought of as the two ends to a continuum of views, but the present study has insufficient evidence to support this' (author's emphasis in bold).

101 *Learning from ELIR 2003-07, Emerging approaches to institution-led quality review at the subject level: combining assurance with enhancement* concludes that 'The ELIR reports confirm that institution-led quality review at the subject level is being operated effectively in Scottish higher education institutions as a peer review process with a high degree of externality'. This report establishes that approaches, practices and procedures to internal subject review operating across the sector in Scotland are shared by a number of institutions. Given this sharing of approaches, practices and procedures it is reasonable to conclude that:

- effective practice is operating within internal subject review

- effective practice in internal subject review has transferred between institutions.

This indicates that both HEA conceptualisations of good practice, effectiveness in context and transferability, are to be found operating within internal review in Scotland and helps to support the suggestion in the HEA report, that the two conceptualisations of good practice 'can be thought of as the two ends to a continuum'.

102 The sharing of approaches, practices and procedures will be in part a consequence of SFC guidance on internal review but it will also have been facilitated by the sharing or transfer of experience and information between institutions by a variety of means, for example:

- through exposure to another institution's internal review process as an external panel member or as an ELIR reviewer

- through Universities Scotland Teaching Quality Forum workshops on internal review and other networking opportunities

- by accessing information on institutions' websites.

103 The survey has established that no institution has a radically different approach or has especially innovative or distinctive practice for internal subject review. This suggests that the sector is using tried and tested approaches and has not overlooked anything significant. While there is a sharing of, or consistency in, approaches between institutions, it can be the range of approaches employed that makes one institution's internal subject review process distinctive from another's, rather than the practice itself being distinctive. Adopting a range of approaches could be considered good practice and may improve effectiveness.

104 Greater variety in practice does occur in relation to the alignment between strategic planning and internal subject review, which will, in part, be due to the different planning methodologies operating within institutions, and the maturity of those processes.

105 Because of the importance of context, no individual approaches or practices are highlighted as good practice. Instead, this report will be a useful toolkit for institutions to:

- reflect on their own approaches to, and practices and procedures used in, internal subject review, whether they are effective and if they are too reliant on one approach or practice

- consider the range of approaches used by other institutions and their appropriateness and or transferability to their own internal review process

- enhance their internal review process by adopting new approaches and/or adapting their existing practices and processes, if appropriate.

## Conclusions

106 The higher education sector in Scotland is diverse in nature and, accordingly, the way in which institutions carry out internal subject review varies to take account of that diversity. Although diverse, the *Learning from ELIR* report suggests that '…institution-led quality review at the subject level is being operated effectively in Scottish higher education institutions as a peer review process with a high degree of externality'.

107 This report provides evidence that institutions employ a range of approaches, practices and procedures for internal subject review and that a number of them are shared by institutions, providing an element of consistency between institutions. This sharing will, in part, result from SFC guidance but will also have arisen from the development of effective practices within individual institutions as quality processes have matured, and through the transfer of practice between institutions as internal subject review, and the ELIR process, has developed and evolved across the sector. Consistency of practice between institutions also implies that the practices and procedures employed are tried and tested and 'fit for purpose', and that they are, in themselves, good practice. Adopting a wider range of approaches may also be good practice and improve effectiveness.

108 'Effectiveness in its context' and 'transferability' are two definitions or 'conceptualisations' of good practice that are most applicable to internal subject review. There is less evidence of 'innovative' or 'distinctive' practice. Consistency of practice between institutions also implies that the practices and procedures employed are tried and tested and 'fit for purpose' and that they are, in themselves, good practices. Adopting a wider range of approaches may also be considered good practice and improve effectiveness.

109 As this report identifies the range of approaches to internal subject review operating within Scotland it should prove to be a useful toolkit for the sector, against which institutions can benchmark their own practices. Reflecting and engaging in this way should result in enhancements to internal review procedures, and generate further debate and discussions within institutions and across the sector.

110 Finally, there is evidence to demonstrate that:

- institutions are addressing the characteristics in the SFC guidance and what it considers as 'good' practice
- aspects identified for development in the *Learning from ELIR* report have been, or are being, addressed by the sector in Scotland.

## Acknowledgements

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## Appendices

Appendix 1: Points of reference

Appendix 2: Survey on institutional approaches to internal subject review

Appendix 3: List of participating institutions

Appendix 4: Case studies

## Appendix 1: Points of reference

The following points of reference have informed the project.

*Enhancement-led institutional review handbook: Scotland (Second edition), 2008*, Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)
www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/ELIR/handbook08final/ELIRHandbook2008.pdf
(Accessed 28 August 2008)

*Handbook for enhancement-led institutional review: Scotland,* First edition (2003). QAA

*Learning from ELIR 2003-07 - Emerging approaches to institution-led quality review at the subject level: combining assurance with enhancement*, QAA
www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/ELIR/learningFromElir/Inst-led08.pdf
(Accessed 24 February 2009)

*Quality enhancement and assurance - a changing picture?* The Higher Education Academy, June 2008. This report is an outcome of joint working by QAA and the Higher Education Academy, with the support of The Higher Education Funding Council for England
www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/resources/publications/QualityEnhance
mentAndAssurance.pdf
(Accessed 28 August 2008)

Scottish Funding Council Circular: *Council guidance to higher education institutions on quality, 6 June 2008, SFC/30/2008: Annex B, Revised guidance on the nature and scope of institution-led quality review*
www.sfc.ac.uk/information/info_circulars/sfc/2008/sfc3008/sfc3008.html
(Accessed 28 August 2008)

Scottish Higher Education Funding Council Circular: HE/04/03 An enhancement-led approach to quality assurance: progress report. Annex B - Guidance to institutions on the characteristics of internal (subject) review 23 January 2003
www.sfc.ac.uk/information/info_circulars/shefc/2003/he0403/he0403.pdf
(Accessed 28 August 2008)

*Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*, (European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 2005)
www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/050221_ENQA_report.pdf
(Accessed 28 August 2008)

Universities Scotland Teaching Quality Forum Survey on Approaches to Internal Subject review (March 2005)

Universities Scotland Teaching Quality Forum Paper - Student Members of Internal Review Panels (December 2003)

Institutional websites relating to internal subject review and quality assurance and enhancement processes and activities

QAA Enhancement-led institutional review reports

## Appendix 2: Survey on institutional approaches to internal subject review

A survey of institutional approaches to internal subject review was conducted in late February-early March 2008 using SurveyMonkey (www.surveymonkey.com). All HEIs in Scotland were invited to participate (including the Open University). Details of the survey are included below.

### Approaches to internal subject review 2008

### Survey for Universities Scotland Teaching Quality Forum

A survey on approaches to internal subject review was undertaken in 2004-05 for Universities Scotland Teaching Quality Forum and the results were fed into a workshop held on 18 March 2005. This survey builds on that earlier one and includes questions on a wider range of topics,[9] the results of which will contribute to the USTQF commissioned project[10] on identifying, collating and disseminating good practice in internal subject review.

The survey is set out over 8 sections and for ease of completion comprises tick box responses, on the whole. As time for the project is relatively short, completion of the survey by Friday 7 March would be much appreciated.

Thank you in advance for your co-operation.

**Wendy Muir**
Project leader
Senate Office, University of Glasgow

| Institution: | |
|---|---|
| Name of person completing Survey: | |
| Title: | |

**General Information**

1.  Who is responsible for leading and managing the internal review process in your institution?

☐ Central Service/Unit    ☐ College/Faculty    ☐ Other - please provide details

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[9]  A number of the topics have been taken from the draft *Learning from ELIR 2003-06 - Evolving Approaches to internal subject review: combining assurance with enhancement'*.

[10]  The USTQF has commissioned two sector overview reports as part of the additional activities to be undertaken during the interim year 2007-08. The reports will focus on analyses of good practice in relation to a) internal subject review, and b) reflective analysis.

2. What is the length of your review cycle?

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6

**Scope and Focus**

3. What is the focus of internal subject review in your institution? (select one)

☐ Learning & Teaching

☐ Learning, Teaching & Postgraduate research provision

☐ Holistic (all department activities)

☐ Other - please specify


4. What is the typical scope of each review? (tick all that apply)

☐ Subject (may cover more than    ☐ One programme
one department)

☐ Department/School    ☐ Cluster of programmes

☐ College/Faculty    ☐ Other - please provide details


5. What are the main purposes of internal subject review in your institution?
(tick all that apply)

☐ Periodic review of a subject    ☐ Continuation of approval
of programmes

☐ The periodic review of    ☐ Accreditation/re-accreditation of
programmes    programmes in joint review event
with PSRB

☐ Validation of new programmes    ☐ Other - please provide details


6. If postgraduate research provision is included within the scope of your internal review process, please provide brief details on how it is incorporated into the event. If it is not, what alternative mechanisms are there to review this provision?


7. What are the mechanisms for reviewing joint programmes involving more than one department or subject area?

8.  If your internal subject review process does not currently embrace joint PSRB accreditation reviews, is there potential for doing so? Please explain further, if necessary.

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Possibly

9.  Does your review process encourage the area under review to reflect on international good practice, such as how the provision compares with similar practice in other countries? If yes, please provide brief details on how this is done.

**Support for Staff**

10. How do you support staff from the subject due to be reviewed in preparing for the review? (tick all that apply)

☐ Initial briefing held well in advance of review event (eg, at least 6 months)

☐ Provide detailed guidelines

☐ Include a member of staff on the Panel (eg, Head of Department) from a subject area due to be reviewed in a subsequent year(s)

☐ Provide direct support in preparing self evaluation document and to encourage reflective approach (eg, by staff from academic practice unit)

☐ Sharing of self evaluation documents is encouraged

☐ Other - please provide details

**The Review Panel**

11. Who chairs the Panel? (select one)

☐ Vice Principal or equivalent          ☐ Head of a Faculty/College

☐ Head of a School/Department

☐ Academic member of central committee with L&T or quality/standards remit

☐ Academic member of faculty/school committee with L&T or quality/standards remit

☐ Range of possible criteria          ☐ No Chair identified (as per ELIR)

☐ Other - please provide details

12. What is the make-up of internal panel members (not including students - see below)? (tick all that apply)

☐ A representative of Senate/Academic Board

☐ An academic from a subject/department within the same Faculty/College

☐ An academic from a subject/department in a different Faculty/College

☐ Head of the Faculty/College from that in which the subject/department is located

☐ Head of another Faculty/College

☐ A representative from the academic practice unit

☐ An administrator (who may also be clerk to the Panel)

☐ Other - please provide details

13. How many external members are typically included on the review panel?

☐ 1  ☐ 2  ☐ 3  ☐ 4  ☐ Other  ☐ per QAA subject benchmark statement

14. How are external members appointed to Panels and what safeguards are there to ensure appropriate distance and objectivity in external appointments?

15. Does the Panel include a student member?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If yes, could you explain briefly the process for appointing students to Panels (who does it, how are students identified, how is participation encouraged, etc)?

16. How are Panel members briefed on internal subject review? In each case, please indicate if this is done via guidelines, at a specific briefing and or training event and who provides briefing/training, etc.

a)  Internal Panel members

b)  External Panel members

c)  Student Panel members (if appropriate)

17. What support beyond briefing is available to student members of the Panel? (tick all that apply)

☐ Attend sparqs training on internal subject review

☐ Support provided by students' association officers

☐ Peer support from student members who've completed a review

☐ Academic member of faculty/school committee with L&T or quality/standards remit

☐ Support provided by unit organising the review

☐ No additional support is provided

☐ Other - please provide details

## Engagement with students from the subject to be reviewed

18. How are students from the subject to be reviewed briefed or informed about the review? (tick all that apply)

☐ At a briefing meeting for student reps from the subject to be reviewed

☐ At a briefing meeting for all students from the subject to be reviewed

☐ At staff-student liaison committee meetings

☐ By a briefing/information sheet

☐ Other - please provide details

☐ If a briefing meeting is held, who conducts the briefing?

☐ Unit organizing the review

☐ Students' association

☐ Staff from subject to be reviewed

☐ Other - please provide details

19. How do students from the subject under review engage with the review process? (tick all that apply)

- [ ] They contribute to the development of the self evaluation document
- [ ] They can provide a student submission
- [ ] Students meet with Panel
- [ ] They are invited to comment on elements of the material submitted by the subject under review
- [ ] Other - please provide details

20. How are student meetings conducted? (tick all that apply)

- [ ] Single meeting of all students studying the subject under review
- [ ] Separate meetings are held for UG, PGT and PGR students
- [ ] Separate meetings are held and students are then allocated to smaller groups led by a Panel member
- [ ] Other - please provide details

**Reporting Process and Follow Up**

21. Does the Panel make a judgement at the end of the review?

- [ ] No
- [ ] Yes - If yes,
  - [ ] As ELIR (broad confidence, limited confidence, no confidence)
  - [ ] As QAA subject review (overall confidence, limited confidence, no confidence)
  - [ ] Continued operation of the programme(s)
  - [ ] Validation/approval of programme(s)
  - [ ] Other - please provide details

22. Does the Panel make recommendations or identify action points where it believes that improvements should be made?

- [ ] No
- [ ] Yes - If yes, are these prioritised in some way? Please provide details

23. Is good practice identified within the Review report?

☐ No

☐ Yes - If yes, how is this identified?

☐ Subject under review submits showcases and Panel to confirm if considered good practice

☐ Subject under review provides examples of good practice in self-evaluation document and Panel to confirm if considered good practice

☐ Panel to identify

☐ Other - please provide details

24. Which body or bodies receive the Review report?

☐ University Quality Committee

☐ University Quality Committee → Senate or Academic Board

☐ College/Faculty Quality Committee

☐ College/Faculty Quality Committee → Faculty

☐ College/Faculty → Senate or Academic Board

☐ College/Faculty Quality Committee → Senate or Academic Board

☐ Other

25. How is action/progress monitored and what is timescale for reporting on progress?

Which body/individual monitors (for example, by body identified in 24 above, by College/Faculty committee, etc)?

How (progress report on recommendations, updated action plan, etc)?

What is timescale for initial report on progress/action?

From when does the timescale apply (eg, date of review or date when report submitted to university committee)?

26. Is the report of the review published (ie on website)?

  ☐ No

  ☐ Yes - If yes,

    ☐ Available internally to staff only

    ☐ Available internally to staff and students

    ☐ Publicly available

    ☐ Other - please provide details


27. Does the report allow for any reserved areas with restricted access (for example, a confidential annex)?

  ☐ Yes    ☐ No


28. Are the responses to recommendations or action plans published?

  ☐ No

  ☐ Yes - If yes,

    ☐ Internally only

    ☐ Available to the public

    ☐ Other - please provide details


29. Does your institution produce overview reports to help identify issues of strategic importance or issues that need to be addressed at a higher level (for example, by Faculty/College or by institution)?

  ☐ No

  ☐ Yes - If yes, are these produced

    ☐ Annually

    ☐ Periodically

    ☐ Other - please provide details

30. Is good practice disseminated more widely within the institution?

☐ No

☐ Yes - If yes, how is good practice disseminated? (tick all that apply)

    ☐ Via specific webpage

    ☐ Through academic development unit (by its staff, through its website, etc)

    ☐ Articles staff newsletter

    ☐ Other - please provide details

31. How has your institution made the links between QA and QE more explicit within your review process (for example using common headings in reports for annual monitoring and periodic reviews, encouraging the promotion of QE resulting from QA processes, etc)?

32. How do you endeavour to bring about alignment between strategic planning and internal subject review (eg, specific section in SED, recommendations/actions feed into local plans, outcomes of overview reports feed into institutional strategic planning, standard agendas for review events, etc)?

**Further guidance and comments**

33. On which 3 aspects of internal subject review would you find further guidance and the sharing of good practice helpful? Some examples are provided below but please add others. Please prioritise those of interest to you.

☐ Supporting staff from subject to be reviewed in preparing for review

☐ The review of postgraduate research provision

☐ The review of joint programmes

☐ Briefing and training of Panel members

☐ Inclusion of students on the Review Panel

☐ Engagement with students from the subject under review

☐ Mechanisms for reporting and follow-up

☐ The identification and dissemination of good practice arising from the subject under review

☐ Alignment between strategic planning (institutional or local) and internal subject review

☐ Making links between Quality Assurance and Quality Enhancement

Please identify other areas if not covered above:

34. Any further comments?

Thank you for completing the Survey. On the basis of responses, some follow-up interviews with staff and or students may take place with a sample of institutions, and I hope you will be willing to participate.

## Appendix 3: List of participating institutions

The following institutions participated in the survey on approaches to internal subject review. The project consultant is very grateful for the cooperation of all institutions involved.

University of Aberdeen

University of Abertay Dundee

University of Dundee

University of Edinburgh

Edinburgh College of Art

University of Glasgow

Glasgow Caledonian University

The Glasgow School of Art

Heriot-Watt University

UHI Millennium Institute

Napier University (now Edinburgh Napier University)

Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh

The Robert Gordon University

The Scottish Agricultural College

University of Stirling

University of the West of Scotland

# Appendix 4: Case studies

## University of the West of Scotland

Each School learning and teaching committee prepares an annual Quality of Student Experience Report (QSER) for each subject within a School. The headings of QSER mirror the six themes used in subject health review, the internal subject review process. Each School then holds an enhancement and annual monitoring event to review:

- the QSER reports

- external examiners' reports

- progression and award statistics

- good practice for dissemination across the University

- the Associate Dean's report on actions and enhancements for the forthcoming session.

The School annual monitoring process also incorporates reflection on issues identified in Subject Health Review, thereby embedding it in normal academic review processes.

Students are invited to attend School enhancement and annual monitoring events to provide feedback and present their views on the previous session teaching, learning and their overall experience.

Key outputs from the School Enhancement and Annual Monitoring Event include:

- the identification of actions and priorities for future enhancement (SMART targets for current session) - progress against relevant objectives in School Strategic Plan

- the production of an action plan in the form of SMART targets

- the identification of key themes for a University-wide Enhancement and Annual Monitoring Event.

The University-wide Enhancement and Annual Monitoring Event focuses attention on key issues for the University arising from the SMART targets identified at the School Enhancement and Annual Monitoring Events, together with other inter-related issues being driven through the University Strategic Plan and School plans.

The resulting report of the University-wide Enhancement and Annual Monitoring Event, which focuses on School SMART targets across the institution and School progress in implementing the University's Strategy for the Enhancement of Quality of Learning and Teaching, is then:

- considered by a sub-committee of the University-level Learning & Teaching Board at an annual Enhancement and Annual Monitoring Seminar

- used for an action plan to inform the School Strategic Planning Cycle.

From 2008-09, School-level reports will be finalised after the School and University wide event (SMART targets do not change) and the headings used for these reports align with the four headings of the Strategy for Enhancement of Learning and Teaching.

## Edinburgh College of Art

The College introduced Academic Planning meetings from the start of session 2006-07, which are held one afternoon each week. These are used as a forum for discussing and developing issues highlighted via internal processes (for example, strategic initiatives, internal subject review, annual monitoring or external examiner reports) and external processes (for example, ELIR, liaison with validating institutions, PSRB requirements).

The meetings are attended by Heads of Schools and key staff (Academic Registrar, quality staff, staff development) who are required to keep this time free to ensure maximum attendance. The meetings are managed informally, last around two hours and are used as an implicit form of academic development. The agenda normally focuses on one or two issues at a time and a running summary of what was discussed is produced. Major topics or developments will be discussed over several meetings and are generally linked directly to the College's strategic plan.

The meetings are well attended on the whole and positively received. Staff generally find the meetings more productive than formal committees.