



Institutional approaches to self-evaluation (IASE): Project report

Contents

Introduction.....	1
1 Background to the IASE project.....	1
2 Previous projects and reports on institution-led evaluation.....	1
3 Guidance to higher education institutions on quality	1
4 The IASE project	2
5 Project Aims	2
6 Project Scope	3
Methodology.....	4
7 Literature survey methods	4
8 Consultation methods.....	4
9 Summarising approaches to institution-led evaluation practice and identification of factors facilitating effectiveness	6
10 Dissemination of the project's findings	6
Project Findings - Literature Survey.....	7
11 Introduction.....	7
12 Evaluation of the QEF and its elements.....	7
13 ELIR reports from the second cycle.....	8
14 The wider educational literature.....	10
15 Work in other sectors.....	11
Project Findings - Consultations	12
16 Conduct of the consultations.....	12
17 Results of the consultation.....	12
18 Changes since the last ELIR.....	12
19 Major transformational projects.....	13
20 The effectiveness of monitoring and review	13
21 Developing annual monitoring	14
22 A little more conversation?.....	15
23 Other changes in annual monitoring	16
24 Institution-led quality review.....	17
25 Staff engagement in institution-led quality review	19

26	Challenges to staff engagement	20
27	Developing the skills of self-evaluation	20
28	Evidence-based review.....	21
29	Academic leadership	21
30	Student engagement	21
31	Members of institution-led review panels	23
32	International reviewers.....	23
33	Follow-up to review.....	23
34	Do monitoring and review lead to enhancement?	24
35	Good practice in Reflective Analysis.....	24
36	Preparation for ELIR.....	25
37	Linkages between annual monitoring, institution-led quality review and ELIR preparation	26
Conclusions		27
38	Stability and change	27
39	Rigour and vigour	27
40	Engaging staff.....	27
41	Effective approaches	28
42	Enhancement is messy.....	29
43	The future	29
References		31
Acknowledgements		34
APPENDIX 1 Survey Questionnaire		35
APPENDIX 2 Scottish Higher Education Institutions represented among the interviewees and/or among the completed responses to the survey questionnaire ...		39
APPENDIX 3 Summary of points made in monitoring and evaluation forms completed by ELIR reviewers and institutional contacts in the second round of ELIR (2009 - 2012)		40

Introduction

Higher education institutions in Scotland evaluate their learning and teaching in a variety of formal and informal ways. These self-evaluation processes have been essential components in the development of the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF) in Scotland since its inception in 2003 and were the subject of a sector-wide project, 'Institutional approaches to self-evaluation' (IASE), commissioned by QAA Scotland to run during the academic year, 2012-13.

This is the report of that project: it describes the background to the IASE project and its aims, scope and methodology; it summarises the project's results and discusses their significance, and suggests areas for further investigation. The consultant leading the IASE project, and author of this report was Professor Paddy Maher.

1 Background to the IASE project

Institutional self-evaluation underpins two elements of the QEF: institution-led quality reviews and Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR), for which each higher education institution prepares a Reflective Analysis (RA). There are variations in the approaches and terminology adopted by individual institutions but the cycles of activities are fairly consistent across the sector: annual monitoring of teaching provision, periodic quality reviews every five or six years of subject areas and, increasingly, student-support areas, and preparation for ELIR which every Scottish higher education institution undergoes on a four-year cycle.

These institution-led processes remain the primary means by which the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) expects institutions to assure and enhance the quality of their provision (SFC, 2012a) and are also a significant focus of attention in the third cycle of ELIR, which started in 2013, on the grounds set out by QAA Scotland that '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' (QAA, 2012).

2 Previous projects and reports on institution-led evaluation

After the first ELIR cycle, two projects were commissioned by the Universities Scotland Teaching Quality Forum to report on good practice in respectively internal subject review (QAA 2009a) and the preparation of RAs for ELIR (QAA 2009b). The former identified the range of approaches used by higher education institutions in their subject reviews and reported considerable consistency across the sector. The other project collected and analysed the views of reviewers and institutional representatives on what constitutes a 'good' RA and how best to produce it. In the same period a *Learning from ELIR 2003-07* report (QAA, 2009c) reviewed evolving approaches to institution-led quality review at the subject level and described it as a 'pivotal link between the subject area and institutional strategic planning processes'; it saw ELIR outcomes as confirming 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'.

3 Guidance to higher education institutions on quality

The SFC provides guidance to institutions on quality, much of which concerns arrangements for periodic institution-led quality reviews. The 2012 version (SFC, 2012a) while asserting that 'considerable flexibility' is afforded to institutions, specifies key characteristics of institution-led review including the scope and length of the review cycle, the use of the

UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code), the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF), subject benchmark statements, student engagement in quality processes, externality, and links between annual monitoring and institution-led quality review. In terms of assurance and enhancement, the SFC also expects institution-led review processes to:

- promote dialogue on areas in which quality might be improved
- identify good practice for dissemination within the institution and beyond
- encourage and support critical reflection on practice.

All three of these areas are pertinent to the IASE project.

The *Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) Handbook, Third edition* (QAA, 2012), produced by QAA Scotland, includes information and advice on producing a Reflective Analysis, the key document for ELIR.

4 The IASE project

The general structure and ethos of the QEF has remained unchanged since 2003 although specific details of its implementation have evolved in the light of experience and changed expectations. This period of relative stability has allowed institutions to design, develop and modify their own systems of self-evaluation increasingly to embrace the enhancement-led approach to quality. After a 10-year period of such development, the IASE project has been commissioned by QAA Scotland to look more deeply at the current state of institutions' approaches to self-evaluation and to encourage cross-institutional reflection on practice.

An early and important amendment to the direction of the project was a change from its original working title of 'Good practice in self-evaluation' to 'Institutional approaches to self-evaluation'. This reflected the view that rather than trying to suggest a particular model of practice and the way that institutions **should** undertake self-evaluation, the project would try to encompass the range of practices that institutions are using and, with their active involvement, to draw out elements that seem to be effective in assuring standards and enhancing the learning experience. The project was therefore designed to stimulate discussion and further activity and not to give definitive advice or propose 'best practice'. In other words the **process** of the project was to become one of its main but less definable outputs.

5 Project Aims

The project's primary aims were defined as being to:

- consider and codify the various mechanisms that institutions use to evaluate their learning and teaching practices
- identify the features of those evaluative practices that make them effective
- encourage institutions to reflect on and share experience of their approaches to self-evaluation, and support the dissemination of illustrative examples.

A supplementary aim was to update the 2009 report, *Good practice in Reflective Analysis when preparing for Enhancement-led institutional review* (QAA, 2009).

The IASE project was intended to update and extend aspects of previous projects by looking at institution-led evaluation across the board in both external and internal review, draw out examples of effective practice and help institutions to reflect on and perhaps develop their approaches to review. It was to take note of the latest version of the SFC's guidance on

quality and of developments in the review methodology in the third cycle of ELIR. The project did not aim to replicate the detailed analysis of the focus, scope and purpose of institution-led quality review in Scottish higher education institutions, which was summarised in the 2009 report, *Good practice in internal subject review*, and to which the reader is referred for further details.

6 Project Scope

With the resources and time available the project could not consider all of the many processes - informal and formal - by which teaching and learning are evaluated in higher education institutions including the evaluative aspects of the design and approval processes for new programmes of study which are important determinants in promoting effective learning and teaching.

The scope of the project was therefore limited to four areas of formal, institution-led, evaluation of existing learning and teaching provision in Scottish higher education institutions:

1. annual monitoring
2. institution-led quality review
3. occasional internal review of institution-level processes
4. production of a Reflective Analysis in preparation for four-yearly ELIR.

Methodology

The project used the following methods:

- literature survey
- consultation with groups and individuals across the higher education sector in Scotland
- identification of features of institution-led evaluation practice that appear to be distinctive or innovative and factors that appear to facilitate effectiveness
- dissemination of the project's findings.

7 Literature survey methods

These included surveying the very extensive literature of evaluation and quality systems in higher education ranging from documents specific to the QEF - such as RAs, ELIR reports, institutional quality manuals, and commissioned evaluations - to the wider educational literature. The most detailed documentation is produced by the institutions themselves and is summarised for review in their RAs. Permission to access RAs from the second cycle of ELIR (2009-12) was kindly provided by the institutions. The RAs and the associated ELIR reports formed the main information base for the consultation phase of the project.

As well as giving specific background information for the consultation phase, analysis of the collection of reports of the second cycle of ELIR provided an overview of the effectiveness of institutions' approaches to self-evaluation. Eight reports were read in full in preparation for interviews at institutions while for all reports three sections were collated and analysed.

The sections were:

- effectiveness of the institution's approach to self-evaluation, including the use made of external reference points
- effectiveness of the institution's arrangements for institution-led monitoring and review of quality, and academic standards of awards
- effectiveness of the institution's implementation of its strategic approach to quality enhancement.

SFC-commissioned evaluations of the QEF which were consulted include a series by the Centre for the Study of Education and Training of Lancaster University up to 2010 (of which the most recent (SFC 2010) covers aspects of internal review and ELIR) and a review of enhancement in the university sector from 2003 to 2012 by QAA Scotland (SFC, 2012b). QAA Scotland provided access to monitoring and evaluation feedback forms from ELIR team members and institutional representatives involved in the second round of ELIR.

8 Consultation methods

There has been extensive consultation throughout the project with groups and agencies including: the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC); Universities Scotland Teaching Quality Forum (TQF); Student Participation in Quality Scotland (sparqs); QAA Scotland and representatives of Scottish higher education institutions and ELIR reviewers.

Higher education staff and students, chosen for their experience of monitoring, review and ELIR, were the main sources of the project's evidence base. They included senior managers and administrators with institutional quality responsibilities; academic staff who lead

faculties, departments or programmes¹, quality managers, staff and student members of internal review panels and ELIR teams, and educational developers. The consultation included presentations, group work, semi-structured interviews and a survey questionnaire. Presentations to SHEEC and TQF were followed by consultations, which yielded useful guidance on the conduct of the project. Group work at an ELIR reviewers' continuing professional development event, which included a number of student reviewers, informed the updating of *Good practice in Reflective Analysis for ELIR*.

There were semi-structured interviews with members of eight Scottish higher education institutions, a sample chosen to be roughly representative of the sector in terms of different size and type of institution and encompassing different types of review processes. Preparation for each institutional interview included reading the institution's RA, ELIR report and publicly available information on its website such as its quality procedures. Each institutional interview usually included one to three senior managers with some degree of responsibility for quality management in their institution; however, one institution arranged a focus group meeting with eleven members of staff occupying a range of roles. Six of the institutional interviews were face-to-face at the institutions, two were by telephone.

The interviews and survey questionnaire were based on a series of questions about:

- changes in internal processes and structures since the last ELIR
- the perceived effectiveness and development needs of monitoring and review processes
- the links between monitoring and review
- preparation for ELIR
- staff and student engagement in quality processes
- selection and preparation of review team members
- follow-up to monitoring and review
- the relationship between quality processes and enhancement
- expectations and suggestions for outcomes of the IASE project.

Not all of these areas were necessarily covered in every interview. Depending on what information was already available, or how the interview developed, other questions were added where there were particular areas of interest, for example large curriculum change projects or apparently innovative approaches to monitoring or review. In general, the interview did not include questions about specific details of the monitoring and review procedures such as documentation, unit of review, committee structures, composition of review panels and so on unless they were required to clarify answers; most necessary details had been gleaned before the interview from ELIR reports and institutional documentation. In addition, these areas had been covered in previous reports and evaluations (for example, QAA 2009a, 2009c), which had shown that Scottish higher education institutions were, in general, conforming to SFC and QAA guidance on quality, whereas the focus of this project is the effectiveness of overall processes.

Officers of sparqs were also interviewed and gave helpful information and advice about student engagement in quality processes.

The survey questions were similar to those used in the interviews and were developed in the light of experience. A near final draft of the questionnaire was shown to a TQF meeting, amended as a result of feedback from members and set up in SurveyMonkey by QAA Scotland who advised on survey design and administered the collection of responses.

¹ The terms that are used to describe academic units, units of study, quality processes and staff categories vary across the sector so the generic terms used here may need to be translated for local usage.

TQF members were sent the survey link and asked to complete the survey themselves and/or distribute it to a sample of staff and student representatives with knowledge and experience of institution-led evaluation processes for either individual or group responses. A copy of the survey is included as Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 lists those institutions at which representatives were interviewed and those providing survey responses.

9 Summarising approaches to institution-led evaluation practice and identification of factors facilitating effectiveness

The survey answers were collated, analysed and summarised and the interviews were written up. Examples of approaches that appeared to be distinctive and/or innovative were derived from the survey and interview records. A set of factors that are likely to facilitate effectiveness were derived from the same sources and from the literature survey.

10 Dissemination of the project's findings

As findings emerged during the course of the project, they were presented to meetings of SHEEC (twice), TQF and ELIR reviewers, and at two conferences: the International Enhancement Themes Conference² (Glasgow, 12 June 2013) and the sixth annual conference of the Higher Education Institutional Research (HEIR) Network (Birmingham, 12 July 2013).

A dissemination event held in Glasgow on 19 September 2013 included case study examples of current practice in annual monitoring, institution-led quality review and institutional-level review from five Scottish higher education institutions.

² A full paper submitted for this conference is currently available on the conference website: see Maher (2013).

Project Findings - Literature Survey

11 Introduction

Most of the documents about institutional self-evaluation read in the course of this project were specific to individual institutions and derived from the ELIR process, in particular the Reflective Analysis documents and ELIR reports. All of the latter and some of the former are publicly available online, the willingness of some institutions to publish their RAs reflecting the increasing openness associated with the QEF. Similarly, many higher education institutions now have part or all of their online equivalents of quality manuals publicly available. All of these sources were drawn on in preparing for the eight institutional interviews and in some cases to follow-up responses to the survey about particular aspects of monitoring and review. Institutions' generally very clear online descriptions of institutional structures, and quality procedures and processes proved particularly helpful when trying to understand differences in definitions and terminology between institutions.

12 Evaluation of the QEF and its elements

The final evaluation in the Lancaster Centre for the Study of Education and Training series (SFC, 2010) touched on aspects of internal subject review and preparation for ELIR. The data used in the evaluation were collected from three key sources: interviews and focus groups conducted during visits to Scottish higher education institutions, a survey of Students' Association officers and staff with a quality remit and a survey of university staff who had responsibilities in the area of quality of learning and teaching. The evaluation report touched on a number of areas of direct relevance to the IASE project; for example:

Internal subject reviews were seen by most participants as a system that did work and as useful for both validation and practical reasons. It was noted by many participants that these reviews provided a useful focus for reflection on pedagogic practices and relevance of subject matter covered by programmes. Staff participants noted that student reviewers were particularly useful in these reviews.

And one student respondent commented:

Probably my participation in an internal review process was the most eye-opening for me...

The evaluation discussed what it called 'the difficult balance between quality assurance activity and quality enhancement activity' and noted the importance of the 'degree of ownership' felt by participants in quality systems in encouraging enhancement behaviour. The report concluded that, in general, internal quality systems appeared to be more devolved in ancient universities and least in post-1992s and that more centralised quality systems can stifle enhancement.

In discussing ELIR, the report found that:

Preparation for ELIR visits and the compilation of the reflective analysis was seen as very useful. This was sometimes used as a unifying focus activity across an institution that could increase staff 'buy in' and ownership. There is evidence that in the view of some stakeholders, some ELIR panels were too audit-focused in their approach. In these cases, the experience of the visit as more inspectorial or audit-focused was considered by some to be moving away from the culture of 'constructive and collegial assessment' that had been expected ... by contrast the

panels' findings tended to be viewed as fair and useful to the institutions. This dislocation in expectations may be worth addressing.

Other perspectives on preparation for ELIR and the ELIR process in general are provided by the views of both ELIR reviewers and institutional representatives as expressed in the monitoring and evaluation forms that they are invited to complete after the event. The comments of those that responded - sometimes vigorously expressed - are summarised without attribution in Appendix 3.

More recently QAA Scotland has carried out an evaluation for the SFC of enhancement in the Scottish University sector from 2003 to 2012 (SFC, 2012b). This comprehensive, two-cycle review reached conclusions about the evolution of institutions' approaches to self-evaluation that are highly relevant to this project. In particular, the review found that institutions' self-evaluative practices had developed over the period, becoming more analytical and robust over the two ELIR cycles with a positive shift from assurance to enhancement and more coherence between monitoring and review.

The range of external reference points available to institutions in designing and reviewing their provision had increased considerably since 2003. Expectation levels had risen as exemplified by the increasingly challenging requirements of successive rounds of SFC guidance, the development of QAA's academic infrastructure with the new Quality Code and institutions' greater engagement with the Enhancement Themes generating what the review describes as 'a dynamic suite of reference points and practices'. Most institutions had arrangements to review periodically their own self-evaluative processes to ensure that they were meeting both their own and developing external requirements.

13 ELIR reports from the second cycle

While considering reports across the complete second cycle of ELIR, it must be remembered that these cover reviews were undertaken between 2009 and 2012 and that many subsequent changes may have occurred in institutions, particularly those reviewed earlier in the cycle.

Collectively, the reports give a strong impression of a sector which has in place rigorous approaches to self-evaluation as exemplified by terms such as 'robust', 'secure', 'systematic' and 'appropriate and consistently applied' used to describe monitoring and review processes. Assurance was generally deeply embedded in institutions' quality culture and there was an improving balance between assurance and enhancement although in some cases approaches to the latter were still developing. A few reports noted variation within and between academic units in the depth of reflection and analysis in self-evaluation processes.

The reports show the wide range of external reference points that institutions have used in their approaches to self-evaluation. Most institutions still saw the views of external examiners as their most important reference point but all institutions engaged with the elements of the Academic Infrastructure: subject benchmark statements, the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF), and the Quality Code and are meeting other requirements of the SFC's guidance on quality. Individual reports refer to a wider range of external reference points, for example the array of external student surveys and in particular the now widely used National Student Survey (NSS), as well as the Higher Education Academy's (HEA) Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) and the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES), the International Student Barometer (ISB) and leavers' destination data.

Other forms of interaction with the HEA, principally engagement with subject centres as a source of discipline-level, external reference points, are featured in a number of reports. There are examples of institutions benchmarking their activities against other groups of institutions in Scotland, the UK or internationally, and bringing external expertise to bear at the subject level through the establishment of advisory or subject development groups. The requirements of Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs) were also external reference points that were particularly important for those institutions with a high proportion of PSRB-accredited programmes.

The ELIR 2 reports collectively demonstrate the increasing involvement of institutions with the Enhancement Themes, a much more consistent picture than in the first round of ELIR. All institutions are engaged, not least through their shared membership of SHEEC, which plans and directs the work of the Enhancement Themes, though clearly there are variations between institutions in the extent of their involvement with individual Themes. One of the effects of the Themes has been to develop expectations, often influenced by international practice, that provide an increasing range of reference points for institutions to take into account in their approaches to self-evaluation.

ELIR reports comment on the effectiveness of institutions' management of data, in particular the ways in which data are used to inform monitoring and review. The quality and accessibility of data available to subject teams in preparing for monitoring and review were generally seen as positive with several reports noting good practice, for example the introduction in one institution of a Business Information System (BIS) which supplies real-time data in a range of areas including student applications and enrolment, student achievement, student feedback and evaluations, and first destination data. Although some reports identified the need to develop specific aspects of data management, this was against a background of general improvement.

An important feature noted in several reports was the value of central, variously named, academic development units in supporting institution-led evaluation and helping to drive enhancement. Their role was most often noted in terms of effective dissemination of identified good practice but also in areas such as supporting academic teams in preparing for review.

Another factor in facilitating effective evaluation was the role of academic and administrative staff with specific remits for aspects of assurance and/or enhancement based in academic units but also belonging to institution-wide networks, again variously named and ranging from Vice-Deans (Academic), Heads of Learning and Teaching to Faculty Quality Officers.

A number of reports referred to recent changes in institutions' structures and procedures and their potential to increase effectiveness of institution-led evaluation and noted a general culture of regular review of associated processes and procedures, sometimes formalised in major, internal institutional reviews.

Reports also point to a number of specific examples of innovative approaches to self-evaluation that deserve wider circulation: for example, the project management approach of one programme team to institution-led quality review, which was seen as a productive opportunity for reflection and renewal and was subsequently adopted by other schools in the institution; and the regular holistic review of all aspects of quality management undertaken in another institution.

14 The wider educational literature

Publications on quality assurance and evaluation in higher education have proliferated in recent years but relatively little attention has been given to the effects and effectiveness of institutions' internal self-evaluation processes. In reviewing fifteen years of the journal, *Quality in Higher Education*, Harvey and Williams (2010) attributed the small number of papers on internal quality assurance to the dominance in the quality debate of the activities of external agencies. Others, such as Newton (2007) have drawn attention to a general lack of research into quality processes in the higher education sector.

Given the time devoted to institution-led evaluation, its supposedly pivotal role in enhancement and the extent to which it impinges on academic life, it is hard to explain why it is not more fully researched. This may reflect the attitudes of academic staff to quality processes that many originally saw as imposed by external agencies and supported by an increasingly managerial approach within institutions. The QEF is enhancement-led with a consultative and participatory ethos and has been exempted from the charge of increasing misalignment of quality culture and academic culture applied to other quality systems (Harvey 2010) but a dislike and distrust of previous quality regimes has left its legacy. According to Laughton (2003) academics need to be convinced of the values and methodologies of quality review to ensure their active engagement and increase the chances of enhancement ensuing. Newton (2002a) quoted an interviewee, who referred to the 'so what?' question:

what differences, if any, are these systems, which are claiming time and energy from staff, making to our performance in terms of the quality of the courses that we're ... designing and getting validated or in terms of the quality of provision to students?

More recently, from an institution within the QEF, Harrison and Bruce (2011) have described the strengthening of trust among teaching staff and other stakeholders through institution-led review. Bamber (2011a), also from a Scottish higher education institution, has pointed out the importance in building trust among staff of recognising diversity of social practices within institutions:

... quality and evaluative approaches which ignore the social practices of those involved risk alienating staff and introducing unsustainable initiatives. On the other hand, evaluative practices which work with social realities can offer powerful support for change, and can lead to change which exceeds what was originally planned.

Maintaining an appropriate balance between what one ELIR report described as 'cross-institutional consistency and flexibility' is a constant feature of quality management particularly in those institutions which favour a devolved approach.

Bamber's paper is part of a collection of articles *Reconceptualising Evaluation in Higher Education: The Practice Turn* (Saunders et al, 2011) which contributes to our understanding of evaluative practice in higher education. It 'conceptualises, theorises and gives empirical examples of evaluative practices across the HE sector' within four domains of practice: national/systemic, programmatic, institutional and self (Saunders, 2011). Clearly the IASE project is mainly concerned with the institutional domain, but a number of examples encountered in the project have elements of the self-evaluation domain in which Saunders explains that 'practitioners, either individually or in groups, undertake evaluations to inform their own practice'. Saunders et al present a number of frameworks and tools that could be useful to institutions and groups within them in designing their evaluative processes: for

example the RUFDATA framework (Saunders, 2011), an acronym for a set of decisions in evaluation planning (Reasons and purposes; Uses; Focus; Data and Evidence; Audience; Timing; Agency) and the Discretion Framework (Bamber, 2011b), 'a model which refers to the relative control an institution may have on the way it undertakes its internal evaluative practice'.

Åkesson (2012), Vice-Chancellor of Uppsala University, adds another perspective to the 'trust' issue:

Staff and students are our university's biggest asset, and a deep trust in their willingness to be professional and committed should be the corner stone of the quality system.

But she goes further to argue for an approach to quality based on scholarship and research:

Monitoring of the quality is needed, but it should be framed as a scholarly approach to professional learning and development, not as a control system ... Internal evaluations should again, be framed as institutional research, i.e. efforts to understand our university and learn to develop it. Internal evaluations have to be carefully designed and not too many.

Her calls to put academic values at the centre of the quality system and produce no more results from internal evaluations than can be acted upon resonate with responses from the consultations.

15 Work in other sectors

Reports on effective practice in self-evaluation in the college and school sectors have also been published (Education Scotland, 2007 and 2011; Ofsted 2006). In general, they advocate the importance for effective self-evaluation of:

- structured reflection on practice
- ensuring staff buy-in by demonstrating the value of the process
- team working within subject areas
- committed and sustained management support
- good action planning and follow-up
- linkage with institutional planning processes.

All of these elements are also important in the higher education sector.

Project Findings - Consultations

16 Conduct of the consultations

The survey questionnaire was completed by 34 people from 13 different institutions while 26 people from eight institutions and sparqs took part in interviews (15) or a focus group (11) based on the same interview agenda. The institutional interviews were primarily with senior staff who had responsibility for quality management. Those responding to the survey were from a wider range of institutional academic and administrative roles and all had experience of review activities. Their numbers at each institution varied depending on how the members of TQF who took responsibility for distributing the survey decided to do so. It had been suggested that a group activity based on the questionnaire could be a way for an institution to reflect on its current approaches as well as feeding into the project. It is not known how many higher education institutions adopted that approach but some responses were written by one person following an internal meeting at which the survey had been discussed.

The variation in the number and nature of responses between institutions could be seen as presenting a methodological problem. However, using TQF members to identify potential respondents in their institutions was the most practicable way available to reach a wider constituency than those with a specific quality remit while at the same time spreading awareness of the project, and because the survey primarily required free text comments it was possible to weight the responses accordingly.

One challenging feature was the underrepresentation of students among those completing the survey. Although some TQF members had, as requested, sent the survey to students with review experience and a number of those had answered the initial questions about them and their roles, very few went on to answer the substantive questions. This also applied to some members of academic staff. There may be several reasons for the level of non-completion, but the main factors were probably lack of time - full completion was time-consuming - and unfamiliarity with the details of quality processes, given that the people in the non-completing group tended to include those who are not regularly or deeply involved in formal quality processes and for whom, in retrospect, face-to-face meetings might have been more effective than a survey (Wentland, 2011).

Therefore, other ways were sought to get the views of student members of internal review teams to supplement those previously obtained from students with ELIR experience. With the help of sparqs and QAA Scotland, short interviews were arranged with four students from Scottish higher education institutions attending the International Enhancement Themes Conference (Glasgow, 12 June 2013).

17 Results of the consultation

The responses obtained from the interviews, focus group, survey questions and ELIR reviewers' workshop were collated and are summarised below. Those providing any type of response are referred to throughout as 'respondents'.

18 Changes since the last ELIR

Respondents were asked about any major changes in their institution's annual monitoring and institution-led quality review processes since their last ELIR, partly to assess the rate of change but also to update the information available from ELIR reports, particularly those from early in the second cycle.

The responses gave a strong impression of a dynamic sector involved in what one respondent described as a 'continual improvement process'. Most institutions had recently reviewed and developed one or more of their quality processes and/or structures, or were in the middle of doing so, or had plans to do so soon. Moreover, some respondents reported plans to review the effects of any such changes at some point, usually one year, after they had been made. Some respondents noted that their institution had made changes **prior** to a recent ELIR as a result of ongoing evaluation. Among categories of changes noted were:

- strengthening the relationship between monitoring and review
- changing the nature and status of annual monitoring
- moving to reduce paperwork and streamline institution-led quality review, increase its enhancement focus and make more effective use of external members of review panels.

19 Major transformational projects

That institutions now have in place or can arrange to put in place the ability to evaluate their own practices and carry out far-reaching reviews is exemplified by those institutions which have undertaken major transformational projects affecting their curricula and/or academic structures. Of the eight institutions interviewed, three had recently undertaken major projects of curriculum reform entailing lengthy and detailed processes of reflection and evaluation, and one had completed such a process shortly before its last ELIR. These were long-term, 'root and branch' projects, which variously required lengthy periods of consultation, much evidence-gathering, extensive external input and persuasive skills. Not all were uniformly welcomed internally at first, but all are now generally seen to be beneficial: one was described by a respondent as 'getting a hugely positive response'. In each case they appear to have had an energising effect, identified by another respondent as making further enhancement more likely to be achieved and have been evaluated both internally and by their use as case studies in ELIR.

20 The effectiveness of monitoring and review

Respondents were asked about their monitoring and review processes and for their opinions on which features of those processes had been particularly positive and effective in improving students' learning experiences and securing academic standards, and which might need further development.

In the responses, the 'positive and effective' features included:

- further embedding of the enhancement-led approach and ethos particularly in relation to institution-led quality review
- more effective approaches to student engagement (but accompanied by a desire to do more and learn from the experience of others)
- changes in annual monitoring processes to make them less paper driven and able to provide better and more immediate feedback
- the development of more useful and reliable data sets to support monitoring and review.

Some of the above areas appeared in other respondents' lists of features that were seen as needing further development, as follows:

- changing the quality culture from compliance to active engagement and enhancement

- developing a more reflective and analytical approach both internally and with collaborative partners including in self-evaluation documents and action-planning
- making institution-led quality review less 'paper heavy' and burdensome
- further improvements in the management of data to support monitoring and review
- making better use of external members of review panels
- developing institution-led quality review to include student support services and postgraduate research
- getting the right balance between centralising and devolving quality processes
- various aspects of student engagement including improving ways of getting feedback from students and closing feedback loops, and making better use of social media
- finding better ways to share and embed good practice across subject areas.

In a later part of the survey questionnaire, after respondents had considered all aspects of their self-evaluation processes, they were asked to consider which of their approaches other institutions might be able to learn from.

One person sensibly noted that the question assumed a familiarity with other institutions' approaches that he did not possess and this was probably true of several respondents, perhaps a reason for spreading greater awareness of how other institutions organise self-evaluation and sharing experience across the sector.

Whether because of this lack of knowledge about others' practices, or an assumption of more advanced behaviour elsewhere, surprisingly few specific examples were advanced. Among those that were put forward were examples of the developed engagement of students at all levels in quality processes, new approaches that were increasing the effectiveness of annual monitoring, institution-led quality review and preparation for ELIR including ways of expanding the pool of people involved in them, and better networking within an academic unit. Those examples will be put into context in the following sections dealing with each of the monitoring and review processes.

21 Developing annual monitoring

The QAA Quality Code *Chapter B8: Programme monitoring and review*³ (QAA 2011) states that:

Institutions should consider the appropriate balance between routine monitoring and institution-led quality review of programmes so that there is a continuous cycle. Routine monitoring is an activity likely to be undertaken within the providing unit. Institution-led quality review is normally an institutional process, involving external participants of high calibre and with academic/professional credibility.

A number of institutions have developed or are developing their monitoring procedures, which, while still 'routine' in being regular annual activities, have assumed greater significance in the totality of quality procedures.

During the consultation, various respondents noted five aspects of traditional monitoring in need of change:

- it needed to be embedded within regular academic activities rather than being seen as a separate task
- it was too 'paper-heavy'

³ At the time of writing, a revised version of this Chapter is out for consultation.

- it was, as one respondent put it: 'heavily stats based - more like an audit'
- staff were disillusioned with the time taken from report to feedback
- concerns raised by staff in monitoring reports had not been acted upon.

22 A little more conversation?

An approach that responds to a number of these concerns and has been adopted in a number of institutions gives more emphasis to discussion and less on the passing of paper back and forth. According to a representative of an originator of this approach to monitoring, they were:

trying to get away from the idea of audit ... going from: 'you report to me, I report back to you' to a lot more conversation and dissemination. It works for us...

In such examples, a reflective annual monitoring report - variously formulated and named - forms the basis for a face-to-face discussion between representatives of the subject team and members of a monitoring group. In one institution, the process has been moved forward to June to be closer to examination panel discussions of programme-related matters, and the required report has been considerably shortened to encourage more focused reflection on only three areas:

- what's working well?
- what's new and innovative?
- what are potential problems?

Other institutions require a more extended self-evaluation document.

In institutions that have adopted the 'discussion' model the composition and approaches of the monitoring group may vary: some include student representatives and/or external members; in one the monitoring group identifies a few major themes for discussion and clarifies more minor issues by email, and so on. However, they all share the aims of making the process more reflective and productive, and not bogged down by operational matters although where concerns about the latter persist it may be possible to address them: for example if the subject team felt there had been a lack of action on points raised in previous reports. One respondent with an institutional quality remit noted that: 'in the past you could get "we reported this but nothing was done" but it was'. Face-to-face meetings allow such matters/misunderstandings to be discussed and resolved. Another respondent with a similar role in another institution welcomed the inclusion of student representatives in the monitoring group as increasing the effectiveness of the meetings and making the atmosphere more relaxed.

Links with institution-led quality review are also strengthened when the accumulated annual reports are used to provide most of the documentary evidence for review with a shorter reflective analysis being the only major new paperwork required. Another advantage of the discussion approach is that feedback to the subject team is both certain and relatively rapid. In one institution, an event to disseminate examples of interesting practice gleaned from annual monitoring closely follows submission of reports providing further evidence to academic staff that the reports were fully analysed by the monitoring group.

Challenges were identified when self-evaluation documents were required for annual monitoring: for example, variability between teams in their levels of reflection and analysis, and staff perceptions of additional annual workload. A descriptive rather than analytical approach, which can also apply, of course, to institution-led quality review documents, may sometimes be a defensive reaction instilled by previous experience of assurance regimes,

but can also be unfamiliarity with the techniques of reflection and evaluation, which can be developed (see below). Additional workload is a constant problem - a lack of time for quality processes when set against other priorities was quoted by nearly all respondents as the major factor inhibiting academic staff engagement in any quality processes. However, respondents who had been involved in these developed versions of annual monitoring reported that some members of subject teams, who may previously have been sceptical, were now attesting to the value of monitoring discussions. For example, a subject team leader commented that 'the annual Quality Monitoring Group dialogues are open and lead to good discussion around quality improvement and student engagement' and one subject team had asked if more time could be allocated to future monitoring meetings.

23 Other changes in annual monitoring

Other institutions are reassessing their approaches to annual monitoring. For example, in one, course monitoring is being recast at school level to provide greater local ownership and more explicit student input while programme monitoring is being added at institutional level to provide a firmer assurance base so that institution-led quality review can have a stronger enhancement focus. In another, an online instrument is being developed to allow more dynamic real-time reporting throughout the year and allow easier sharing of information about good practice.

Another trend is institutions' improvements in the quality and accessibility of the data sets on which subject teams at whatever level rely for their evidence base, previously an area noted for action in some ELIR reports. A number of respondents commented on positive developments, in particular in the way that data is being collated and examined. For example, one respondent noted that annual monitoring drew together data on student progression and retention and from various student surveys to allow a holistic review of all aspects of the student experience on which subject teams could be expected to have an impact. Of course, the availability of extensive data sets does not ensure that they are fully utilised: one respondent noted that while data were now more consistent and reliable, and better accepted by academic staff, more work was needed to get maximum value from them and that annual monitoring sometimes lacked in-depth analysis of data sets.

Respondents generally agreed on the importance to their monitoring evidence base of student feedback, both to internal prompts for course evaluation and increasingly to external surveys such as the National Student Survey (NSS). The NSS figured strongly not least because of the reputational issues of public comparison to other institutions. Several institutions now use online course surveys to elicit student feedback, allowing rapid dissemination and data collection and potentially faster analysis and feedback to students. Lower response rates than with paper surveys have sometimes resulted - a concern to some respondents - although it is claimed by some institutional representatives that the quality of free text responses is higher.

Against a generally improving picture of 'closing the loop' on feedback some ELIR reports noted students being unclear about the effects of their feedback. Several respondents stressed the value of their 'You Said, We Did' communications to students. A managed approach to student feedback is exemplified by one institution with a long history of promoting student engagement and includes extensive evaluation and follow-up action on external student surveys, in particular the NSS. There is a coordinated, common approach across the institution in which key themes are drawn out and analysed, and which then inform the management of performance indicators, while at school level the 'You Said, We Did' approach is prevalent and staff-student liaison committees take a more proactive approach to feedback. To meet the potential criticism of over-reliance on external (or internal) surveys, the validity of which have been questioned, this and other institutions

described a wide range of sources, both formal and informal, from which students' views were gathered and collated.

While developments in annual monitoring are being presented here in a positive light, another viewpoint - and warning - about the rise in importance of annual data analysis is provided by Gibbs (2012) writing in an English context:

Regardless of the validity of currently available data, institutional behaviour is being driven by data to an unprecedented extent. In most institutions there is now an annual cycle of analysis of performance indicators at both institutional and departmental level, followed by planning to improve them, again at both institutional and departmental level. Departments are much more aware of how their competitors at other institutions perform, in relation to the main indicators. In some cases this annual analysis of data has in effect taken over from institution-led quality review and QAA audit [*sic*] as the main driver of quality assurance and enhancement (and without this having been planned or agreed). Any future revision of national quality assurance mechanisms, and requirements on institutions, will need to take this reality into account.

From the limited evidence available to the IASE project, an over-riding focus on performance indicators for competitive reasons does not yet appear to be the main concern for Scottish higher education institutions in designing their annual monitoring procedures: rather there appears to be a significant shift away from an audit culture to a better balance of assurance and enhancement.

Another important caveat about the use of data was raised by a respondent, who pointed out a tendency to assume that information and evidence are the same thing whereas data needs to be evaluated, interpreted and interrogated to develop it into an effective evidence base for both monitoring and review.

24 Institution-led quality review

The generally positive view of periodic, institution-led quality reviews given by ELIR reports and evaluation of the QEF has already been mentioned as has their adherence to a fairly standard format adopting the characteristics set out in the SFC guidance on quality. What the IASE survey and interviews have shown is a number of ways in which institutions are trying to make the process more streamlined, effective and enhancement-led.

A number of respondents pointed to the importance of their institution-led quality review processes in providing an opportunity for reflection:

Although annual programme reporting offers some opportunity for reflection it is really ... Quality Review (that) provides a fixed time point for deep reflection on what we have been doing and why, and an analysis of any challenges and new initiatives. Being a member of the review team for other areas provides an opportunity for identifying areas of best practice and learning from others.

Academic Reviews are particularly effective at encouraging staff to be reflective about processes and also about their own teaching/support methods, when writing the review documentation but also when meeting with the Academic Review Teams.

The style of the Academic Reviews encourages students and staff to be open and honest, generating an informed dialogue with Review Teams, which not only leads

to identifying areas for improvement but can also lead to more creative thinking and identification/consideration of enhancement opportunities.

One academic with responsibility for coordinating a subject team's preparation for review noted that the experience of writing the review document was very positive because it allowed senior staff 'to get to grips with the strategic direction of the school and has borne fruit'. However, the whole process had been 'an enormous amount of work'. (Some other respondents had made estimates of the costs in academic and administrative time of various evaluative processes and produced eye-wateringly large figures - another reason for both reducing bureaucratic burden and getting added value from the processes.)

By developing annual monitoring so that accumulated yearly reports provide the major quality assurance base for institution-led quality reviews, some institutions are trying to reduce paperwork and allow staff to concentrate on evaluation and enhancement. One institution has developed a 'Look' model for school-based evaluation: looking back to key messages from past quality assurance, looking inwards to the working of the school and its courses, looking outwards to external reference points, and looking forward to the future context for students, graduates and the school. An interesting feature of this model is that the 'Look Back' report - a systematic, longitudinal evaluation of the outcomes of the past five years of annual monitoring and any other relevant assurance information, is prepared by a faculty quality officer, a role which academic staff colleagues reported is highly valued. This and other institutions' attempts to use annual monitoring to lay the assurance foundations and thus allow the review to focus more on the way forward also encourages external review panel members to contribute more to the enhancement discussions than perhaps they could when reviews were concentrating too much on the past - a problem that had previously been identified by some subject teams frustrated that they were not able to gain full value from the presence of external experts. Another aspect of interaction with the review panel was the view of some academics that the programme/subject team has to make the most of the opportunity of interaction with the review panel by being open and consultative and not defensive. There is also onus on review panels to set the right tone for an enhancement-led review and encourage openness, and to make the process work effectively: as one quality manager added, review panels need to 'allot time to meet with groups of staff at all levels for candid discussion'.

Changes in review culture from older defensive approaches, which played down areas needing improvement, to a genuine culture of enhancement can take a long time to achieve and, of course, need to be reflected in institutional attitudes to review outcomes. One respondent made the point that professional bodies scrutinise internal review reports and may pick up on any comments perceived to be negative in subsequent accreditation events; so there were both internal and external pressures for teams to achieve a 'positive' outcome with few requirements or recommendations.

There is a range of approaches to reapproval of programmes: there may be no stipulation on the length of life of a programme and no formal revalidation process; where programme life is limited, reapproval may be combined with institution-led quality review or review and revalidation may be separate. In one case where the processes are separate but contiguous, staff welcomed the enhancement approach of the review event but found the following revalidation made the overall process lengthy and onerous.

While most of the consultation responses were about reviews of programmes or subject areas, others underlined the increasing importance of institution-led quality review of student support services. Some institutions were still developing their approaches, others were further down that pathway, sometimes adopting a more holistic approach to the 'unit of review' combining a number of support areas whose outcomes could be viewed from the

standpoint of students experiencing a range of services. An example of this was noted in the QAA Scotland evaluation:

At one institution in particular, of the five reviewed this year (2012), there were positive comments in the ELIR report about the approach adopted to reviewing student-facing services which included the identification of a common set of service standards and explicit consideration of the impact of the services on the student experience (SFC, 2012b).

25 Staff engagement in institution-led quality review

The active engagement of academic staff is an important - possibly **the** most important - feature in the successful operation of institution-led quality review as an enhancement tool. Convincing hard-pressed staff, for whom, as pointed out previously, competing pressures and lack of time are key factors, requires an answer to the 'so what?' question: 'why should I be giving up time for this activity?' That would have been harder to answer ten or more years ago when 'quality review' was associated for some people with bureaucratic, paper-heavy, tick-box activities, but the enhancement focus of current and developing review methodology should be making it easier.

Respondents were asked: 'What are your Institution's approaches to getting effective academic staff engagement in evaluation processes and what are the challenges?'

In terms of institutional culture, respondents stressed the need for a clear evaluation model and for reflection to be embedded in the institution's culture from the top down. Evaluation should be seen as part of professional practice with review having a developmental rather than bureaucratic approach, and this should be instilled in induction for new staff and in ongoing staff development.

Some institutions make particular efforts to engage staff by demonstrating the academic value of review and increasing the feeling of ownership. One invites subject teams (and students) to contribute their own items to the review agenda and arranges an early, informal meeting between the subject team and internal panel members to clear some of the descriptive ground and facilitate discussion. There is staff development in reflective analysis and educational developers support dissemination of good practice. Feedback from staff has been positive.

The consultation focus group held at one institution and composed largely of academic staff pointed out that approaches that help to engage staff include relating the review activity to other things that they wish or have to do. A specific example was how internal review could link to professional body accreditations, a very significant activity in that institution. While a complete combination of internal review and external accreditation events was difficult to achieve - as borne out by other institutions - preparatory work for the internal process could be a helpful precursor for accreditation: there were examples of this improving accreditation paperwork and eliciting positive comments from the professional body. In another institution paperwork for an internal review had been designed to fit also the requirements of the external accrediting body, thereby saving the subject team considerable time and effort while meeting the needs of both bodies.

The focus group also pointed out that serving as a member of a review panel was seen as a form of personal and professional development - possibly helpful in seeking appointment to teaching-related posts - as well as preparation for one's own subject area's review and a source of ideas gleaned from another area's practice. It was also important to broaden the

range of panellists, both to freshen up the process and spread knowledge and experience of review.

26 Challenges to staff engagement

In term of challenges, several quality managers commented on the difficulty of engaging all academic staff; for example:

It is certainly the case that some staff see certain self-evaluation processes as little more than paper exercises and therefore a waste of time. This view may always be held by a few and may be difficult to change, but so long as the processes are as inclusive as possible and draw on concrete examples and evidence that staff can relate to then they should effectively engage the majority of staff.

Another commented on the difficulty of 'Capturing the staff voice among many staff voices'.

Several respondents commented on the need to ensure that all staff members are reflective, critical and analytical in producing their review documents. There was a danger of producing a narrative of operational issues rather than a critical analysis. One academic leader commented:

There are issues in getting some staff to contribute to the self-evaluation process whether a result of time pressures or because there are issues they are aware of from their practice that they don't wish to have explored.

When time is the big constraint, evaluation may be given lower priority than other activities, particularly if quality processes are seen as bureaucratic and excessively paper-heavy: there were several calls to reduce the burden of review. And staff can become disillusioned if after they have put a lot of effort into a review, feedback is not timely and constructive. There were also difficulties for institutions with a high proportion of part-time academic staff, who have external professional practice careers, in finding the time and opportunity to engage them in reflective activities prior to reviews.

27 Developing the skills of self-evaluation

Respondents were asked to what extent and how the skills of self-evaluation were being developed in their institution. One respondent raised a question about the extent to which effective evaluation can be delivered without requiring all staff to become experts in the field. Only one example of specific development of staff in reflective analysis was put forward, although a number of respondents cited support in document production being offered usually by academic development units. Respondents also referred to written guidance in producing a Reflective Analysis or Self-Evaluation Document and prompts in the form of templates. There were also opportunities for academic team leaders as potential authors to get support and prior experience by, for example, being mentored by a previous author or appointed to a review panel.

However, the overall impression from responses to this question was summed up by one respondent, who said that development of the skills of self-evaluation was: 'strongly supported in students, less so in staff'. This recalls a point made in *Good practice in Reflective Analysis* (QAA, 2009b) that:

Reflecting effectively on practice is often taught to higher education students, particularly those on practice-based courses. It can be a difficult skill to acquire and has not necessarily been explicitly developed in staff members engaged in

departmental or institutional review processes: perhaps this is a candidate for a future Enhancement Theme?

28 Evidence-based review

One institution encourages subject areas to use the self-evaluation document that they prepare for institution-led quality review 'as an opportunity for candid evidence-based reflection on the effectiveness of their provision'. The stress on self-evaluation being an evidence-based process is echoed in the QAA's guidance to institutions in preparing for ELIR: 'The evaluation will be evidence-based and the RA should include the evidence, or clear reference to the evidence, on which the analysis is based' (QAA 2012).

Institutions take various approaches to ensuring that institution-led quality review is evidence-based but usually specify their requirements in guidance to subject teams, sometimes by providing detailed templates for the preparation of self-evaluation documents. The various sources of teaching and learning-related information available to subject areas typically include external examiner reports and responses; engagement with the elements of the Academic Infrastructure; admissions, student characteristics, progression and retention statistics; internal and external student and graduate survey data; PSRB reports; engagement with Enhancement Themes and so on. These should usually have been previously summarised and analysed for annual monitoring, and, as described above, institutions are increasingly using previous years' monitoring reports to provide much of the evidence base for institution-led quality review. A comprehensive and accessible set of data, seen to be both relevant to subject teams and reliable, and which is then appropriately (and candidly) analysed and summarised, appears to be an important factor in facilitating an effective review.

29 Academic leadership

A number of the challenges in preparing for institution-led quality review can be mitigated by academic leadership. Some responses mentioned the important role of staff in academic units, who have specific learning and teaching and/or enhancement roles and who mediate the implementation of centrally-defined quality processes.

Another very important leadership role, perhaps sometimes underplayed in terms of meeting development needs, is that of the programme leader, who needs co-operative leadership skills to ensure that review preparation invites and gives space to the views of all members of the academic team, while ensuring that preparations move forward in a timely fashion. The programme leader also needs to make sure that students are also fully engaged in the process.

30 Student engagement

A number of general conclusions about student engagement can be drawn from previous evaluations and from the IASE consultation:

- Scottish higher education institutions take student engagement seriously and are continually seeking to make it more effective, and all find this challenging
- throughout the sector, students are included on institution-led quality review panels and involved at virtually all committee levels and as class representatives
- Student Staff Liaison Committees (SSLCs), or differently named equivalents), are ubiquitous but may vary in effectiveness

- Student Union sabbatical officers play key roles in many quality processes but regular changes in personnel make development of long-term sustainable relationships difficult
- training for student representatives is aided by sparqs, who provide a vital support and energising role in the QEF, but is also increasingly provided in-house with sparqs 'training the trainers'
- appointment of paid student officers in academic units has helped to enhance links between staff and students.

When the IASE survey asked about positive and effective features of quality processes, many of the answers were about student engagement. General features included:

- students' involvement in reviews - described as 'enthusiastic participation' in one institutional response
- faster methods of collecting survey feedback from students and institutions' responses to it
- more effective operation of SSLCs
- student-led teaching awards and similar activities
- the positive experience in several institutions of the appointment of paid student officers to, among other duties, aid communication between students and subject area staff
- positive responses to the training role of sparqs.

Some respondents gave institution-specific examples, such as:

- school student officers collecting student views prior to institution-led quality review (and being on the monitoring group for annual monitoring)
- trained student reviewers being used to comment on a draft of the institution's Reflective Analysis for ELIR
- in an institution, which includes postgraduate students on institution-led quality review panels, a pool of research student reviewers has been recruited from those who are undertaking training to teach on undergraduate courses, and for whom the experience of review may be a valuable form of staff development.

In contrast student engagement was also seen as presenting institutions with several challenges. These include:

- low survey response rates and possible over-surveying of students
- variation in the operation of SSLCs
- recruiting sufficient representatives to fill all available positions
- engaging students in 'harder to reach' categories including those who are based off the main campus, part-time learners, distance learners, mature learners and to a certain extent postgraduate taught and research students
- as with staff, distinguishing 'the student voice' among so many voices.

Several institutions would like to learn how others are facing the challenges of getting effective student engagement and this was mooted as a possible outcome of the IASE project. The expertise to support such a learning process is certainly already available from work that has already been done across the sector by sparqs among others and in individual Scottish institutions, some with a long and distinguished record of enhancing student engagement.

31 Members of institution-led review panels

Respondents were asked if there were features of their institution's selection and preparation of review panel members, internal and external, which are particularly effective or may need further development.

In general respondents were very positive about the selection and preparation of both internal and external members of review panels. External members were usually chosen from nominations by the subject team based on subject and/or industry expertise, or sometimes for particular experience in an area of importance to planned developments such as distance learning. Internal staff members were generally experienced staff with no direct affiliation to the subject area, with perhaps a less experienced member included to aid their personal development or to help prepare them for an upcoming review. Panel chairs were generally senior members of academic staff from another area, perhaps deans or members of a quality committee. Interestingly, against the 'no affiliation' norm for chairs, at least one institution requires the dean of the academic area that includes the subject under review to chair the panel. This is said to bring subject-related authority to the role in relation to working with distinguished external academics and allows deans to get a deeper insight into the workings of their own schools.

Briefing and training by institutions of internal staff panel members is now common but more problematic for external members. One institution had not encountered significant problems arising from the lack of time to brief externals but was considering how it could be improved particularly for those outwith Scotland who might be less aware of the QEF and its enhancement-led approach. Student representatives are often trained by one or more of their Student Union, sparqs and their institution. While most institutions appear to provide good support for student members of review panels and try to ensure their full integration with staff members, one student respondent reported a lack of support and explanation of the process before a first review.

32 International reviewers

At the request of TQF members another area explored with the survey group was whether international reviewers had been included on review panels and, if so, their usefulness. However, very few institutions had included international reviewers or intended to do so, at least in the short-term. One respondent gave an example of how the inclusion of an international reviewer with a particular set of attributes had been very helpful in the review of a school with international interests and collaborations; another took the view that seeking UK reviewers with significant international experience was a more effective way of bringing in the required expertise. In a different context, one institution undertaking a major institutional review had sought information and advice from overseas institutions, while another engaged in a similar review had set up an international group to aid their evaluation processes.

33 Follow-up to review

Respondents were asked how issues that were identified in monitoring and review processes were followed up, and also how good practice was identified in monitoring and review processes, and then disseminated.

In general, institutions have well-defined processes for following up requirements or recommendations in review reports such as monitoring by a senior quality committee, subject area action plans with SMART targets and follow-up progress reports at specific times and in the subsequent year's annual monitoring.

There is greater diversity of practice when it comes to disseminating good practice that has been identified during reviews and this continues to be a challenging area. One respondent stressed the importance of review reports identifying areas of good practice when it exists in maintaining the morale of subject area staff in what can be a very stressful period. However, the identification of practice which has proven to be effective in one context says little about its potential for transferability to another, and dissemination does not ensure take up or embedding. The survey has drawn out a number of examples where institutions have gone well beyond the publication of a list of commendations recorded in review reports that may at one time have constituted 'dissemination'. These approaches sometimes involve the active engagement of central, variously named, academic development units, which seem to be acquiring greater prominence in a number of institutions, sometimes with an 'academy' element that draws in staff from academic units on a short-term basis.

Among the dissemination (now sometimes referred to as engagement) activities reported by respondents were quality enhancement or learning and teaching conferences, good practice events, subject development meetings and dedicated websites. An interesting development described in one institution was the establishment of a post to help the institution be more proactive in identifying and disseminating good practice and seeking to embed it into strategies, policies and procedures.

34 Do monitoring and review lead to enhancement?

When asked if monitoring and review led to the enhancement of students' learning experiences a high proportion of respondents gave positive answers and examples from course, school and university level of beneficial changes. A few expressed caveats, one stating that while enhancement is likely, the expected improvement of the student experience is not fully tracked, and another noted that improvement is incremental rather than step-change. This area may be better informed as SHEEC's work on 'indicators of enhancement' develops and, given the centrality of the question in an enhancement-led approach, would certainly merit further research.

35 Good practice in Reflective Analysis

This was the report of a 2008 project to identify, collate and disseminate elements of good practice in the preparation of a Reflective Analysis (RA) document. ELIR reviewers and staff and students responsible for producing RAs were asked for their views on the features of a 'good' RA, and the elements of ELIR preparation that help to produce one. Answers to these questions, supplemented by analysis of RAs and ELIR reports, produced the guidance in the report, which was well-received in Scotland and has generated interest in other parts of the UK and abroad.

Given the expertise of the 2008 survey group, the conclusions of the report were expected to retain currency, but the IASE consultations allowed the guidance to be revisited and updated. Encouragingly, little has changed in the 2013 view, according to which the characteristics of a good RA are that it:

- addresses the primary audience, the ELIR team, and is fully accessible to external readers
- is reflective, analytical and evidence-based
- summarises a process of continuous reflection with a forward-looking dimension
- is open, honest (transparent), and upfront about areas for further development
- balances description and analysis, and assurance and enhancement
- is not too long and comprises a readable, consistent narrative

- provides clear pointers to additional material using hyperlinks that reviewers can use to access documents both in and outwith the institutional setting
- uses case studies illustrating strategic processes rather than examples of good practice.

A document entitled *Updating commentary for Good practice in Reflective Analysis for Enhancement-led Institutional Review*⁴ has been published on the QAA website.

36 Preparation for ELIR

Those respondents who had been involved in their institution's preparation for ELIR between 2009 and 2012 were asked which features of the process were helpful in producing a good Reflective Analysis and which features were less helpful. They were also asked whether ELIR preparation was a one-off process or an opportunity for an internal review of the institution's strategic approach to quality enhancement.

Several survey and interview participants referred to the positive opportunity that an upcoming ELIR presented for prior institution-level evaluation. For example:

The ELIR provided an opportunity to step back and reflect on the many activities and processes that underpin quality enhancement thereby ensuring a holistic review of our approach.

A respondent whose involvement was more peripheral, held a similar view:

...the process of thinking about what you do that's good and thinking honestly about where things might be improved, has been helpful overall.

Another welcomed ELIR as providing:

a framework (and impetus) for us to take a look, at the institutional level, at our enhancement plans and assurance processes.

Such positive views are more prevalent in 2013 than they were in 2008 but are tempered by the distinctions made between the usefulness of the **process** of ELIR preparation and the subsequent ELIR visits which have been felt by some to be insufficiently enhancement-focused. This echoed comments made in the Lancaster evaluation (see above).

The view of the usefulness of such preparation is tempered by the recognition of the time and effort required to prepare for a four-yearly ELIR, something which is particularly felt in smaller institutions. While some felt a four-year cycle was too short, others thought it was about right for timing a strategic overview. Several institutions were already well into their preparations for ELIR 3.

In 2008 the average length of a sample of RAs from the first ELIR cycle was around 30,000 words, though variance was high, however in a similar sample from ELIR 2 that figure had just about doubled. This runs counter to both the advice in *Good practice in Reflective Analysis* and the desire of some higher education institutions to streamline paperwork. However, some interviewees were not surprised at the growing length of RAs, citing the need to explain at greater length the ever-growing complexity of their institutional contexts to those reviewers from outwith Scottish higher education, and the importance attached to

⁴ *Updating commentary for Good practice in Reflective Analysis for Enhancement-led Institutional Review* is available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Commentary-Good-practice-in-Reflective-Analysis.aspx

securing a positive ELIR outcome working against brevity. One respondent suggested that time constraints militated against the production of a more tightly edited, shorter document. The requirement in the third round of ELIR for an advanced information set (AIS) should help to reduce the length of the accompanying RA.

Institutions adopt a range of approaches to ELIR preparations but there is usually a representative Steering Group and one or more authors gathering evidence and wider opinion from working or focus groups of staff and students. A number of respondents cited the helpfulness of QAA Scotland staff in helping them prepare, including commenting on early drafts of the RA. Several respondents wanted greater sharing of preparation experiences between institutions; some had already consulted colleagues in similar types of institutions or at the same point in the ELIR cycle, and seeing examples of RAs (some are publicly available online) was considered helpful. Some said that the most useful experience was previous membership of an ELIR team to get an understanding of what a reviewer looks for in an RA.

37 Linkages between annual monitoring, institution-led quality review and ELIR preparation

Evidence that institutions were 'linking the design and operation of their monitoring and review processes to ensure they form a coherent whole' was noted by the 2012 evaluation of enhancement (SFC 2012b). This is reinforced by the results of this project which has shown that institutions are placing an increasing emphasis on successive reports of annual monitoring to provide the primary evidence base and reduce the quality assurance burden of institution-led quality review. In turn, annual monitoring is used to ensure that the requirements and recommendations of institution-led quality review have been appropriately followed up. There are also examples of how individual institutions are bridging the two processes: for example by having shared membership between the quality monitoring group) and institution-led quality review panels, or the 'Look Back' reports produced by faculty quality officers referred to above.

While the trend is towards greater linkage of annual monitoring and institution-led quality review, the process is not as far advanced as some respondents would like. One commented that institution-led quality review is seen by some staff members as a 'one-off every six years' while annual monitoring can 'sometimes lack in-depth analysis of data sets. More integration (is) needed.'

The view of several respondents, that preparation for ELIR is an opportunity for a strategic overview and review, has been referred to above. However, others wanted to point out that institutional review is an ongoing process and is not driven by ELIR. In their view, evaluation is a constant, and ELIR preparation is an additional and complementary opportunity for reflection on an institution's strategic approach to enhancement. One institution takes the midpoint between successive ELIRs as an opportunity for a holistic review encompassing all of its quality processes, structures, governance and culture, and external influences on them. Others have used ELIR as an opportunity to reflect on a particular area already identified as needing to be changed - for example, the institutional learning and teaching strategy - and have presented their approach to reflecting on and evaluating the proposed change in the RA for their ELIR. A few respondents maintained that the recommendations of their institution's ELIR report presented few surprises, and were in some cases reinforcing the institution's own agenda for enhancement.

Taken together the responses to the question about linkage of self-evaluation processes shows a much closer relationship between the different types of activity than hitherto. In particular, preparation for ELIR is now seen as a more integrated activity rather than the

view that was still found in 2008 that ELIR was a one-off additional burden, separate from the institution's own quality processes.

Conclusions

38 Stability and change

The IASE project has attempted to identify some of the more distinctive and innovative approaches to institution-led evaluation at the time this snapshot of the sector - an inevitably incomplete picture given the selective sample - was taken. The examples of developing practice described above are still within the evolving but stable framework of the QEF. The reassurance of knowing, at least in general terms, what external requirements are going to be for a reasonable period of time, and that they will continue to be enhancement-led, has allowed institutions the latitude to develop processes better suited to their own contexts and requirements. This echoes the acknowledgement in the 2003-12 review of enhancement in the Scottish sector (SFC, 2012b) that a continuing commitment to the long-term is 'particularly beneficial to bringing about effective culture change'.

39 Rigour and vigour

Another general conclusion is one already reached by other evaluations of the QEF and backed by the evidence of ELIR reports, that the processes of monitoring and review are, in general, rigorous and meeting the requirements of the SFC guidance on quality. While systems are still necessarily grounded in quality assurance the balance of focus continues to shift towards enhancement. Institution-led quality reviews encompass all academic provision and, increasingly, student-facing support services within a five or six-year cycle; review panels include student reviewers and external members with academic or other professional expertise; linkage with annual monitoring is strengthening; and institutions have generally well-defined and developing procedures for following up the conclusions of review whether requirements and recommendations for change or identification and dissemination of good practice.

The IASE consultations have also demonstrated the degree of vigour and a 'continual improvement' ethos within the sector in regularly reviewing and enhancing its approaches to self-evaluation. This is reinforced by the fact that half the institutions interviewed had undertaken and successfully concluded far-reaching major institutional reviews in recent years.

40 Engaging staff

Within this overall impression, there are many variations in emphasis and differences in the extent to which individual higher education institutions are developing their arrangements, but what is readily apparent is the extent to which these developing internal processes have moved on considerably from the more rigid quality assurance procedures of the past and are more fully embracing of the enhancement-led approach. These changed procedures appear to be more successful in engaging academic staff as some of the examples above have shown. However, it is also clear that in what appears to be an increasingly time-strapped profession with competing priorities, persuading staff to find time for evaluation will continue to need strong justification. The greater convergence of academic and quality cultures, inculcating evaluation as a standard element of professional practice and encouraging institutional research about and based upon institution-led evaluation should help. Central diktats and turning back from a cooperative enhancement-led approach are likely to be unhelpful.

41 Effective approaches

The extent to which institution-led approaches to self-evaluation are effective - that is, successful in producing their desired results - is more difficult to assess in a climate of continual improvement when processes are being regularly renewed or revised. Judgement of the effectiveness of institution-led evaluation is reached during ELIR and by that token the general positivity of ELIR reports suggests that institutions are adopting effective approaches.

Institutions have mechanisms for reviewing and revising quality processes that should identify and change those that are not producing the desired results: i.e., they monitor their own effectiveness. In some there is a specific point in time for taking stock of such monitoring: for example, the four-yearly holistic review midway between ELIRs referred to above. In others, regular meetings of quality committees and oversight by senior managers and administrators provide evidence of effectiveness and prompts for review of particular procedures. The consultation suggests that while ELIR may note particular areas requiring development, the impetus for change is more likely to come from institutions' own reflections on their quality practices; the particular need for change and the approach being adopted to achieve it may well then be emphasised in the institution's next RA.

When considering institutional practices, an aim of the IASE project was to identify features that make them effective. The following list of factors, identified from the literature and consultations, appear to facilitate effective self-evaluation that may lead to enhancement.

Institutional self-evaluation is more likely to be effective when:

1. Processes are trusted

- Giving confidence to, and gaining the trust of, external and internal stakeholders: balancing assurance and enhancement.
- Being able to identify the wider purpose (answering the 'so what?' question) for staff and students.
- Facilitating teamwork and gaining the support of senior management.
- Supporting open communication between reviewers and reviewed.
- Engaging a wide spectrum of students as reviewers and providers of evidence.

2. Quality and academic structures are aligned

- Putting academic values at the centre of the quality system, framing evaluation as a scholarly approach to professional learning and development and/or institutional research.
- Making evaluation a team activity which recognises and develops the desire of good teachers to reflect on and improve their professional practice.
- Being flexible, recognising differences in culture and practice between disciplines.
- Using coherent subject groupings which make sense to academic staff, and allow sufficient depth of scrutiny and discussion.
- Explicitly relating evaluation to improving the learning experience of students.

3. Appropriate training and support are in place

- Providing easily understandable information and guidance on the quality assurance and enhancement arrangements in place at institutional level and, in devolved structures, at faculty/ college/school level.

- Ensuring subject teams are led by academics who have developed skills in facilitating effective, inclusive self-evaluation and ensuring they are supported by strong institutional networks.
- Encouraging and supporting individual staff members and course teams to develop analytical self-evaluation skills.
- Training and supporting student representatives to be effective members of review panels and ensuring other reviewers are briefed on how to work effectively with student members.
- Ensuring external reviewers receive information, training and support which enable them to participate as effective panel members.
- Using guidance and support available from outside the institution, such as from Student Participation in Quality Scotland (sparqs) or the Quality Assurance Agency (Scotland), and considering other institutions' approaches to evaluation.

4. Processes are informed by reliable information and external reference points

- Providing comprehensive, relevant, accurate, accessible and standardised management information/data.
- Using management information to support evidence-based evaluation.
- Using an agreed set of external reference points, such as subject benchmark information, the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF), the UK Quality Code for Higher Education and engagement with the Enhancement Themes (current sector expectations are set out in the Scottish Funding Council Guidance).
- Using relevant performance indicators.

5. Feedback loops are closed

- Asking: What's working? What's not? What needs to change?
- Ensuring that the findings from self-evaluation, monitoring and review inform institutional strategic planning.
- Developing enhancement plans with SMART targets and effective feedback - don't produce more results from internal evaluations than can be acted upon.
- Ensuring monitoring and review processes are linked to Enhancement-led institutional review (ELIR) preparation, and are themselves regularly reviewed.

42 Enhancement is messy

Of course, ticking off all these factors is still no guarantee that institution-led evaluation will lead to enhancement of the quality of students' learning experiences - as Newton (2002b) has pointed out 'enhancing quality is a messy business'; however, the commitment and positivity of those interviewed and surveyed during the course of this project suggest that it will stand a good chance.

43 The future

For the future two related areas of educational research should be borne in mind. While the IASE project was underway, SHEEC commissioned evaluative research to revisit the set of 'Indicators of Enhancement' that were originally developed in 2008 and to look at their past and future usability and use both by individual institutions and by SHEEC. If the indicators are to play a more important role in future, their use during self-evaluation processes may need to be reconsidered.

Another set of studies that may influence the future scope and conduct of institution-led evaluation is the 'Dimensions of Quality' work undertaken by Graham Gibbs (Gibbs, 2010 and 2012). In relation to quality assurance Gibbs (2012) maintains that:

The aspects of educational provision that institutions pay attention to in their internal quality assurance processes often overlook crucial indicators. Any new quality regime should ensure that it focuses on the right variables ... If quality assurance pays attention to variables that do not influence quality and does not pay attention to variables that do influence quality then they are unlikely to assure or improve quality.

His challenging analysis needs to be considered when setting the agendas for monitoring and review: are the right questions being asked to assure and enhance quality?

While the IASE project formally ended in July 2013, it is hoped that it will have had a catalytic effect in prompting continuing discussion within and between institutions about the development of institutional approaches to self-evaluation within the QEF. A dissemination event planned to coincide with the publication of this report will incorporate examples of innovative practice from a number of institutions with the intention of stimulating further discussion and ways of sharing practice beyond the life of this project.

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APPENDIX 1 - Survey Questionnaire

Institutional approaches to self-evaluation (IASE) project

SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

Introduction

The IASE project is intended to:

- help Higher Education Institutions in Scotland to reflect on their processes of annual monitoring, periodic quality review and preparation for ELIR
- identify aspects that are particularly effective in the assurance and enhancement of quality and others that are less so
- share with and learn from others in developing practice.

A link to the online SurveyMonkey version of the questionnaire has been sent to Teaching Quality Forum members for completion and where possible, distribution to other members of staff and students who have had experience of an institution's internal review processes. That experience may be in a range of capacities: for example, as a member of a programme team undergoing review, as a review panel member, as a senior manager, as a member of a team preparing the institution's Reflective Analysis for Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR) and so on.

The online link to the questionnaire will close on Wednesday 10th April. This paper-based version is provided in case anyone wishes to use it to facilitate discussion in a group setting or to have an overview of all the questions. Some of the questions may not be relevant to or answerable by all respondents and they should ignore those questions.

Most of the questions are open-ended and the reply boxes in this Word doc and in the online version can be expanded so please give as much information as you can.

Responses to the questionnaire will be treated as confidential and neither individuals nor institutions will be identified in subsequent reports unless they have given permission.

Please address any queries or suggestions to
Professor Paddy Maher
E-mail:
Telephone:

Many thanks for your help

Best wishes

Paddy

Institutional approaches to self-evaluation (IASE) project: survey questionnaire

Responses to this questionnaire will be treated as confidential and neither individuals nor institutions will be identified in subsequent reports unless they have given permission.

1. About you

Your name:

Your institution:

Please state in which capacity or capacities you have been involved in institution-led evaluation:

.....
.....

2. About your institution's annual monitoring and periodic review processes:

(a) Have there been any major changes in those processes since your institution's last Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR)?

- No
- Yes
- If Yes please give brief details of changes

.....
.....

(b) In your opinion which features of your Institution's monitoring and review processes have been particularly positive and effective in improving students' learning experiences and securing academic standards? Which might need further development? Are annual monitoring and institution-led quality review linked or separate processes?

<u>Positive and effective features?</u>
<u>Features requiring further development?</u>
<u>Linkage of annual monitoring and institution-led quality review?</u>

3. Your institution's preparation for ELIR: If you have been involved in your Institution's preparation for ELIR, which features of the process were helpful in producing a good Reflective Analysis and which features were less helpful? Was ELIR preparation a one-off process or an opportunity for an internal review of the Institution's strategic approach to quality enhancement?

<u>More helpful features?</u>
<u>Less helpful features?</u>
<u>One-off or an opportunity for strategic review?</u>

4. Effective practice: If you were asked to showcase any of your Institution's approaches to self-evaluation that other institutions might learn from, which would you choose and why? If

you were looking to make improvements in any of your Institution's approaches, how might the IASE project be framed to help you?

Example(s) of effective practice?

IASE Project help required?

5. Evaluation skills: To what extent and how are the skills of self-evaluation being developed in your Institution? (For example, in helping programme/subject teams to reflect on practice and produce effective self-evaluation documents.)

Development of evaluation skills?

6. Student engagement: What are your Institution's approaches to getting effective student engagement in evaluation processes and what are the challenges?

Student engagement - approaches?

Student engagement - challenges?

7. Academic staff engagement? What are your Institution's approaches to getting effective academic staff engagement in evaluation processes and what are the challenges?

Academic staff engagement - approaches?

Academic staff engagement - challenges?

8. Members of institution-led review panels: Are there features of your institution's selection and preparation of review panel members, internal and external, which are particularly effective or may need further development? If international reviewers have been involved, have their contributions in general added a significant element to the review process?

Effective features of selection and preparation of review panel members

Features requiring further development

Contribution of international reviewers

9. Follow-up: How are issues that were identified in monitoring and review processes followed up? How is good practice identified in monitoring and review processes, and then disseminated?

Follow up of identified issues?

Dissemination of good practice?

10. Enhancement: In your view do internal monitoring and review processes lead to enhancement of students' learning experience? If so, can you give any examples?

Enhancement resulting from monitoring and review?

11. Project development and outcomes: How would you like to see the IASE project developing? What would be your preferred outcomes? (For example a Toolkit on Effective Practice in Evaluation, Dissemination Workshop for sharing effective practice and developmental needs, etc.)

IASE Project development and outcomes?

12. Any other comments?

Please add any other comments you wish to make:

Thank you very much for your help.

Responses to the questionnaire will be treated as confidential and neither individuals nor institutions will be identified in subsequent reports unless they have given permission.

APPENDIX 2 - Scottish Higher Education Institutions represented among the interviewees and/or among the completed⁵ responses to the survey questionnaire

Institution	Interviewed	Survey Respondents
University of Aberdeen	Yes	Yes
University of Abertay, Dundee	-	Yes
University of Edinburgh	Yes	Yes
University of Glasgow	-	Yes
Glasgow School of Art	-	Yes
Heriot-Watt University	Yes	Yes
University of the Highlands and Islands	Yes	Yes
Queen Margaret University		Yes
Robert Gordon University	Yes	Yes
Royal Conservatoire of Scotland	Yes	-
University of St Andrews	Yes	Yes
University of Stirling	-	Yes
University of Strathclyde	-	Yes
University of the West of Scotland	Yes	Yes

⁵ A 'completed survey' was counted as one where respondents had answered one or more of the substantive questions about their institution's approaches to self-evaluation and not simply their personal details such as job description and experience.

APPENDIX 3 Summary of points made in monitoring and evaluation forms completed by ELIR reviewers and institutional contacts in the second round of ELIR (2009-2012)

1 Preparation of the Reflective Analysis (RA)

- a. RAs in ELIR 2 appear to be longer and more detailed when compared with those in ELIR 1: try to keep them more concise and readable at one (albeit long) sitting.
- b. QAA Assistant Directors are willing to support ELIR preparation and read RA drafts: higher education institutions who used that support found it very helpful.
- c. The main value of ELIR for an institution is the requirement to undertake detailed reflection and self-evaluation. The **process** of preparing the RA is arguably more important than the **product**: it is a very useful way of stepping outside the institution's day-to-day concerns to reflect on its approach to quality assurance and enhancement and can feed into the strategic management cycle. However, the RA is also a useful compendium of the institution's processes and of its strategic objectives and progress towards their achievement.
- d. Staff and students, who are selected to help to prepare the RA and/or meet the ELIR team, can be a very valuable resource in the processes of reflection and self-evaluation and as champions of enhancement and change.
- e. ELIR has matured and evolved over two cycles and now entering the third cycle should be seen as a developmental engagement.
- f. In preparing the RA, higher education institutions should try to put themselves in the reviewers' shoes: how can we supply the information the review team may need in the most accessible way? Which areas of our activities are likely to be the most difficult to understand. Use the expertise of ELIR reviewers and review co-ordinators in your own institution (and if you don't have any, encourage potential recruits) and/or ask critical friends to help you.
- g. Be prepared for reviewers to ask what may seem to you to be basic questions or to ask for further documents that you may feel have been covered by your RA: you are experts in the study of your own institution and its documentation, they are not.
- h. Build on rather than completely reinvent previous RAs and make sure you have dealt with and covered all the points raised in the previous ELIR report.
- i. A number of higher education institutions in ELIR 2 commented on the value in preparing for ELIR of using the ELIR Handbook and also the publication: *Good practice in Reflective Analysis when preparing for ELIR* and the workshops associated with it.
- j. Having evaluative summaries at the end of each RA section helps to ensure focus on reflection and enhancement for RA authors and provides a potential agenda for engagement with the ELIR team.

2 Additional documentation

- k. A difficult balance has to be struck between providing too little or too much additional documentation. With the prevalence of e-documents there is a danger of overwhelming the review team.
- l. If the RA is not well organised or there is insufficient evidence, reviewers may return to the same area several times and require additional documents and perhaps thereby curtail discussion of the enhancement agenda.
- m. Several reviewers suggested greater guidance to higher education institutions on documentation required to illustrate the management of standards and quality -

an issue which has been addressed through the requirement to provide ELIR teams with an advance information set (AIS) to 'enable enquiries relating to quality assurance and the management of academic standards to be addressed earlier in the process than has been the case in the previous cycles. In turn, this will free up time during the review visits for exploration of institutional approaches to enhancing the student learning experience' [ELIR Handbook May 2012].

- n. Reviewers may also wish to consider whether their requests for further documents are always justified and to check carefully that the evidence they seek has not already been supplied or referenced in the RA.
- o. Higher education institutions need to think carefully about the IT facilities and electronic access they provide: the operational manual suggests that access to the institutional intranet would be appropriate. Some previous ELIR teams were delayed in getting on with their work by IT problems: for example, hyperlinks that don't work or inability to obtain the promised access. If in doubt, use an 'outsider' to test the links and access that you intend to provide.
- p. Waiting until the team arrives to ask them about their IT needs risks delays at the start of the Part 1 visit. Providing ELIR teams with maximum access at the same time that the RA is received allows the review to get up and running as soon as possible and demonstrates an open approach to review. [From Operational guidance: 'The ELIR team should be able to access the institution's system (virtual learning environment, intranet and so on) as though they were members of staff. Some institutions are able to arrange remote access so that the reviewers can read materials between or after the two visits. It is helpful if the ELIR team can be issued with any usernames and passwords in advance or at the start of the Part 1 visit.']

3 Case Studies

- q. There are still conflicting views on the utility of the case study(ies). While the role of the case study appears to be more clearly linked to the RA, some institutions felt that ELIR teams had not used them sufficiently. Higher education institutions need to ensure that case studies really do illustrate their strategic processes in practice and are relevant to the ELIR process and reviewers should ensure that where that is the case, they refer to them in their report writing.

4 Day 1 activities

- r. Similarly ELIR reviewers have had mixed views on the utility of the Visit 1 Day 1 institution-led introductory activities. An introduction that was too formal and formulaic (for example, a presentation 'taken off the shelf') was seen as much less helpful than presentations and activities that illuminated aspects of the RA particularly where these involved active student participation. The use of posters illustrating points on the team's tour of facilities that were subsequently available in the team's meeting room was an example of how the Day 1 activities could supplement the RA effectively. But remember: the team has limited time to assimilate all the new information available to it so be selective.

5 The RA: open and reflective

- s. At the heart of the ELIR process is the need for institutions to be open and reflective in their RAs and their approach to the ELIR visits. Problems arise when institutional teams are not prepared to share concerns, perceived weaknesses and areas for development. Being overly defensive and trying to hide significant issues can cause the review to default towards a more audit-style of engagement. A positive

approach to ELIR and the student learning experience is beneficial for all concerned.

- t. A minority of RAs are too descriptive rather than evaluative. One reviewer even suggested that such RAs should be returned and a resubmission asked for. A too descriptive RA can force the ELIR team to take more time to understand the institution's own focus on enhancement.

6 The ELIR process

- u. Reviewers need to remember that that ELIR can still be very daunting and stressful for the institution's staff and students. That may be particularly so for those staff who have been centrally involved in preparing the RA and for the visits and may have spent the best part of a year with ELIR as a major part of their workload. One institution calculated that nearly 4,500 person hours had been used in ELIR preparation.
- v. Smaller institutions also made the point that preparation for ELIR can divert resources away from other academic developments which may have to be put on hold.
- w. Therefore, reviewers need to be aware of this and to recognise the efforts that higher education institutions have put into preparing for their visit, and to ensure that they are as well-briefed as possible before they meet institutions' staff and students.

7 Internationalisation

- x. While there were some doubts about the value of having a specific international reviewer, the point was made that institutions might make more of the opportunity that an international perspective provides to discuss their internationalisation agendas.

8 QA/QE balance

- y. There remains a clear requirement for the review process to confirm the standards and quality of learning opportunities as well as the enhancement agendas.
- z. If the ELIR team cannot quickly satisfy themselves about the efficacy of the institution's assurance procedures, their attention to the enhancement agenda may be delayed. In turn this may lead the institutional team to believe that the process is too focused on assurance and is too akin to an audit.
- aa. A small number of reviewers expressed concerns that assurance was being downgraded; for example that an institution might have thought that the priority given to their enhancement agenda permitted a loosening of quality requirements.

QAA 555 09/13

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