



**QAA**

# **Learning from ELIR 2003-07**

## **Emerging approaches to student engagement in quality assurance and enhancement**



**Sharing good practice**

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## Preface

In 2003 Scotland adopted a new approach to managing quality and standards in higher education. The enhancement-led approach is now attracting significant international interest. Its key features include: a focus on improvement; important roles and responsibilities for students; and partnership working between Universities Scotland, QAA Scotland, the National Union of Students in Scotland, the national independent student development service, student participation in quality Scotland (sparqs), the Higher Education Academy and the Scottish Funding Council.

In addition to Enhancement-led institutional review (ELIR), the Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF) comprises a rolling programme of national enhancement themes, institution-led review at the subject level, student engagement in quality management, including support provided through sparqs, and the inclusion of student reviewers as full members of institutional review teams.

Scottish higher education institutions have made significant progress in developing their approaches to the management of assurance and enhancement. Institutions' success is apparent in the published ELIR reports from the first cycle, 2003-07. Institutional systems continue to be judged rigorous and robust in assuring the quality of provision and the maintenance of academic standards. Individual institutions have taken the enhancement agenda forward according to their particular strategic priorities and mission, supported by a common sector-wide framework. With growing insight into the management of enhancement, institutions have made very effective structural, systemic and process changes designed to encourage a culture of critical reflection on learning and teaching, and the wider aspects of the student experience.

These various changes combine to create a synergy which reinforces and strengthens the drive for enhancement. The growing focus on the student experience has led institutions to foster wider student engagement in quality and enhancement processes, with external support for the training of student representatives being provided by sparqs. The recent (2007) independent external evaluation of the QEF stated that it 'brought right to the fore the simple and powerful idea that the purpose of quality systems in higher education is to improve student experiences and, consequently, their learning' and concluded that 'the approach to quality that we review(ed) here is ambitious, distinctive and, so far, successful'.

QAA Scotland will commence the second cycle of ELIR this autumn, using a revised method which will build on these achievements in a number of ways: integrating ELIR more fully with other aspects of the QEF; sharpening the focus on the enhancement of the student learning experience, through the three fundamental principles of quality culture, student engagement, and high quality learning; and drawing more on good practice, not only across the United Kingdom (UK), but internationally (including through the inclusion of an international member on future ELIR review teams).

Having excited considerable interest since its inception, both in the UK and internationally, the enhancement-led approach to managing quality in Scotland now finds resonance with approaches in a number of other countries, most notably Ireland, Finland, New Zealand and increasingly, in the United States of America.

QAA Scotland will continue to develop these and other international links to inform the ongoing development of the enhancement-led approach in Scotland.

This report is one of a series of six reports addressing a range of topics relating to the enhancement-led approach in Scottish higher education over the last five years. It provides an overview of evolving approaches to student engagement in quality assurance and enhancement and explores a number of different aspects, including: student engagement with the ELIR process itself; efforts to improve student representation; partnership working between institutions and student associations; student engagement in monitoring and review processes; student engagement in institution-led subject review; the dislocation of postgraduate research students from institutional processes beyond the realm of research; diverse approaches to student feedback; and developments to promote the strategic engagement of student associations.

The companion reports address evolving approaches to: the management of assurance and enhancement; institution-led quality review at the subject level; the impact of virtual learning environment based and other information technologies; staff development, focusing on recognition, reward and the dissemination of good practice; and employability and personal development planning. An interim report on evolving approaches to the management of assurance and enhancement, based on the first 15 ELIR reports, was published in June 2007. These reports collectively provide evidence of the impact to date of the enhancement-led approach, to inform national and international debate and, more particularly, to support the ongoing development of the enhancement-led approach and the embedding of a quality culture across the Scottish higher education sector.

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## Background

The Scottish Government's Lifelong Learning Strategy recognises the need to develop a quality framework which is 'fit for purpose', and which puts learners' needs at the centre of educational systems.<sup>1</sup> The enhancement-led approach to quality in the Scottish higher education sector is consistent with this. For the purposes of ELIR, enhancement is defined as 'taking deliberate steps to bring about continuous improvement in the effectiveness of the learning experience of students'.

The Scottish higher education sector is small but diverse, containing within it a wide range of institutions of varying missions and sizes, cultures and organisational complexity, including three designated small specialist institutions. Across the sector, institutions have approached the enhancement agenda from a variety of starting points and perspectives. The ELIR method has the flexibility to address this diversity while systematically addressing key aspects of managing provision.

ELIR reports are structured around three main sections:

- internal monitoring and review of quality, standards and public information
- the student experience
- the effectiveness of the institution's strategy for quality enhancement.

The factual evidence of the overviews is complemented by the more discursive commentaries which provide deeper insight into the effectiveness of the various systems, processes and strategies, and the way in which they interact to support quality assurance and quality enhancement.

This analysis is based on a detailed examination of the reports of 20 ELIR reviews, conducted during the first cycle of ELIR, 2003-07 (see Annex). It draws primarily on the evidence compiled from the sections on internal monitoring and review of quality, standards and public information, and the student experience, together with the final summary. Early draft versions were circulated for comment to members of the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee, the QAA Scotland Committee, and to QAA Scotland, all of which groups provided valuable and constructive feedback.

While each ELIR report covers broadly the same aspects of provision, it represents the outcome of an engagement with the institution, which will necessarily address the institution's own state of evolution and particular strategic priorities to promote enhancement, with differing emphases from one institution to another. This overview is a synthesis of information drawn from ELIR reports from the first cycle, not a snapshot at a single point in time. Its primary purpose is to illustrate developments across the sector over the last five years. QAA Scotland is conscious of the ongoing evolution and development of institutional approaches to enhancement, particularly in institutions which were reviewed early in the cycle, as well as the importance of institutional context. Consequently, the particular examples of practice cited here have not been attributed to institutions, but are offered as a stimulus to reflection and further development, rather than as exemplars of good practice in themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> *Learning to improve: quality approaches for lifelong learning*, Lawrence Howells, Scottish Executive, Edinburgh 2005.

However, QAA Scotland will be pleased to facilitate enquiries relating to specific examples, by referring them to the relevant institution. Please contact [t.barron@qaa.ac.uk](mailto:t.barron@qaa.ac.uk)

## Executive summary

The 21 ELIR reports published between March 2004 and May 2007 show that the Scottish higher education sector has made considerable progress in developing approaches to student engagement, both in the context of the ELIR process itself, and within institutions. The continuous improvement of the student experience, which is the focus of the enhancement-led approach, requires effective student engagement in order to succeed. At the end of the first cycle of ELIR, institutions are increasingly seeking to develop an effective working partnership with their students. This is characterised by a more integrative coordinated approach to student representation, with improving channels of communication between student representatives and student associations, and between student associations and the wider student body; and more strategically focused partnership working with student associations to promote student engagement. As institutional quality systems become more reflective, evaluative and learner-centred, so in turn the ELIR reports illustrate the emergence of a variety of new structures, mechanisms and resources to support more effective student engagement.

## General conclusions

From the evidence of the first cycle of ELIR, the following general conclusions emerge.

- The inclusion of trained student reviewers as full members of ELIR teams has been implemented very successfully. This has provided one of a number of important platforms for student engagement at sector level, as well as adding a key new dimension to the review process itself.
- Within institutions, sabbatical officers have had a prominent role in many ELIR Part 1 visits, and student representatives more generally have been consulted on institutional reflective analyses as well as participating in meetings.
- sparqs has played a pivotal role in the provision of training and support for course representatives and student officers across the sector. This includes tailored support for students' associations and institutions to promote student engagement, as well as contributing, with other QEF partners, to sector-wide fora charged with the continuing strategic development of the enhancement-led approach.
- Institutions are adopting a more strategic approach to ensuring effective student representation. This includes improving communication between student representatives and student associations, and forming strategic partnerships with student associations to drive and manage change, and to develop a more sustainable model of student engagement.

- The role of 'Student Champion', 'Dean of Students' or equivalent has been created in a small number of institutions to help progress institution-wide issues identified by students, as a locus of support and guidance for student representatives, and to take oversight of the student experience.
- Virtual learning environments have had a significant impact in supporting student engagement. They serve both to facilitate communication between student representatives themselves and their constituencies, between student representatives and the students' association, and between the students' association and the wider student body. They are also a repository for increased information, and resources for training and support of student representatives.
- Student membership of institution-led subject review panels (by 2007 in over half the sector's higher education institutions) has been a very successful development, which staff consider to have impacted positively on the process, and students consider to be empowering for them in terms of their wider engagement with, and understanding of, quality processes.
- The adoption by institutions of more diverse approaches to gathering student feedback, including more targeted and thematic questionnaires addressing the student experience, is providing more useful information for strategic planning.

### Future development of student engagement

Collectively, the ELIR reports identify a number of aspects in which good progress has been made and where a continuing focus would serve to further strengthen student engagement. In part this relates to ongoing capacity building through systemic change and increased resource. In part it relates to deepening student engagement in quality processes. Evidence from the annual discussions with QAA Scotland confirms that institutions are addressing a range of issues as part of their follow-up response to the ELIR. In the wider context, the identification of some of the more challenging aspects of student engagement will inform the continuing work to develop cross-sector strategic support for the embedding of enhancement by the partners in the Quality Enhancement Framework. From the evidence of the ELIR reports, the following emerge as key areas for further development.

#### Student associations

- Ensuring that student associations have sufficient capacity and resource to engage with learning and teaching, including appropriate support for both sabbatical and non-sabbatical officers.
- Continuing to develop effective partnerships with students' associations to drive and support change, and provide greater strategic continuity (given the lack of continuity in sabbatical officer roles).
- Enabling more strategic involvement of student associations, for example by extending sparqs training opportunities.



### **Student representation**

- Continuing to develop more integrative representational structures and roles, which facilitate communication between students at different levels, and support engagement across the wider student body.
- Developing effective student representation at college/faculty/school level, which has clearly defined roles and appropriate support and training, and is capable of articulating with other levels.
- Seeking to ensure that student representational systems reflect the demographics of the student population and in particular, ensure equivalence of structures, processes and systems for multicampus, off-campus and collaborative provision.
- Seeking to provide systematic periodic review of provision and support for research students, either by extension of existing subject review processes or through a separate process with a particular focus on postgraduate research.
- Improving representation of research students in quality processes, including on committees at institutional level.

### **Student engagement**

- Improving student participation in monitoring and review processes for programmes and modules, where engagement is seen to be problematic, for example students in large first and second-year classes, and joint honours students.
- Identifying opportunities to link the partnership approach with the employability agenda, where appropriate.
- Ensuring consistency of approach to student engagement, especially in devolved structures.
- Developing deeper engagement of student representatives in the subject review process.

## Introduction

1 The aim of this report is to provide an overview of evolving student engagement in quality assurance and enhancement processes in the Scottish higher education sector. Student engagement represents one of the five key elements of the Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework adopted in 2003, in which training and support for student representatives was to be provided by student participation in quality Scotland (sparqs), the new national student development service, and student reviewers were to be included as full members of institutional review teams. The ELIR reports demonstrate the growing impact of sparqs over the first ELIR cycle in assisting and supporting student representatives, students' associations and institutions in improving the effectiveness of student engagement in quality assurance and enhancement in institutions across Scotland. However, in different ways, and to varying degrees, the other elements of the framework also indirectly promote student engagement. For example, since 2003 a number of student representatives, principally student sabbatical and non-sabbatical officers, have been active at sector level as student members of enhancement theme steering committees, or engaged in enhancement theme projects. However, until recently, the sector has lacked a central forum for student officers to discuss student issues. The establishment in 2008 of the Scottish Learning Enhancement and Engagement Committee has now provided just such a national forum, to enable student officers to network and to help steer national education policy. The ELIR reports show that institutional structures, quality systems and processes are evolving to be more enhancement-facing with a focus on the student learning experience. In synergy with these systemic changes, institutional approaches to improving student representation and fostering student engagement are becoming more strategic. Epitomised by partnership working with student associations, such strategic approaches offer a more sustainable model of student engagement for the future.

## Student engagement with ELIR

2 Student engagement has been a key feature of the ELIR process itself. First, all ELIR teams included a trained student reviewer as a full member of the review team. Secondly, within institutions, student representatives participated in, or had the opportunity to comment on, the production of the institutional reflective analysis. The ELIR reports confirm that all institutions consulted with the student body on successive drafts of their reflective analyses. In just over half of the institutions, the steering group charged to oversee production of the reflective analysis included in its membership a student sabbatical officer, usually the student association president. Exceptionally, one institution incorporated in its reflective analysis a student view of the effectiveness of the University's quality enhancement strategy written by the student association president. Thirdly, the ELIR reports also confirm student involvement in ELIR Part 1 and Part 2 visits, including meetings with students who had a representational role at different levels in the institution. Additionally, in a number of institutions, the Part 1 visit featured presentations by both senior staff and student sabbatical officers, the latter typically addressing the student experience, developing partnerships between the student association and the institution to improve the student experience, and student involvement in quality management and enhancement activities.

## Developing effective student representation

3 Student representation is generally strong and well established at all levels in the deliberative structures of higher education institutions in Scotland. It falls into two spheres: representation at institutional level and representation at sub-institutional level, in colleges, faculties, schools, departments, programmes and courses. At institutional level, elected officers of students' associations, predominantly sabbatical officers, represent the student body on senates, academic councils and governing bodies, as well as on the key committees for quality and academic standards, enhancement of learning and teaching and the wider aspects of the student experience, including student welfare. At the subject level, programme and course representatives sit on student-staff liaison committees, while faculty, school and department representatives are members of learning and teaching committees and faculty or school boards. Research students are represented on research committees, higher degrees committees and graduate research schools, but are rarely active as representatives outside the research domain.

4 The evidence of the ELIR reports suggests that in order to promote an effective learning experience, an institution needs to engage the wider body of students in a 'partnership'. However, engagement of this order requires more from the institution than just provision for student representation; it is dependent on good communication and support for student representatives to fulfil their role successfully. ELIR reports show that while students are generally satisfied with representation at programme and course level, the effectiveness of representation at the next level (that is, college/faculty/school) is frequently questioned. One ELIR report attributes the problem to a historic lack of consistency within institutions in the extent and nature of representation at the middle level, coupled with a lack of clarity about the nature of the role.

5 The emerging focus on the student experience has highlighted the need for clear channels of communication in turn between institutions and their students' associations, and between students' associations and the student body they represent. The ELIR reports show that institutions and students' associations are working together to improve communications in the key links between these areas. For example, at the time of their reviews, two institutions are reported to be seeking to create a unified system of student representation, through the establishment of a 'student parliament', constituted from all student representatives.

6 Another two institutions are reported to be developing the role of a student 'school officer' to bridge the communication gap between student programme and course representatives, the school, and the students' association, with a view to promoting student engagement in quality assurance and enhancement. In both institutions the role of school officer was still evolving, and indeed, in one, was described as a pilot. In the first case, the ELIR team considered the school officer role to be an innovative approach to addressing the challenge of linking local and institutional representation, and one which had considerable potential. Supported by a good role specification, training and an honorarium, the school officers are said to provide effective student representation within multidisciplinary schools, in a devolved structure, linking to the students' association through membership of the Students' Association Academic Committee (which comprises in membership all student

representatives) and the Student Senate, and sometimes serving also as members of school learning and teaching committees. The ELIR report notes, 'These two forums provide a mechanism for sharing views and discussing institution-wide issues such as those identified by the University's Learning and Teaching Board. The Students' Association Academic Committee and the Student Senate have been effective in facilitating student representatives to make cross-school comparisons...and in enabling them to make informed judgements on consistency and comparability across the University'. In the second institution, where the role of school officer was being piloted, the ELIR report notes that the requirement to attend school boards had been dropped in favour of a focus on communication with student-staff consultative committees, as a way of optimising communication.

7 In one large ancient university, where greater emphasis was placed on student representation at the college and school levels, the students' association had introduced a system in which two undergraduate school representatives from each school were responsible for liaising with the academic management of the school. The ELIR report elaborates, 'Each school has a school council which is open to any matriculated student within the school. The councils are chaired by the school representatives, and class representatives are members. The University has recognised that the system is working more effectively in some parts of the institution than others'. The students' association is reported to be providing ongoing support and training, which to date had focused mainly on encouraging school representatives to establish themselves within their school.

8 Also apparent from the ELIR reports is the widespread impact of virtual learning environments in facilitating communication between students' associations and student representatives, and between student representatives and the wider student body. Dedicated websites serve both as a repository of information, and as a resource for training and support, including the dissemination of online training packages developed independently or in collaboration with sparqs.

## **Institutions and student associations: promoting student engagement**

9 In association with sparqs, all students' associations have developed and delivered annual training for course representatives. In addition, the ELIR reports demonstrate a general trend in institutions to provide policy statements or student representative handbooks as a means of encouraging effective student representation and feedback. Usually produced in collaboration with sparqs, these generally contain information about student representation in the institution's deliberative and monitoring and review processes, including on the operation of student-staff liaison committees, as well as advice on the procedures for appointment, and guidance on the role and responsibilities of student representatives.

10 In two institutions, the student representative system has been strengthened through the appointment of a 'Student Champion' and 'Dean of Students' respectively. In the first institution, the 'Student Champion's' role is to progress at senior level institution-wide issues identified by students, and to take forward equality and diversity matters. The role also includes convening the institution's Equal

Opportunities Committee, the Disability Advisory Group, and the Welfare Forum. The role is described as a locus of support for student representatives, and a source of advice and guidance on how to progress matters of importance to student representatives. In the second institution, the remit of the Dean of Students includes a 'championing' role for the student experience and helps enable further dialogue between the University and the students' association.

11 More generally, the ELIR reports show how institutions and student associations are working effectively in partnership, taking forward a range of initiatives to encourage students to engage with the work of enhancing the student experience. The ELIR reports provide some particularly interesting and innovative examples of partnership working between institutions and students' associations, to promote effective student representation and engagement through institutions' and students' associations' deliberative structures.

12 One such new initiative, launched in 2004-05, was in its early stages at the time of the institution's ELIR. Linking to the institution's employability agenda, the 'Partners in Delivery' project is described as aiming 'to develop graduates who are dynamic, confident, innovative, inclusive, responsive, and entrepreneurial and valued by employers, thereby reflecting the 2010 Vision of the University'. It comprises two complementary elements specifically concerned with increasing student engagement: a Partnership Agreement and a Student Leader Programme, run by the Students' Association. The Partnership Agreement, launched in 2004-05, sets out the standards, services and facilities that students can expect from the institution, which includes students having the opportunity to comment on programme delivery through the election of class representatives. It also makes clear the responsibilities of individual students, including participation in learning activities. The Student Leader Programme, run by the students' association in partnership with the institution, aims to support and develop the leadership qualities of students who undertake roles such as sabbatical officers, class representatives, welfare volunteers, societies' officers or sports captains. The ELIR report explains that:

'Students participating in the programme are asked to produce evidence of effective participation in, for example, staff-student consultative groups, and are eligible for a certificate signed both by the Principal and the President of the Students' Association, and for nomination as [name of institution] Student of the Year. A further aspect of the Student Leader programme has been the introduction of paid positions as Student Guides to promote and assist student access to support services'.

13 In a similar vein, student representatives at another institution have the opportunity to attend, in addition to the normal student association training sessions, a programme of key skills sessions provided by the students' association student training team, a group of students who have undergone a 'Training the Trainers' certificate offered through the NUS National Student Learning Programme. These sessions are held throughout the year and are open to all the University's students.

14 At another institution, where the demographics of the student population have made it more difficult to secure student representation on school boards (a significant

proportion of students being in full-time employment), the students' association worked with the institution's quality enhancement unit to develop a student representation strategy. The strategy defines the student representative arrangements across the institution and one of its key objectives is that all student representatives should have access to the same information, guidance and support. As part of the strategy, a new role of student school officer was piloted in 2005-06 (see paragraph 7). The ELIR report notes that 'This links with a theme emerging from the work of [the students' association] and the Quality and Enhancement Unit, and which was emphasised in discussions during ELIR, to stop trying to fit the students into the existing structures and start shaping the structures around students'. The students' association is reported to be working on a number of new strategies to ensure that currently under-represented constituencies within the student community are represented, and to encourage such groups to become involved. For example, prior to the ELIR visit, two 'STAR' (Students Taking Action and Representing) groups had been established successfully, one for gay, lesbian and transgender students, and the other for international students. By the time of the ELIR visit, STAR groups for women and for postgraduate students had been established, and further groups were planned.

## **Student engagement in monitoring and review processes**

15 In all Scottish higher education institutions, the principal forum for student engagement with quality assurance and enhancement at the programme level has been the student-staff liaison committee. Overall, the ELIR reports confirm the effective operation of student-staff liaison committees across the sector, but highlight in some cases the need for more timely identification and appointment of student representatives, and greater attention to the publication of follow-up action. The delivery of training and support for student representatives is contingent on the timely appointment and notification of names of student representatives to students' associations. This appears to have been more of a challenge in the earlier part of the ELIR cycle, with the later reports showing these processes to be working more effectively.

16 A number of institutions are reported to have taken deliberate steps to empower student representatives on student-staff liaison committees. For example, in at least two cases student representatives are given the opportunity to chair meetings or take the role of secretary; in these and other cases, students are also encouraged to hold a pre-meeting without staff present. More generally, it is common for the minutes of student-staff liaison committees to be included in the documentation for institution-led review at the subject level.

17 As institutions and students' associations seek to improve the effectiveness of student representation, there is evidence of a growing awareness of the need for more integrated, better coordinated channels of communication between representatives at programme or course level on student-staff liaison committees, representatives at the middle level (that is, college, faculty, school), and the students' association. The student-staff liaison committee is beginning to be viewed less as a primary vehicle for communication, and more as a key element of a wider network, which facilitates the identification of student issues at the institutional level.

18 Three ELIR reports note that the institutions in question experienced reluctance on the part of students to complete questionnaires and/or attend committees on which they had a representative role. The engagement of students in large first and second-year classes was perceived to be particularly problematic. In these cases the diversity and demography of the student body, coupled with the wider difficulty of engaging students who are balancing their time between academic and part-time work commitments, is seen to result in a culture of low student engagement. As one ELIR team observed, 'There is a risk of students being seen as less than fully active partners both in the learning process and in their engagement with [the University's enhancement strategy]'

19 The majority of ELIR reports indicate a shift in institutional monitoring and review processes from teaching to learning, with a greater focus on the experience of the learner, for example in student questionnaires. The increasing focus on the continuous improvement of the student experience in turn informs annual faculty and school reports, enabling better articulation between quality assurance processes and institutional strategic planning processes. However, it appears students are not always clear about the significance or relevance of various mechanisms for gaining their feedback. In particular, several institutions experienced a low response rate to online questionnaires, although there was a view that virtual learning environment based questionnaires which can be completed online elicited a better response rate (see paragraph 42).

20 Institutional strategies to promote student engagement need to take more cognisance of students' different modes of study, programme type, and, in some cases, location of study. For example, where institutions have multicampus, off-campus, or collaborative provision, the ELIR reports highlight the need for equivalence of structures, systems and processes so that all students have equal opportunity to participate in monitoring and review processes. One ELIR report noted that while the mechanisms for student feedback in validated provision would normally include questionnaires and student-staff liaison committees, associated and accredited partners sometimes had difficulty in persuading students to provide feedback. Another ELIR report notes the institution's own view that off-campus provision received inadequate consideration in some school annual programme monitoring reports. This was seen to be symptomatic of the difficulties of achieving equivalence of process and student engagement for off-campus provision, but nevertheless highlighted a need for greater consistency of approach between schools. Yet another ELIR report noted the institution's recent establishment of a collaborative forum, to allow common themes and actions to be identified and addressed consistently, and to ensure clear and consistent reporting lines with its committee structure for all collaborative links.

21 On campus, certain student groups may be marginalised by the quality systems in place. For example, the ELIR reports suggest that students on joint honours programmes in some institutions are less able to engage effectively in quality assurance processes, because monitoring and reporting arrangements do not adequately cater for them. Where responsibility is shared by departments, at times this leaves both staff and students unclear where responsibility for a programme lies. In such cases, to ensure equity of provision for students, institutions need to clarify

the ownership of such programmes at departmental/subject level, and consider how quality assurance arrangements can be implemented most effectively.

22 In numerous cases, but particularly in the case of smaller institutions, the importance of informal student feedback was emphasised. This was particularly true of the small specialist institutions, where the closer, more intense working relationship with tutors, often in a studio environment, affords more opportunity for students to provide informal feedback on the nature of provision. While both institutions and students valued the role of informal feedback, and were keen to preserve this spontaneity, they were also aware of the importance of capturing these student views at the institutional level, to bring about greater transparency and consistency of practice.

23 From the evidence of the ELIR reports, it appears that, in general, departments and schools take rigorous steps to close feedback loops to student representatives at module or programme level, including the outcomes of senior committees to which the student-staff liaison committees report. Variability in feedback from student-staff liaison committees is raised in only one ELIR report, and in this case students affirmed that where minutes were posted on departmental notice boards this was effective. It may be relevant that the virtual learning environment at the institution in question was at an early stage in its development at the time of the ELIR.

24 The ELIR reports suggest there is scope for more strategic student engagement in the evaluation of outcomes from annual monitoring and review processes. For example, as a culmination of their annual review processes, two of the small specialist institutions hold an evaluative event during the autumn, which the student association president attends. In one case, the event is also attended by graduates, together with external representatives of the professions. This latter example attracted particular praise from the ELIR team: 'The use of graduates in the evaluation phase appears to be particularly effective in that it provides a longer-term perspective and context for student concerns'. At least one of the larger institutions holds a school-based annual monitoring event, in which some schools are reported to be developing student participation.

25 In those institutions where it is used, the 'thematic audit' process affords another means of engaging with students on strategic issues, and particular aspects of the student experience. Most pertinently, one institution is reported to have conducted a thematic audit relating to student engagement with quality assurance and enhancement processes, which has been effective in producing tangible enhancement through providing an insight into the effectiveness of these arrangements and in generating resultant action plans.

26 The ELIR reports indicate that in many institutions, internally conducted annual surveys on the student experience are becoming more common, while in a relatively few cases during this period participation in the National Student Survey complemented the outcomes of internal monitoring and review processes.



## Institution-led quality review at the subject level

27 The ELIR reports indicate that at the time of the reviews at least 13 of the 20 institutions had included at least one student member on their subject review panels, while a further four were keeping the position under review.<sup>2</sup> These included one institution where the subject review process was holistic, and student association representatives shared the institution's view that the wide coverage of the reviews, with much material of limited immediate concern to students, militated against student membership. Student members of review panels are typically sabbatical officers, but in at least two institutions student members are drawn from a pool of student reviewers provided by the student association, with demand for places reported to be considerable.

28 ELIR reports confirm that at the time of the reviews at least six institutions were providing generic training to prepare students to participate as members of subject review panels; in three of these the training was provided through students' associations in tandem with sparqs. Where no formal training was provided for this role, student members in two institutions were reported to receive support from students' association staff, while a further three institutions provided written guidelines on the process, combined with oral briefings, including in one case from the chair of the review panel.

29 The evidence indicates that student members of subject review panels discharge their responsibilities professionally, and that their participation is valued by staff. One ELIR report notes:

'Student membership of [subject review] panels is positively valued by staff, and the dynamic relationship between these reviews and the University Strategy for the Enhancement of the Quality of Learning and Teaching was emphasised in discussions with the staff involved. Academic staff and students highlighted that [the reviews] are influenced by student involvement in other ways, including through the reporting of [student-staff liaison committee] discussions during the [review] process and by [review] panels meeting groups of students.'

30 Another report states that students who had participated in some capacity in the institution's subject review process considered it to be a valuable and useful experience. Student panel members in particular emphasised that the process had served to increase their own confidence in the quality of the University's academic provision, and that they had been well integrated into the panel as a whole. The ELIR team concludes:

'These positive views endorsed the University's own view of the value of student membership of [subject review] panels as a practical example of its aim to ensure that "effective engagement with students is integral to the University's approach to the assurance and enhancement of the quality of teaching and learning." Although only in the early stages of implementation, the involvement of student

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<sup>2</sup> At the end of the ELIR cycle, anecdotal evidence suggested that all institutions either had or were in the process of revising their subject review procedures to include a student member on the review panel.

panel members and the contribution that they are making to the process is an evident strength.'

31 Subject review events typically involve meetings with student representatives for the subject area, including members of student-staff liaison committees as well as different groups of teaching and support staff. Less commonly, the process involves graduate students or makes provision for the views of graduate students to be sought via questionnaire.

32 The ELIR reports demonstrate that, in addition to the standard meetings between review panels and student representatives, and the documentary inputs relating to student feedback and student-staff liaison committees, institutions are exploring a variety of ways of engaging students more effectively in the review process. For example, two institutions have sought to involve students in the preparation of the self-evaluation document and a third encourages a student-led submission as part of the review documentation. In this last example, student members of the student-staff liaison committee are invited to contribute a written student submission to the subject review panel. The ELIR report confirms that, 'In the instances where the students take the opportunity to submit a written commentary to the panel, these submissions make an effective contribution to the [subject review] process'.

33 One emerging issue here, particularly for institutions with more devolved management structures, is how to ensure a consistent approach to student engagement, both in terms of the involvement of student representatives in the review process, and in terms of the role of the student panel member. For example, there may be variation in the way in which students' views are captured, and in the style and degree of formality of meetings with groups of students. Such variation on approach may also contribute to a lack of clarity among students about how their views have impacted on provision.

34 In two institutions where there was no student panel member, students were either consulted as part of the preparation for the review or as part of the deliberations on the outcomes. In the first, staff highlighted that 'there were opportunities for students to comment on elements of the material departments submitted and that students views were sought during the panel one-day visit ...'. In the second, student-staff liaison committees were asked, after the event, to consider and comment on the main findings of school reviews.

35 In 15 out of 20 institutions, subject reviews focus only on taught provision. In many of these cases, it appears that institutions lack an alternative systematic, periodic review of provision and support for research students, incorporating independent external input. One ELIR report suggests that this gap in the quality processes be addressed either by extending the existing subject review process, or through another process with a particular focus on postgraduate research.

36 Institution-led subject reviews can last from one to three days, depending on the scope of the review and the volume of provision included. The considerable time commitment means that, typically, the role of student member is more likely to be undertaken by sabbatical officers, as part of their normal remit. However, one ELIR report does mention remuneration of students for participation in subject review.

## Research students

37 During the ELIR cycle, many institutions were reviewing or restructuring their postgraduate provision, in the light of the publication in 2004 of the second edition of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*. While the precepts are mainly concerned with the research environment, progress and review arrangements, and student support, the *Code* does make reference to the benefits of research student involvement in quality processes: 'There should be formal opportunities for institutional, faculty and departmental committees and groups to consider statistical and other information relating to postgraduate research programmes and to act upon it. Student involvement in these processes is beneficial'.

38 Postgraduate research students are generally well represented on research committees, and within graduate research school structures. However, beyond the immediate research environment, the evidence of the ELIR reports suggests there is significant under-representation of postgraduate research students on committees at the institutional level. Nor are they routinely represented on student-staff liaison committees. Encouragingly, a number of institutions have taken steps to redress this imbalance. For example, in one institution there is provision for postgraduate student-staff committees to function as either discipline-based or school-wide forums. A small specialist institution was introducing a student-staff liaison committee for postgraduates, putting in place arrangements for more holistic collection of feedback from research students, to monitor their broad experience and progression, with clear and appropriate plans for further development. At the time of its ELIR, yet another institution had established a research student coordinating group to consider mechanisms for research student representatives to participate at the institutional level.

39 Because of the obvious differences between postgraduate research and taught programmes, separate and distinctive processes are required for the collection of student feedback. Generally, postgraduate research students have a half-yearly progress review which includes the completion of a confidential questionnaire, the outcomes of which are considered by the relevant central committees. The ELIR reports also indicate some lack of awareness among both postgraduate research students and staff of the mechanisms for receiving feedback on the outcomes of analysis of the questionnaires. Even where graduate schools are in place, devolved structures are sometimes seen to lead to variability and inconsistency in practice. In some cases, this issue has been addressed through the establishment of an overarching postgraduate research school at institutional level. Although there are a very few references in the ELIR reports to surveys of research student views, no clear overview emerges on how institutions gather feedback on the research student experience. One institution was reported to be looking at how to increase the effectiveness of surveys of research students' views. Another required its schools to complete research degree appraisal overview reports on an annual basis, in parallel with the annual appraisal of undergraduate courses.

40 In one large research-led institution, from 2003-04 postgraduate student representatives have been elected in the annual student association elections, but by postgraduate students only. In this instance, all postgraduate representatives deal with institution-wide rather than subject-specific issues. Both taught and research

postgraduates can become involved, although the student association's experience is that taught postgraduates are less likely to take time out of their intensive study for this activity. In 2001-02 this institution introduced postgraduate questionnaires; one for taught postgraduates and one for research students, which are designed to identify general and specific issues of concern to postgraduates. The ELIR report observes, 'The questionnaires also aid the University's decision-making processes by providing statistics which can be used to support specific proposals or decisions. The University intends for 2006/07, to build on the questionnaires by putting in place more robust procedures for monitoring the matters raised and the resulting actions taken'. The importance of having effective institutional mechanisms for obtaining feedback from currently registered postgraduate research students is further pointed up by low response rates to questionnaires post-graduation.

41 In institutions with relatively low numbers of postgraduate research students, where there is an uneven distribution between schools or departments, the Graduate Centre or Graduate School has a key role in developing and supporting a research community, for example through the production of a research newsletter and the establishment of research 'space' in the virtual learning environment. An institution with distinctively distributed campuses has taken measures to ensure that research students can interact with their peers and develop a meaningful research community. In addition to holding an annual two-day research students' induction event and conference, this institution, at the time of its ELIR, was trialling a software application produced by its Learning and Information Systems Department aimed at supporting the research student community by providing an electronic 'social networking' facility.

## **Diverse approaches to student feedback**

42 The collection of feedback from students is an integral part of institutions' engagement with the student community. In addition to the formal mechanisms for monitoring and review at course and programme levels, the ELIR reports demonstrate that institutions are adopting more diverse approaches to gathering student feedback. This signifies recognition that some feedback methods may no longer be fit for purpose and that regular requests for feedback via questionnaires may also result in questionnaire fatigue and a poor return rate. Some ELIR reports suggest that virtual learning environment based questionnaires, which can be completed online, elicit a better response rate from students (see paragraph 19).

43 The increasing focus of institutions on the student experience is reflected, particularly in the later ELIR reviews, in a refocusing of the approach to managing the various student support services (including careers, library and information services, counselling services, and learning support) through new task groups and committees charged with oversight of the student experience. One review report highlights the use of questionnaires to elicit student views on centrally provided support services, as well as the content, delivery and management of courses.

44 One of the later ELIR reports shows how the use of questionnaires is becoming more targeted so that undergraduates now receive university-wide questionnaires in their first and final years only, in order to concentrate, respectively, on student transition to the university, and students' experiences over their entire learning period.

The questionnaire on the first-year experience is part of a wider institutional initiative to provide more detailed feedback from students, and to help identify the causes of low progression rates on some courses. In addition, new questionnaires have been implemented for postgraduate and distance-learning students, and the module questionnaire has been revised and shortened. With regard to the management of the process, the ELIR report notes, 'The development of an electronic platform for questionnaire delivery, analysis and feedback to students has delivered greater efficiency in processing feedback, amongst other benefits, and student response rates have improved significantly since the introduction of the revised questionnaires'.

45 Student focus groups are used in a variety of different contexts: to inform the development of policy and practice relating to the student experience of institutional support for their learning, for specific strategic and institution-wide matters, and by some departments to supplement information provided by liaison committees. For example, one ELIR report notes, 'The use of such groups facilitates informed discussion and appears to result in swifter and more meaningful modification or change'. Another states that 'The recent review of the University's 2010 strategy incorporated students' views obtained through a specific student focus group. The University indicated that student groups will have further input and opportunity to comment on the University's strategy'.

46 Over the period of the ELIR cycle the use of 'student satisfaction' surveys appears to have become more widespread. One institution, in particular, has undertaken a project funded by the Scottish Funding Council Widening Access Premium Funds. At the time of the ELIR, the project had generated three sets of student satisfaction surveys giving an overview of student reaction to their experiences as they progressed through their programmes. These data were supplemented by 25 group interviews designed to gather information on the student experience that was both 'student specific' and of more general interest. The ELIR report notes the impact of the study to date, in so far as 'The results have identified the need for a clearer recognition of the diverse nature of the student body in the development of learning strategies....To date in addition to University level deliberation of the outcomes of the project, schools have also considered the outcomes of the project in relation to their own performance'.

47 A new federal institution uses an annual online student experience survey, which involves the institution's students across all its academic partners. The survey is regarded as providing a consistent means of collecting and analysing responses from across the academic partners, and in particular, as providing an opportunity for students to give feedback in a standardised way. This provides quantitative and qualitative data to inform action planning by the academic partners, subject networks and individual programmes.

48 Another ELIR report describes the institution's periodic survey of the whole student body through an institution-wide student satisfaction survey. The first student satisfaction survey was conducted in 2002, covering a broad range of topics including the quality of teaching and learning, and a follow-up survey was scheduled for 2006-07. The same institution had also undertaken a survey of international students in order to better understand the needs of this student group. However, the ELIR report notes that while some findings of the 2002 survey had been incorporated into

the learning and teaching strategy, the process of responding to the issues emerging needed to be more systematic. It also suggests that the institution should consider the benefits of undertaking such surveys more frequently, in order to facilitate wider student understanding of the potential benefits of gathering such information.

49 Three ELIR reports demonstrate institutions taking an integrated approach to the 'student experience', in seeking to bring together consideration of the different areas of student academic and pastoral support through specific committees or task groups. However, at the time of the institutions' ELIR, these integrated committees were at an early stage of development, in one case described by the ELIR team as 'student focused' rather than 'student driven'. In one of these examples, the remit of the Student Experience Task Group extends beyond student support. Reporting to the institution's quality enhancement committee, the group's remit is 'to take account of student opinion and involvement in institutional initiatives and to ensure that issues affecting students are brought to the attention of the Quality Enhancement Committee'. Noting that the Task Group had met less frequently in the current session than in the previous session, the ELIR team also became aware there appeared to be issues of pressing importance to the student body which were not currently being considered by the group. However, while there may be need for refinement, these new and developing approaches show that some institutions are already endeavouring to provide a formal locus within their deliberative structures for holistic consideration of the student experience.

## **Institutions and student associations: working in partnership**

50 The relationship between institutions and their student associations is a key element in student engagement with quality assurance and enhancement. Regular informal meetings take place between senior officers of the students' associations and their principals. In smaller institutions this is sometimes a wider forum, including a number of senior staff and student representatives. More formal liaison committees, where they exist, focus on the support services, which engenders a sense of ownership in developments. One ELIR report notes that 'the partnership approach [between the institution and the Student Association] has proven to be effective in driving and managing change and the University will be able to develop and gain from the enthusiasm and energy which is clearly present in the staff and students'. It goes on to observe that embedding this approach could help to develop a more sustainable model of student engagement.

51 As part of their strategic approach to enhancement, some institutions have increased the capacity of their student associations to engage with teaching and learning matters, with additional student officer support. Two institutions are reported, at the time of their ELIR, to have funded additional student sabbatical posts and a third planned to do so in the near future. A further five institutions have established additional administrative support posts within student associations, in some cases associated with specific initiatives, for example to promote student representation, or to promote student engagement more generally.

52 In a few cases, the ELIR reports highlight the heavy workload of student association officers. The enhancement agenda places an increased burden on student association officers, particularly sabbaticals. One ELIR report also notes the lack of formal support available for non-sabbatical officers, and the need for further development to ensure both continuity and effective support. This view is echoed in another ELIR report: 'Current arrangements put a large burden of work, and of expectation on [Student Association] officers, particularly the new Vice-President (Education and Careers). There would be benefit in both the University and [the Student Association] considering further how they might work in partnership to improve the support that is offered to [Student Association] officers'.

53 The lack of continuity in sabbatical officer posts is seen as limiting the extent to which student associations can engage in strategic decision-making. With this in mind, one institution highlights the importance of the contribution which students make to short-term working groups, which do enable them to shape longer term strategic development. It considers that the focus, small size and short duration of such working groups is more in tune with the perspective and experience of student participants and that student involvement is often most effective in this context.

54 Interestingly, one ELIR report notes the institution's innovative plan, in response to a request from the students' association, to include the students' association in its rolling programme of service area reviews. Allied with this, the same institution is also reported to be outlining arrangements, through the Principal's office, for providing support to the students' association on undertaking strategic planning. Believing that there would be benefit in extending training to support greater strategic involvement, the students' association proposed that training opportunities offered by sparqs might be extended in order to support the university in its efforts to promote the greater strategic involvement of the students' association.

55 Despite the more limited opportunities for strategic involvement of students, there are many examples where representative systems enable students to propose ideas and influence institutional debates, such as, for example, the development of a personal tutor system and improvements to the learning and teaching infrastructure. One report emphasises the professional contribution of student representatives: 'The University recognises the professionalism displayed by the [Student Association] sabbaticals, in particular, and the student representatives in general, highlighting that the contributions and views of students are valued. The professional contribution of student representatives was evident during the ELIR'.

56 Another report acknowledges that significant student involvement in initiatives can reduce risk and improve on successful delivery of initiatives, such as, for example, in the introduction of a virtual learning environment. In this instance, the student association was extensively involved in briefing the student body and collecting their views. This cooperative approach between the university and the student association was seen by both staff and students as important in ensuring the widespread ownership of the virtual learning environment project across the university.

57 The ELIR reports demonstrate that institutions are continuing to build productive partnerships with their student associations, characterised by consultation and constructive dialogue, with parties working together to ensure effective student representation at a number of levels.

## **Conclusion**

58 The student voice is critical to the promotion of an effective learning experience. The ELIR reports confirm that Scottish higher education institutions have made significant progress in promoting student engagement. Over the period of the first ELIR cycle institutions have been working in conjunction with student associations to build capacity and to promote effective student representation. This has been achieved partly through the provision of training and support for student representatives, partly through the creation of new representative roles, with a focus on improving channels of communication with student associations and the wider student body, and partly through structural and systemic changes to focus on the student learning experience. The successful implementation of student reviewers on ELIR review teams has been swiftly followed in a majority of institutions by the inclusion of student members on institution-led subject reviews, and in some cases, more effective engagements with students in the subject area. More targeted approaches to student feedback are delivering better information to support strategic planning, often assisted by virtual learning environment based technology. These achievements provide a strong basis for continuing future development. Across the sector, the sharpening focus on the enhancement of the student learning experience should engender a deepening engagement of students both in quality processes within institutions, and within the sector as a whole.



## Annex

This interim report draws on the evidence of the following ELIR reports:

The Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, Glasgow	March 2004
University of Glasgow	April 2004
Queen Margaret University College*	May 2004
Bell College of Technology, Hamilton**	June 2004
University of Dundee	November 2004
The Glasgow School of Art	February 2005
Edinburgh College of Art	March 2005
University of Aberdeen	April 2005
University of Strathclyde	April 2005
The Scottish Agricultural College	May 2005
Bell College of Technology, Hamilton* (Follow-up review)	November 2005
Glasgow Caledonian University	December 2005
Heriot-Watt University	February 2006
University of St Andrews	March 2006
University of Paisley	April 2006
Napier University, Edinburgh	April 2006
University of Edinburgh	November 2006
University of Stirling	November 2006
The Robert Gordon University	April 2007
University of Abertay Dundee	May 2007
UHI Millennium Institute	May 2007

\* now Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh

\*\*now the University of the West of Scotland

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