QAA Scotland

Enhancement-led institutional review

University of Aberdeen

MAY 2010

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Introduction

1   This is the report of an Enhancement-led institutional review (ELIR) of the University of Aberdeen (the University) undertaken by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). QAA is grateful to the University for the willing cooperation provided to the ELIR team.

ELIR method and report

2   The ELIR method was revised during 2007-08 following extensive consultation with the Scottish higher education sector. Full detail on the method is set out in the *Enhancement-led institutional review handbook: Scotland (second edition) 2008*, which is available on QAA's website.

3   ELIR reports are structured around three main sections: the management of the student learning experience; institution-led monitoring and review of quality and academic standards; and the strategic approach to quality enhancement. Each of these three sections leads to a 'commentary' in which the views of the ELIR team are set out. The three commentaries, in turn, lead to the overarching judgement on the level of confidence which can be placed in the institution's management of academic standards and the quality of the student learning experience. A summary report is also available in printed form (from QAA) and from QAA's website.

Method of review

4   The University submitted a Reflective Analysis (RA), which provided the focus for the review. The RA was supported by a number of accompanying documents, including case studies on the Aberdeen Students Taking Active Roles (STAR) Award, and the international approach taken by the University to evidence gathering during the Curriculum Reform Project. The ELIR team also received the report of the University's previous ELIR which took place in 2005.

5   Development of the RA was overseen by a steering group chaired by the Convener of the University Committee on Teaching and Learning which included the three college directors of teaching and learning; a head of one of the graduate schools; the Students' Association President for Education and Employability; and representatives of the Centre for Learning and Teaching, the Registry and the Careers Service. After initial consideration by the University Management Group, the University Committee on Teaching and Learning and the Senate at their meetings in November 2009, the RA and subsequent drafts were made available to all staff and students by communal email and a dedicated website, and comments were sought from across the University. A final version of the RA was approved by the Senate and by the Senior Vice-Principal on behalf of the University Court in February 2010.

6   The ELIR team visited the University on two occasions: the Part 1 visit took place on 24 and 25 March 2010 and the Part 2 visit took place in the week beginning 3 May 2010.

7   The ELIR team comprised Professor Howard Colley, Professor Bob Craik, Mr Gavin Lee, Professor Martin Oosthuizen, Ms Gill Troup and Mr Tom Ward. The review was managed on behalf of QAA by Ms Stella Heath, Assistant Director, QAA Scotland.

Background information about the institution

8   The University has three Colleges: Arts and Social Sciences (CASS), Life Sciences and Medicine (CLSM) and Physical Sciences (CoPS). Each college contains a number of schools, and each has a graduate school responsible for the oversight of postgraduate taught and research provision. The main University campus is at King's College in Old Aberdeen. A large satellite

campus, comprising much of the provision of the College of Life Sciences and Medicine, is at Foresterhill, adjacent to the Aberdeen Royal Infirmary. The Rowett Institute of Nutrition and Health merged with the University in July 2008 and contributes to the delivery of postgraduate taught programmes administered through the College of Life Sciences and Medicine Graduate School. The University has a small number of collaborative partnerships, including formal validation agreements with the Al-Maktoum Institute in Dundee, the International Christian College in Glasgow and the UHI Millennium Institute (UHI).

Institution's strategy for quality enhancement

9   At the time of the 2005 ELIR, the University's priority was to raise awareness in the newly formed colleges and schools of the principles of developing a quality enhancement agenda within an assurance culture. Since then, the University has embarked on a major review of the curriculum, and the University's strategic approach to quality enhancement is now embedded in the Curriculum Reform Project, which the University highlighted as being far reaching and representing a step change in the institution's approach to quality enhancement. Through the Project, an extensive dialogue has been initiated across the University about the institution's culture and values.

Management of the student learning experience

Key features of the student population and the effectiveness of the institution's approach to managing information about its student population

10   In 2009-10 the University of Aberdeen had 12,972 full-time equivalent (FTE) students, of whom 81 per cent were undergraduate students, 13 per cent taught postgraduate students and 6 per cent postgraduate research students. The total includes 3,412 non-UK FTE students. Of the 2009-10 total student population, just over 6 per cent were studying part-time and approximately 3 per cent were classified as distance learners for Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) return purposes. In the same year, 233 students were studying on collaborative programmes. The international student population increased by 36 per cent from 2004-05 to 2008-09.

11   The University records data relating to aspects of the student experience through a student record system administered by the Registry. Students have access to a student portal where, for example, they can review and propose amendments to their personal data, review their academic record, register, and pay fees. The University produces an annually updated Institutional Academic Profile, and scheduled or on-demand reports are also generated for use by University Management Group, colleges, schools, or individual practitioners, and are routinely supplied to schools preparing for Internal Teaching Review (ITR). The University actively uses management information to monitor and report on student retention and progression. The University acknowledges that its long-standing data storage and management system is no longer fully capable of supplying the data needed to inform the operation of its monitoring and evaluation system with respect to quality and standards. Therefore, it has begun replacing the system and the first stage of this process was completed in spring 2009. The new system is more versatile, using a portal to ensure interactive, user-friendly access to management reporting, and should provide a more versatile platform for supporting monitoring and evaluation activities (see paragraph 64).

The effectiveness of the institution's approach to engaging and supporting students in their learning

12   Students are represented on all key decision-making bodies, including the University Court, the Senate, Senate Business Committee, University Committee for Teaching and Learning (and its working groups), Academic Standards Committees, and the college and school teaching and learning committees. Students are also included as members of ITR panels.

13   Class representatives provide formal feedback on academic provision at staff-student liaison committees (SSLCs) and they have automatic membership of the relevant SSLC, a key function of which is to be involved in the annual course monitoring process. The University has worked with the Students' Association to improve coordination of, and communication between, undergraduate class representatives, for example, by establishing Students' Association school conveners. Partnership working with the Students' Association has also helped the University to promote effective representation for postgraduate research students. There is clearly a strong working relationship between the University and the Students' Association.

14   The University has a Student Affairs Committee which comprises representatives from the Students' Association and senior University staff; University welfare and support staff are also in attendance. This Committee meets twice each semester, and its remit is to advise the University Court and the Senate on policy and strategy relating to student welfare and advisory services. This approach to engaging student representatives in setting the strategic agenda is a feature of good practice.

15   The University obtains course feedback from students through Student Course Evaluation Forms (SCEFs). In 2006-07 the SCEF was revised to allow schools to include questions that related more directly to the course being reviewed. This was intended to improve student engagement with the evaluation process; however, in general, this has not happened. As a result, a University Committee on Teaching and Learning working party has been established to review the approaches to gathering feedback from students on their learning (see paragraph 56).

16   The University participates in the National Student Survey and, in response to the results of the 2009 Survey, has identified feedback on assessment as an area for development. The Framework for Feedback has been jointly developed by the Students' Association and the University, and it was implemented in 2009-10 following approval by the Student Affairs Committee and the University Committee on Teaching and Learning. The Framework sets out guiding principles to aid the provision of timely, supportive and focused feedback on students' assessed work. The Framework provides a codification of existing expected practice and, although it is too early to assess its impact, it is anticipated that the Framework will provide a basis for ensuring greater clarity and consistency of practice across the University (see paragraph 67).

17   The Curriculum Reform Project is intended to enhance the student learning experience, and promote learning and teaching across the University by developing a broadened and more flexible curriculum which takes account of increasing internationalisation in higher education, emphasises generic skills acquisition, and develops the ability to work in cross-disciplinary teams while maintaining discipline strength. The Project is intended to create a step change in learning and teaching practices at the University by engaging and supporting students in their learning through, for example, the development and recognition of co-curricular activities such as the Students Taking Active Roles (STAR) Award (see paragraph 27). Currently, incoming ERASMUS and international exchange students to the University far outnumber their outgoing counterparts, and a recommendation of the Curriculum Reform Project is that all students should have the opportunity to undertake an international placement. The University is supporting this by the establishment, during 2010, of a dedicated unit within the Careers Service.

18   The University has established three graduate schools which cater for taught postgraduate and postgraduate research students. Graduate schools are responsible for all aspects of the administrative arrangements relating to these students, and working together with the Student Recruitment and Admissions Service (SRAS) manage the admissions of postgraduate research students. The schools also coordinate programme design and delivery, and postgraduate student induction to ensure a consistent approach within colleges. Each college has a postgraduate director who has oversight of the postgraduate student experience. Feedback from postgraduate research students suggests that there is variability in practice between the graduate schools' approaches to student induction, student representation and student support and monitoring, which could lead to variable quality of the postgraduate research student experience.

19   There have been a number of University developments in the provision of learning support since the 2005 ELIR. Previously, the University offered student support through a number of different services: Student Support, University Sport, and Campus Services. These now form the Directorate of Student Affairs. Student support was also provided through the Careers Service, the Centre for Learning and Teaching, and the Registry. These now form the Directorate of Academic Affairs. As a result of a recommendation of the University's Curriculum Reform Commission, and in consultation with the Students' Association, the University is now developing a one-stop-shop Student Centre which will provide an integrated support and information service, drawing on services provided by both the Directorate of Student Affairs and the Directorate of Academic Affairs.

20   The University also provides support for students through academic advisers of studies. Advisers of studies act as a student's personal contact with the academic and administrative structures of the University. During 2008-09 a working group of the Senate reviewed undergraduate academic and pastoral support for students, and focused on the advising system. The University is currently implementing the recommendations of the working group, and much of this will be completed during 2010-11. On implementation of the new arrangements, all academic staff will be available for advising and this will reduce the average advisee load, although, due to the implementation of the new curriculum, advisers will be required to advise on a broader range of courses, which will make the role more complex. A new training programme for advisers will be implemented over the next two to three years in line with the implementation of the Curriculum Reform Project.

21   The University has continued to reflect on its approach to student retention, and has sought to enhance this by providing greater support for students immediately post-arrival. This induction support includes the introduction of a 'New Students' website, bespoke events for direct entrants and mature students, and a series of transition workshops. The University and the Students' Association have worked in partnership to evaluate the enhanced induction programme, and feedback from students has been positive.

22   Since the 2005 ELIR the University clearly has enhanced its approach to the student learning experience and has strengthened arrangements for the coordination and delivery of student support. In particular, the strategic approach taken to enhancing student induction and the advising system represents good practice.

23   Overall, students are positive about their experience at the University, and indicate that they are well supported by both academic and support staff and are actively engaged in their learning.

The effectiveness of the institution's approach to promoting the development of graduate attributes, including those relating to employability, in all of its students

24   An outcome of the Curriculum Reform Project has been to identify the attributes expected of the University's graduates. The University intends that the reformed curriculum should enable graduates to become academically excellent; critical thinkers and effective communicators; open to learning and personal development; and to be active citizens. The University is currently working on the definition of corresponding attributes for taught and research postgraduates. The University is seeking to ensure that students have the opportunity to attain the attributes through the course approval process for all newly validated programmes, and is now considering ways in which to evaluate the achievement of graduate attributes.

25   The University intends that all students will have the opportunity to acquire graduate attributes through the reformed curriculum and co-curricular activities, and this, along with other aspects of the Curriculum Reform Project, is being effectively communicated to students via a comprehensive publicity campaign by the University.

26   A further outcome of the Curriculum Reform Project is the University's intention to introduce a web-based resource to include online diagnostic and self-evaluation instruments to enable students to become aware of the attributes and skills required, and the opportunities for their acquisition. Students will be directed to resources and support which will address their personal development needs and aid their self-recognition of these attributes.

27   The Students Taking Active Roles (STAR) Award is a scheme which provides a framework to support the development of students' skills and the acquisition of graduate attributes through co-curricular activities such as: voluntary work, work experience and work placements, participation in clubs and societies, and taking an active role in student representation. The STAR Award is overseen by a steering group comprising members of the Careers Service, the Registry, and the Students' Association, and assesses students' achievement of a range of the University's identified graduate attributes (see paragraph 17).

28   The Award, which has grown from an initial pilot of 22 students in 2007-08 to 135 students registered in 2009-10, is an example of good practice. Students who had participated were positive about the project. However, as the University has recognised, the Award is resource-intensive and, therefore, challenging to scale up. The University is encouraged to consider how a broader range of students might gain recognition for skills developed through co-curricular activities.

The effectiveness of the institution's approach to managing the learning environment

29   The University is taking forward a significant programme of capital investment, including student residences, an integrated student centre, a new library building and the recently opened Aberdeen Sports Village. There are also improved learning and teaching facilities on the Foresterhill campus. Work on the new University library building began in 2009 and will complete in the autumn of 2011. The Library Project Board includes the President of the Students' Association.

30   There are dedicated resources to enhance the learning environment in support of the objectives of the Curriculum Reform Project, and the Curriculum Reform Implementation Board has oversight of relevant objectives, including the creation of more informal learning spaces as well as the one-stop-shop Student Centre. As part of the Curriculum Reform Project, the University is introducing a new approach to timetabling to make more efficient use of teaching space, and to make programmes more accessible to part-time and non-graduating students. It is also intended that the new timetable will make it easier for full-time students to balance study with paid employment, and should assist staff in time management. Wednesday afternoons will continue to be kept free to allow student participation in co-curricular activities, including sports. The new approach will also allow for the scheduling of the new Sixth Century Courses, which are part of a series of enhanced study options introduced by the Curriculum Reform Project and will be introduced from September 2010. The courses are intended to produce better informed, more rounded and more intellectually flexible graduates.

31   Overall, there have been demonstrable enhancements to the learning environment since the 2005 ELIR as a result of a planned and sustained approach by the University. Curriculum reform has created a framework for the alignment of improvements in the learning environment, and a coherent approach to the management of this area in support of University goals. This has been taken forward with appropriate consultation and involvement of student representatives and staff. Support staff noted that there was now greater shared planning across services, which is essential for the development of integrated services such as the planned Student Centre, and students were positive about the recent and planned improvements to the learning environment.

The effectiveness of the institution's approach to promoting equality of opportunity and effective learning for all of its students

32   The University has two main campuses. The majority of students are based in Old Aberdeen, with a significant percentage at Foresterhill. The Rowett Institute of Nutrition and Health, which merged with the University in 2008 and is currently based at Bucksburn, is planned to move to the Foresterhill site. The University has a relatively small number of part-time and distance-learning students and, of the 1,225 part-time students registered in 2009-10, most were studying on Access or in-service education programmes, or continuing education courses. Foresterhill students identified no problems with access to central University services and gave examples of activities, such as postgraduate student induction, being scheduled at times to ensure their ability to participate.

33   Since 2005, the University has progressed its equality and diversity agenda to cover all areas of equalities legislation, and has equality schemes and action plans in place relating to disability, gender and race. It has also developed an Equality and Diversity Impact Assessment Strategy and Toolkit, which incorporates a rolling plan of impact assessments. In 2009-10 these schemes are being united into a single Equality and Diversity Scheme. A Vice-Principal has overarching responsibility for equality and diversity matters, working with the Equality and Diversity Adviser, and the Senior Disability Adviser to ensure the University complies with relevant legislation.

34   The University's approach to equality and diversity in relation to academic provision has been systematised as a result of the Curriculum Reform Project. An Equality and Diversity Adviser advised on the development of the new curriculum, and the Senate Academic Standards (SENAS) forms for new course approval now demonstrate consideration of equalities issues, including the identification of opportunities to promote equality within the proposed provision.

35   Academic support for students with specific learning needs is located within the University's mainstream academic support services, and the Academic Skills Adviser (Dyslexia) is based in the Student Learning Service, which is part of the Centre for Learning and Teaching. The University's international student advisers give information and advice about student life at the University and in the UK, and provide specialist guidance on visa and immigration matters. English language support is available before and throughout the session via the Language Centre, and the Student Learning Service offers workshops and advice on academic skills. The University is increasing its international student numbers and is currently considering how to enhance the support it provides for these students.

36   The University is taking an active approach to ensuring equality of opportunity and effective learning for all of its students.

The effectiveness of the institution's approach to supporting and developing staff to promote effective learning for their students

37   Since the 2005 ELIR, the Centre for Learning and Teaching has been established, bringing together a number of existing services, including mandatory and optional learning and teaching development courses for academic staff. This is a significant university-wide strategic development which is contributing to a more coordinated approach to staff development. Staff noted that the Career Development and Staff Appraisal Scheme is also helping to embed a more systematic approach to identifying and meeting development needs, although the University recognises that the appraisal scheme has yet to become fully embedded throughout the institution.

38   The Centre for Learning and Teaching organises a mandatory course on learning and teaching in higher education for all probationary lecturers, and this has recently been developed to incorporate a more discipline-related focus. Probationary teaching staff also have a three-year personal training plan, which is overseen by the Head of School and Head of College.

39   The University has redeveloped its Postgraduate Certificate in HE Learning and Teaching and it now includes contributions from previous participants. The programme is now aligned with Standard Descriptors 1 and 2 of the UK Professional Standards Framework, and it was re-accredited by the Higher Education Academy in 2009. The Postgraduate Certificate is available to all academic staff, and less-experienced staff are particularly encouraged to undertake it. It is not, however, a requirement and the take-up rate is relatively low. The University is hoping that as the culture of the University changes in response to the greater institutional commitment to, and recognition of, learning and teaching development, there will be an increased take-up of opportunities such as this Postgraduate Certificate.

40   Academic staff highlighted the annual Best Practice Fair, which showcases good practice across the University, and the role of the college directors of learning and teaching, as being important in supporting innovation in learning and teaching. Excellence in Teaching awards were introduced in 2007, the primary aim of the awards being to recognise, encourage and reward staff who have undertaken the development of teaching, or support for teaching, which has resulted in particularly effective learning for students. The scheme also assists in the dissemination of information about effective teaching and support practices throughout the University. Human Resources offers a suite of leadership, management and supervisory skills programmes for all groups of staff, and has gained particular recognition for its International Leadership Development Programme (ILDP).

41   A revised promotions policy was introduced in 2006. The new procedures for Managing Promotion and Recognising Contribution provide promotion opportunities across all academic grades, including reader and professor, based on formal recognition of achievement in teaching and scholarship, and their introduction is beginning to have a positive impact on the recognition of teaching in the University.

42   Since the 2005 ELIR, clearer career paths, role definitions, promotion criteria and access to training opportunities have all contributed to a perception among staff that there has been significant improvement in staff development provision. In particular, the support provided by the Centre for Learning and Teaching for the Curriculum Reform Project has helped the University to innovate its approaches to learning and teaching, and the University is encouraged to continue enhancing staff development to support innovation in learning and teaching and curriculum reform.

The effectiveness of the institution's management of the student learning experience on collaborative programmes

43   The institution has a small number of collaborative partnerships, including formal validation agreements with the Al-Maktoum Institute in Dundee, the International Christian College in Glasgow and the UHI Millennium Institute (UHI). It also has articulation agreements with Aberdeen College and UHI, and has a partnership agreement with the Bangalore Management Academy. In 2009-10 there were 233 students on collaborative programmes.

44   Views from students on collaborative programmes are gathered through local partner feedback mechanisms, monitored locally on an annual basis and used in the annual review of each collaborative partnership. There is evidence of the University actively supporting the enhancement of the student learning experience at partner institutions. For example, Student Support and other support staff have been engaging directly with their counterparts at UHI and the Al-Maktoum Institute. The University's staff commented favourably on the effectiveness of these engagements in relation to communication and staff interaction.

Institution-led monitoring and review of quality and standards

Key features of institution-led monitoring and review at the institution, and the extent to which these arrangements meet sector-wide expectations

45   The University identifies three key mechanisms for the monitoring and review of its provision: Internal Teaching Review (ITR), external examining, and annual monitoring of courses. Courses are generally semester-long units within degree programmes.

46   The ITR procedure was introduced in 1994, and most recently modified in 2008-09 to accommodate the University's Learning and Teaching Framework and to address Scottish Funding Council Guidance. ITR continues to be modified to accommodate changes connected with the Curriculum Reform Project. The modifications take account of the contribution of support services in periodic review, and the need to monitor the embedding of graduate attributes in programmes. The aims and procedures for the ITR process are set out in the Academic Quality Handbook. The ITR process draws on an extensive set of information, including: annual course review reports; external examiner reports; the postgraduate research student supervision and training form; the programme review report for each programme; and the school quality enhancement action plan, which each school is required to submit together with the ITR self-evaluation document. Reviews, on a six-yearly cycle, have addressed both undergraduate and postgraduate provision in schools and departments. Generally, three to four academic units are reviewed each year.

47   The ITR self-evaluation document and review panel report follow an institutional pro forma. The general information on ITR, as well as specific preparatory information provided to staff, students and external members, is clear and explicit, with a helpful explanation of the process, the responsibilities of specific members, and required documentation. A useful feature is the list of typical questions that may be asked during the review process and which are formulated in a manner that is relevant to the perspectives and interests of the specific group. For example, students are guided to expect questions such as whether they have been made aware of the learning outcomes of their degrees, and how this happened, and the extent to which their expectations of courses matched curricular content and learning outcomes.

48   In view of the increasingly international dimension of the University's provision, review panel composition has been modified to provide for at least one external subject specialist from outside Scotland. ITR reports are submitted to the Academic Standards Committee (Undergraduate), or Academic Standards Committee (Postgraduate), or both, for scrutiny, while the respective Academic Standards Committee also carries out the evaluation of school responses to review panel reports and the school one-year follow-up report. The ITR panels also have student members, and students taking on this role considered that they were valued and played a full role in panel deliberations, including the chairing of sessions. The Centre for Learning and Teaching has taken on an increasingly important role in acting as a 'critical friend' for academic units preparing for ITR.

49   Extracts of Academic Standards Committee minutes provide evidence that these committees exercise effective oversight of the ITR process. For example, in the academic year 2008-09 these committees engaged with school responses on matters such as the adequacy of student participation in the planning of courses and programmes, and contribution to the dissemination of good practice. An annual report on ITR, prepared by either the Vice-Principal (Teaching and Learning) or the Chair of the University Committee on Teaching and Learning, summarises the main findings of ITR, as well as good practice identified by the ITR process and by reviews undertaken by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs). The annual report is submitted to the University Management Group and the Court for approval before submission to the Scottish Funding Council.

50   The ITR process typically operates at the school level. However, a new development in May 2008 saw an ITR of a graduate school following a request from the College of Life Sciences and Medicine (CLSM), which suggested that the cross-school nature of its postgraduate provision merited a stand-alone ITR at the College level. Evidence from the ITR report for this review indicates that the process succeeded in identifying various challenges that need to be addressed in order to create greater cohesion within the CLSM Graduate School, including the development of a common mission statement and mechanisms to promote interdisciplinary learning. On the basis of the evidence from this ITR, the University is encouraged to explore the use of a college-level ITR process where the nature of the review justifies it, especially at the postgraduate level.

51   The University considers ITR to be a high-quality process which is of benefit to participating schools. The positive comments of student ITR panel members, as well as evidence from a selection of ITR reports, support the University's view that the ITR process continues to deliver robust and consistent assurance of quality. A selection of ITR panel reports from the three colleges suggest that the process is applied in a rigorous and systematic manner, and that it effectively addresses key aspects of programme quality and standards, such as: the range of programmes and courses offered; staff resource and staff development; organisational matters; assessment methods; the use of student feedback; the provision of feedback on assessment to students; the supervision and training of postgraduate students; student employability and personal development; student support, retention and progression; and resources. The actions arising from the ITR reports also indicate that schools respond constructively to ITR panel recommendations. Both the ITR reports and the school responses demonstrate that the student voice is given appropriate consideration during the review process.

52   In a small number of cases a substantial volume of material was presented during ITR. Previously, the University has acted to reduce the requirement for extensive documentation and there would be benefit in reviewing again the volume of documentary evidence required for ITR.

53   External examination procedures are overseen by the Academic Standards Committees (ASCs) and this includes scrutiny of school responses to external examiner reports. ASCs also approve formal institutional responses to external examiners on their reports. There is clear evidence to illustrate how recommendations from external examiner reports are being addressed at school level, leading to adaptations to the curriculum.

54   The University follows sector practice in its procedures for the appointment of external examiners, with nominations from the relevant school being approved by college directors of teaching and learning and the Vice-Principal (Teaching and Learning) or the Convenor of the University Committee for Teaching and Learning. University pro formas are used for the nomination and appointment of external examiners and for external examiner reports. External examiners are provided with a briefing letter on appointment and guidance, and the Academic Quality Handbook assigns responsibility to the schools for further briefing, which includes the provision of relevant course and programme handbooks. The Handbook also sets out clear criteria for the termination of an external examiner's contract.

55   The majority of external examiners now submit their reports electronically. In general, external examiner reports are thorough and informative, and most include commentary on the coverage of the course and programme through the balance of assessment methods, the manner in which assessment addresses achievement of course outcomes, and the validity and reliability of assessment. However, a small number of reports were very brief, focusing primarily on the validation of marks, and offered little opportunity for staff to have formalised feedback on the overall health of the programme. As an outcome of the Curriculum Reform Project, the University is considering introducing a greater role for external examiners in identifying innovative approaches to the design and delivery of the curriculum, and is seeking to move towards an enhancement-within-assurance culture by modifying institutional guidelines relating to the role of external examiners. This is a potentially positive development and the University should now provide further guidance to external examiners in order to support this development.

56   Annual monitoring of undergraduate and taught postgraduate provision continues to focus at course level, and takes into account student feedback through summary reports of student course evaluation forms (SCEFs) and course coordinator's reports. The Head of School prepares and submits a course review summary to the staff-student liasion committee (SSLC), and this summary, plus the course coordinator's report, is scrutinised by the college before being submitted to the appropriate Academic Standards Committee. Responses from the Academic Standards Committee are fed back to heads of school, who then communicate with students via SSLC or feedback sessions. A variety of examples of course coordinator reports and course review summary reports demonstrate that they focus clearly on areas of strength and weakness that are identified through student feedback, as well as on actions that have been taken to address concerns raised in previous course coordinator reports. However, some students are concerned about the lack of feedback that they receive on action taken to address their concerns. Students identified a need for more consistent communication about the outcomes of feedback processes, and how suggestions made in the SCEF forms are taken forward. The University acknowledges that school feedback to students is not always optimal, and a University Committee on Teaching and Learning working party is currently considering the best ways to elicit student feedback and effectively communicate action taken (see paragraph 15).

57   The University has considered the 2005 ELIR report recommendation that it should consider giving greater emphasis to undertaking annual monitoring at the programme level, but maintains that course-level monitoring is more appropriate given that, apart from professional disciplines which have an essentially fixed curriculum, most programmes can show significant variation because of the modular nature of the curriculum. The Academic Standards Committee review over one thousand courses in an academic session, although there is an indication that a form of monitoring also takes place at the programme level, through examination boards, when external examiners and programme coordinators are present. Aspects of programmes are also reviewed by school teaching and learning committees.

58   Documentation, including minutes of committees and exam boards, indicates that effective annual monitoring is taking place and that programme-level matters and issues are discussed on a routine basis, in various fora, throughout the year. There is sufficient oversight of quality assurance within the programmes, and the University is encouraged to identify mechanisms by which outcomes from the separate processes might be considered in an aggregated form to identify any systemic issues arising across broader programme areas.

59   The taught postgraduate student experience is reviewed annually using a questionnaire, with outcomes considered by the Academic Standards Committee (Postgraduate) and communicated to schools for comment, action and feedback to the Academic Standards Committee (Postgraduate). For 2009-10 the University will take part in the new two-year Higher Education Academy (HEA) administered Taught Postgraduate Student Experience Survey. The University also participated in the HEA Postgraduate Research Student Experience Survey in 2007-08 and is considering further participation in 2010-11. Biannual monitoring of postgraduate research students is undertaken through progress reports that are completed by supervisors and students, and which are considered by Academic Standards Committee (Postgraduate). Biannual monitoring is a recent development, which has been welcomed by students.

The extent to which the institution's monitoring and review arrangements include consideration of all students

60   The University states that the three key mechanisms for monitoring and review are operated in ways that implicitly include consideration of all categories of students. The self-evaluation pro forma for ITR, which was modified in 2008-09, has an increased focus on equality and diversity, with a section on inclusivity and support for all groups of students. Curriculum reform approval procedures for courses and programmes also require statements on equality and diversity, and pro formas for external examiner reports and student course

evaluation forms contain sections to consider the experiences of specific student groups. The University's Equality and Diversity Adviser provides support for a range of monitoring and review processes.

The effectiveness of the institution's approach to self-evaluation, including the use made of external reference points

61   Self-evaluation at the institutional level involves a three-tier performance indicator system, which comprises eleven high-level strategic performance indicators, a set of supporting quantitative indicators and external benchmarks, and a series of operational performance indicators. Reporting, usually on a biannual basis, is to the University Management Group, the Operating Board (a committee of the Court to which the Risk Management Committee reports) and the Court. In conducting self-evaluation, the University draws upon the views of the Senate and related committees whose membership is representative of the academic community. The Undergraduate Committee for Teaching and Learning plays a key role in overseeing regular reflection on issues relating to the quality of the student learning experience and academic standards. Self-reflection also takes into account annual college reports, the reports from ITR and external examiners, and student course evaluation forms. In ITR reports, schools are required to reflect on the use of external reference points such as subject benchmark statements and the requirements of PSRBs, while, in both monitoring and review, external examiner reports are viewed as important external reference points. In some of the ITR reports there are references to benchmark guidelines in relation to assessment, as well as to the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) as a key reference point for reflection on curriculum design and progression to higher levels of complexity. Programme advisory boards, whose membership comprises external advisers from, for example, business and industry, also play an important role in providing external reference points to support self-evaluation. Minutes of programme advisory boards demonstrate that they consider curriculum aims and structure, learning and teaching, research and other activities (see paragraph 92).

62   Developments within the University take account of the Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework, the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*, published by QAA, and the SCQF. The Curriculum Reform Project made a particular point of using international comparators in considering approaches to curriculum reform taken by leading international universities in Australia, Hong Kong and the USA. Within support units, such as the Careers Service and the Centre for Learning and Teaching, regular user surveys enable self-reflection on the quality of services provided.

63   At the present time, a thorough review of one of the key approaches to self-reflection, the student course evaluation forms (SCEF) procedure, is being conducted by a working group of the University Committee on Teaching and Learning. To improve the effectiveness of the process the working group is recommending: the use of an online version of SCEFs, more appropriate timing in making SCEF returns so that feedback obtained can be made relevant to those currently on the course, and the adaptation of the content to capture comments on graduate attributes. This is a positive approach by the University to improving its SCEF process.

The effectiveness of the institution's approach to the management of information to inform the operation and evaluation of its monitoring and review activity

64   The ITR process specifies the criteria and information that schools are required to reflect upon in the review of quality and standards, for example, data on admissions, retention, student progress and employment destinations. A new overarching platform is being introduced which will provide a more integrated architecture for the management information systems and easier access to data. This is an important development which should improve the operation of monitoring and review procedures (see paragraph 11).

The effectiveness of the institution's approach to setting and maintaining academic standards, including the management of assessment

65   The University adopts an approach to course and programme approval that is in line with practice in the sector. Proposals for new programmes and courses are aligned with school and college policy, strategy and procedures, as well as with institutional strategy, regulations and practice, and are checked for adherence to the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF), and the QAA *Code of practice* and subject benchmark statements. This is captured in the Senate Academic Standards (SENAS) form, which is the key document for new course and programme approvals. The SENAS forms and guidance are well structured and comprehensive, with recent modification to include reference to the acquisition of graduate attributes.

66   Assessment policy and practice, and degree regulations are set out in the Academic Quality Handbook. The University encourages flexibility in the use of diverse assessment methods in order to evaluate the attainment of specified learning outcomes. Central to the award of marks is the Common Assessment Scale (CAS), which is a scale from zero to 20 based on descriptors of the standards of achievement. Classification of student degree performance is achieved through the Grade Spectrum Procedure, which determines grades by the calculation of the proportional weight of contributing assessments into a final achievement level on the assessment scale. From late 2009, the CAS has been undergoing review by a University Committee on Teaching and Learning working group to address concerns that students, particularly international students, and employers have some difficulty in translating the achievement levels indicated by the CAS into nationally and internationally recognised attainment levels, while the procedures used to calculate the CAS course mark could also be more transparent. At the time of the current ELIR, the CAS working group had made proposals for modification of the system, but these proposals had not yet been approved by the Senate. The proposed modifications to the system, which would replace the numeric scale with an alphanumeric one, were welcomed by staff, who thought that the modified system would be more transparent to students and would aid staff in the aggregation of marks.

67   The University has also developed a framework for giving feedback on assessment to students. The key principles are that feedback should be timely, supportive, understandable and focused on improvement. University guidance provides advice to staff on giving feedback on coursework and examinations, although some students indicated that feedback is not routinely provided on examinations, and that there is a lack of awareness that it is possible to ask for such feedback. Staff indicated that the Framework for Feedback codifies existing good practice and promotes innovative approaches to assessment, but that the strength of the Framework is that it now formally empowers students across the University to request appropriate feedback on their assessed work (see paragraph 16).

68   The University's processes for assuring quality and academic standards are robust and are applied consistently across the institution. The University is actively and effectively managing academic standards and the approach to the assessment of students.

The effectiveness of the institution's approach to managing public information about quality and academic standards, including the linkage with the institution's monitoring and review arrangements

69   The University has indicated that in developing its prospectuses it has taken note of the advice of the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) 2003 and 2004, and in particular the 2007 SFC Joint Quality Review Group report. The undergraduate and postgraduate prospectuses, which are developed and administered by the Student Recruitment and Admission Service, focus on student choice and preparation for study, and only in more general terms on quality and standards. Heads of school are required to check the accuracy of the information that is provided in the prospectuses and course catalogues relating to the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes and courses for which they are responsible, including information on programme specifications

and regulations for the award of degrees. The Registry ensures that new programme information contained in University prospectuses is accurate, and that appropriate approval has been given to all programmes and courses cited in the prospectuses and course catalogues. The Registry also ensures that changes to programmes and courses are reflected in the University Calendar.

70   There are newly-designed University and student websites which, while dealing largely with the student experience, also provide links to various aspects of the University's management of quality and standards. While the University does not routinely publish ITR reports, outcomes of relevant quality assurance processes are made available to accrediting PSRBs. The Institutional Academic Profile, which is published on the University website and updated annually, provides information on pass rates at the level of individual courses. It is intended that the new data storage and management system will provide more accessible information on student numbers, retention, progression and diversity. A range of evidence supports the view that the University is effectively managing public information about its provision.

The effectiveness of the institution's approach to linking its monitoring and review processes to its enhancement arrangements

71   The University's Learning and Teaching Framework 2007-10 outlines a deliberate enhancement-led approach to reflection, planning, implementation and evaluation.
This approach promotes the identification of good practice in a range of processes: ITR; external examiner reports; and student course evaluation form (SCEF) returns. Examples of potential good practice that are identified in external examiner reports and SCEF returns, such as innovative forms of teaching and assessment, are submitted to the relevant institutional services for wider dissemination.

72   The 2005 ELIR report highlighted the manner in which the ITR process provides for the systematic identification and dissemination of good practice. The ITR Self-Evaluation Document (SED) explicitly provides for reflection on good practice, while review panels are asked to identify points for commendation. Both staff and students confirmed that identification of good practice was a regular feature and they were able to cite examples that had been identified and disseminated. Evidence from various ITR reports indicates that the process serves as an important vehicle for encouraging reflection on innovative approaches to the aims and structure of the curriculum, learning and teaching, assessment, and student support. In addition, there is some evidence from ITR reports that the process itself is being used to disseminate good practice. For example, in its one-year follow-up report Computing Science indicates how it is communicating good practice that was identified during the ITR process across the College of Physical Sciences and the University.

73   During 2009, the University has reviewed the extent to which ITR, external examiner reports and student feedback can be used as vehicles for enhancement, and has introduced the Strategy for the Identification and Dissemination of Good Practice in Learning and Teaching. The Strategy lists activities which have the potential to result in good practice at school, college and University level. It also describes a pivotal role for the Centre for Learning and Teaching, which includes collating examples of good practice from sources including ITR, external examiner reports and student feedback, and providing an annual report to the University Committee on Teaching and Learning. It is clear that the strategy provides the University with the opportunity to use more fully the ITR, external examiner and annual monitoring processes to optimise benefit from teaching development and innovation.

The effectiveness of the institution's approach to monitoring and reviewing its collaborative activity

74   At present, the University has only a small amount of provision delivered through collaborative partnerships. Partnership arrangements conform to practice across the sector in terms of approval, accreditation and monitoring. Arrangements for monitoring and review, and

the maintenance of academic standards essentially follow the same procedures as internal arrangements. These procedures include: ITR, external examination, and the approval of programme and course proposals. A review of assessment arrangements is also included in annual reports made to the Academic Standards Committees by partner institutions. All partnership activities take into account the SCQF and the QAA *Code of practice*.

75   Documentation, including annual reports, submitted to the Academic Standards Committees provides evidence that partners are meeting the required academic standards for degree programmes and following the University's guidance for quality assurance. The annual reports cover a range of matters, including: quality assurance; academic staff; progress on ongoing issues; entrance requirements; student performance; research student training and feedback; resources; and issues for the University. On the basis of the annual reports, it is evident that the University ensures the effective implementation of its accreditation agreements, and that accreditation panels, as well as the relevant ASCs at the University, monitor and review the operation of partnership agreements and the assurance of academic standards and quality effectively. It is clear that the partner institutions respond to the recommendations of the accreditation panels, and also appear to have in place appropriate structures to assure quality and maintain academic standards.

76   The University has stated that a requirement of the annual report submitted to ASCs is that it includes a summary of the performance of students registered for a University award. In one instance, while students were progressing through the programme, they were taking longer to do so than might be standard. The University was aware, during the initial validation process, that a section of the student cohort in question typically undertook part-time study over an extended timescale in order to achieve academic awards relevant to their chosen field of full-time employment while remaining in that employment. The University accepted that the students in question would take longer than normal to achieve their awards and the progress of those students is monitored in the same way as that of all other students.

Strategic approach to quality enhancement

Key features of the institution's strategic approach to quality enhancement

77   At the time of the 2005 ELIR, the University's priority was to raise awareness in the newly formed schools and colleges of the principles of developing a quality enhancement agenda within an assurance culture. Although there was central oversight by the University Committee for Teaching and Learning, academic enhancement was undertaken by individuals and groups in the schools and other academic units, and it was acknowledged that the dissemination of innovation in learning and teaching across the institution was not the product of an institutionally managed process of change.

78   The University's Strategic Plan 2004-09 committed the institution to a thorough review of learning and teaching to address the challenges of maintaining academic standards, enhancing quality, and meeting student needs and expectations. The result of these deliberations was a Learning and Teaching Framework, which was based on the concept of the learner as a self-aware individual developing initiative and independence, and was intended to lead to strategic change.

79   The Learning and Teaching Framework has subsequently been incorporated into and superseded by the Strategic Plan 2007-10. The University prepares an annual Learning and Teaching Operational Plan that sets out the activities, timescales and responsibilities for the year. These activities are explicitly linked to the objectives and activities set out in the University's Strategic Plan.

80   Since the 2005 ELIR, a key strategic priority for the University has been the commitment to an intensive review of the curriculum. The Curriculum Reform Commission was established in 2007 with a remit to review and make proposals for the reform of the University's educational

objectives, programme structures and curriculum content, taking into account developing international approaches. Membership of the Commission comprised academic and administrative staff as well as Students' Association representatives, and it was led by the Vice-Principal (Curriculum Reform). The Commission consulted with a wide range of stakeholders, including students, employers, potential students and professional bodies. It also carried out a number of international consultations with overseas institutions that have undertaken, or are undertaking, similar curriculum reform.

81   The Final Report of the Commission included a definition of the graduate attributes that all of the University's students will be given the opportunity to acquire, as well as the means by which students are provided with opportunities for gaining them. In relation to this, the Report recommends the provision of a broadened curriculum as well as changes designed to enhance learning, promote personal development and enable students to achieve their potential. The Report was approved by the Senate in October 2008 and an implementation timeline was proposed in which curriculum changes at undergraduate level 1 would be implemented from September 2010. At the time of the current ELIR, therefore, the support infrastructure was in place and courses had been approved, but no students had yet started on the new curriculum.

82   Although the Curriculum Reform Project was conceived as a stand-alone exercise, it is clear that it has become a major change programme. Other enhancement activities, for example the reviews of feedback and induction which had initially been separate projects within the University, have become associated with the Curriculum Reform Project, thus giving coherence to a range of activities and providing a sense of a common purpose across the institution. This has greatly increased the impact both of the Curriculum Reform Project and the other projects, as all the activities are now interlinked and complementary.

83   The Curriculum Reform Project has clearly energised staff and students and has developed into a way of thinking about the University, creating a shared conceptual understanding of the purposes of the curriculum. The project is making a significant change in the extent to which teaching is valued within the University's culture and in the consistency of academic delivery, which is intended to lead to a more consistent student experience. The Curriculum Reform Project is far reaching and represents a positive step change in the University's approach to quality enhancement.

The effectiveness of the institution's implementation of its strategies and policies for promoting quality enhancement across the institution

84   The Curriculum Reform Project is the largest step change project being undertaken currently by the University (excluding capital projects) and, although it is still in the implementation phase, there have already been some developments, such as the introduction of the STAR Award for co-curricular activity and the restructuring of student support services, which are enhancing the quality of the student experience.

85   The Curriculum Reform Project has been led from the start by a senior academic, the Vice-Principal (Curriculum Reform) and this has clearly demonstrated institutional commitment to the Project, as well as signalling its importance to the wider University community. The Curriculum Reform Commission produced a report with 52 recommendations and these are being implemented through an Implementation Board which will ensure that the project is delivered in a planned, resourced and integrated manner.

86   As the curriculum changes are still being implemented, it is too early to measure specific impact. The University makes extensive use of performance metrics across all activities, including teaching, research, and finance, and across all levels (schools, colleges, and University); however, it has still to finalise how the outcomes of the project will be evaluated. Current measures which are being considered include the number of student applications, entry qualifications, applicant

diversity, student satisfaction and employer engagement. In the longer term, the University hopes that the outcomes will be sustained and will be accompanied by improvements in measures of esteem such as references in the media and citations by other institutions, and there would be benefit in the University continuing with its development of performance indicators to ensure clarity in measuring the successful implementation of the Project over its lifetime.

87   One outcome of the Curriculum Reform Project has been to reinforce the importance of teaching within the University and to engage academic and support staff in enhancing the student experience. This has been achieved by involving large numbers of staff in the planning, implementation and review of this major project. This engagement has been particularly effective in relation to understanding the concept and meaning of graduate attributes, with staff able to articulate both general concepts and the specific implications for themselves and their students.

88   The staff of the Centre for Learning and Teaching are a key group who have responsibility for delivering or supporting many of the University's learning and teaching activities. The Centre provides a wide range of courses, such as the Postgraduate Certificate in HE Learning and Teaching, and also offers tailored courses for individual colleges as well as more general workshops on, for example, e-learning. The Centre for Learning and Teaching is a significant strategic development and will play a key coordinating role in the support for learning and teaching as part of the Curriculum Reform Project and other learning and teaching projects; it also has significant responsibility for the activities listed in the annual Learning and Teaching Operational Plan. The Centre will need continuing support to sustain it over the longer term once the Curriculum Reform Project has been implemented, and the University is encouraged to continue to support and promote the Centre's work.

89   The Curriculum Reform Project contains many elements of good practice: it has initiated deep thinking about the place of the University regionally, nationally and globally; it has required detailed research about what is achievable and how it might be achieved, drawing on the best practice from a wide range of universities; and there has been extensive consultation with a wide range of stakeholders. The Project has been effectively led, managed and resourced to achieve the scale of change that is the ambition of the University. It has initiated an extensive dialogue across the institution about the University, its values and its culture, and it is being effectively implemented.

The effectiveness of the institution's use of external reference points in its approach to quality enhancement, including the extent to which the institution's approach is informed by national and international practice

90   The Curriculum Reform Commission undertook an initial desk-based exercise followed by meetings and international visits. There was formal consultation with employers and professional bodies, as well as the identification of leading higher education institutions internationally that had undertaken curriculum reform and could provide aspirational benchmarks. There is a clear link between the learning from these activities and the eventual outcomes of the Curriculum Reform Project, and this process of external consultation, engagement of the University community, and learning from best practice internationally is itself good practice.

91   The University also makes use of external reference points in support of enhancement activities initiated at school or college level. Links have been strengthened with the Higher Education Academy (HEA), and there is regular participation in HEA events as well as visits by HEA staff to the University. The University has also engaged with the national Enhancement Themes. There have been some Themes that are immediately relevant to the University and for which there has been active engagement, for example the First Year Experience Theme. In other cases, the Themes have provided valuable reference points beyond the formal duration of a particular Enhancement Theme; for example, the Responding to Student Needs Theme (2003-04) informed later reflection on how the University gathered student feedback and contributed, in 2006, to a reconfigured student evaluation pro forma.

92   As part of the Curriculum Reform Project it will be a requirement for all programmes, either singly or as cognate groups, to have an external advisory group comprising alumni, employers and community stakeholders as appropriate. These programme advisory groups will supplement the strong links between subject groups and relevant professional bodies that exist in some disciplines (see paragraph 61).

93   It is clear that the University makes extensive use of external reference points to inform its approach to quality enhancement.

The effectiveness of the institution's approach to identifying, disseminating and implementing good practice in the context of its strategic approach to enhancement

94   The 2005 ELIR report indicated that the University could improve its systematic dissemination of good practice. A recommendation from the Curriculum Reform Commission was that there should be a strategy to identify and communicate best practice in learning and teaching to all staff. The resulting Strategy for the Identification and Dissemination of Good Practice in Learning and Teaching 2009-10 sets out a structured and targeted approach to systematically identifying good practice; providing dissemination opportunities; and annually reviewing the effectiveness of the approach. Central to this Strategy is a recognition that a wide range of communication methods are necessary.

95   The Strategy identifies a key role for the Centre for Learning and Teaching, as well as a role for the colleges and schools, in the identification and dissemination of good practice. The Centre also acts as a broker for ideas about good practice and supports professional development by providing networking opportunities for staff, such as the annual learning and teaching Symposium and Teaching Fellows event. At the college level there are newsletters and opportunities for discussion at Learning and Teaching fora, while at the school level there are school teaching days and tailored workshops.

96   A Best Practice Fair for poster exhibits was first organised by the college directors of teaching and learning in 2008 and has become an annual event. The Centre for Learning and Teaching started the annual Learning and Teaching Symposium in 2009 to showcase examples of good practice in areas of learning and teaching, such as flexible delivery and the 21st Century Learner, and the Centre also provides funding for the operation and dissemination of enhancement projects.

97   As many of these activities are relatively new, it is difficult to judge what their longer-term impact will be, but it is clear that the University is taking a systematic approach to identifying and disseminating good practice in ways which are explicitly linked to the University's strategic objectives.

The effectiveness of the institution's approach to enhancing collaborative provision

98   The University has a small number of collaborative partners, most of which are located in the North of Scotland. There are regular visits from administrative staff to collaborative partners to ensure that administrative matters are dealt with effectively.

99   The University's accreditation agreement with UHI has regard to the development of a research culture in this partner, and a Senior Educational Development Advisor from the University has run regular activities for research student supervisors at UHI and was also a member of the UHI Staff Development Committee.

100   For most of its partnership arrangements the role of the University is one of ensuring robust quality assurance and its level of engagement in enhancement is more limited. However, this is appropriate for the scale and nature of the partnerships.

Conclusion

Effectiveness of the institution's management of the student learning experience

101   Students are positive about their experience at the University, and are actively engaged in their learning. The University has worked in partnership with the Students' Association to enhance the system of class representation, and there is a strong working relationship between the University and the Students Association.

102   The University is taking a strategic approach to the development of student support, and since the 2005 ELIR there have been a number of positive developments. The University has enhanced its arrangements for the coordination and delivery of student support, and has reorganised support services into the Directorate of Student Affairs and the Directorate of Academic Affairs. A one-stop-shop Student Centre is planned, which will draw on services provided by both Directorates to provide an integrated support and information service. Partnership working with the Students' Association has facilitated a cross-university approach to the enhancement of induction support, and during 2010-11 the University will finalise implementation of the new arrangements for the advisers of studies system.

103   A key outcome of the Curriculum Reform Project has been the identification of the graduate attributes University of Aberdeen students are expected to acquire. All students will have the opportunity to acquire the attributes through the curriculum and co-curricular activities, and this, along with other aspects of the reformed curriculum, has been effectively communicated to students via a comprehensive publicity campaign by the University. The STAR Award, which enables students to gain recognition for skills and attributes acquired through co-curricular activities, is an example of good practice, although the Award is challenging to scale up and the University is encouraged to consider how a broader range of students might gain recognition for skills developed through co-curricular activities.

104   The introduction of the new Procedures for Managing Promotion and Recognising Contribution, which provide promotion opportunities based on formal recognition of achievement in teaching and scholarship, is beginning to have a positive impact on the recognition of teaching in the University. The support of the Centre for Learning and Teaching for the Curriculum Reform Project has helped the University to innovate its approaches to learning and teaching, and the University is encouraged to continue to enhance staff development to support this.

Effectiveness of the institution's arrangements for institution-led monitoring and review of quality, and academic standards of awards

105   The University's processes for assuring quality and academic standards are robust and applied consistently across the University. The University is enhancing its ITR process to include outcomes from the Curriculum Reform Project, such as how programmes are providing opportunities for students to acquire graduate attributes, and it effectively addresses key aspects of quality and academic standards. Documentation indicates that effective annual monitoring is taking place, and that programme-level matters and issues are discussed on a routine basis, in various fora, throughout the year. This provides sufficient oversight of quality assurance within the programmes, and the University is encouraged to identify mechanisms by which outcomes from separate processes might be considered in an aggregated form to identify any systemic issues arising across broader programme areas.

106   It is clear that the University is actively and effectively managing its approach to assessment, including through the introduction of its Framework for Feedback in response to the need to provide a more consistent and transparent approach to providing feedback on assessed work.

107   As a result of the Curriculum Reform Project, the University is considering introducing a greater role for external examiners in identifying innovative approaches to the design and delivery of the curriculum. This is a potentially positive development and the University should now provide further guidance to external examiners in order to support this development.

Effectiveness of the institution's implementation of its strategic approach to quality enhancement

108   Since the 2005 ELIR the University has embarked on a major review of the curriculum, and the University's strategic approach to quality enhancement is now embedded in the Curriculum Reform Project, which is far reaching and represents a positive step change in the University's approach to quality enhancement. The project has acted as a catalyst for extensive dialogue across the University about the institution's culture and values, and is being effectively implemented.

109   The University makes extensive use of external reference points to inform enhancement practice. Links have been strengthened with the HEA and the University has engaged with the national Enhancement Themes. Furthermore, as part of the Curriculum Reform Project, there has been extensive consultation with a range of stakeholders, as well as the identification of leading higher education institutions internationally which have undertaken curriculum reform and can provide aspirational benchmarks. The approach taken to the development of the Curriculum Reform Project, and in particular the extensive consultation process undertaken by the University, is an example of good practice.

110   Since the 2005 ELIR the University has created a Centre for Learning and Teaching and this is a significant strategic development. This central unit is important to many of the University's developments, and provides a key coordinating mechanism for the delivery of the Curriculum Reform Project and other learning and teaching projects, and the University is encouraged to continue to support and promote the Centre's work.

Overarching confidence judgement

111   The findings of the ELIR indicate that there can be confidence in the University's current, and likely future, management of the academic standards of its awards and the quality of the student learning experience it provides.