



QAA Scotland

Annual Report for academic year 2010-11

Foreword - Jenny Rees, Chair



In this my first year as Chair of the QAA Scotland Committee, let me start with thanks to my predecessor, Professor Nick Kuenssberg. Taking on the chair while Norman Sharp was Director QAA Scotland then overseeing the transition as Bill Harvey stepped into Norman's shoes, Nick ensured that the many distinctive strengths of the Scottish quality system for higher education were ably advocated and the partnership approach which has characterised its development was encouraged to continue. I am delighted to have this opportunity to support QAA Scotland as a key partner in the continuing evolution of the distinctive approach to assuring and enhancing higher education quality in Scotland.

Last year's Annual Report predicted difficult times ahead and certainly there has been no shortage of higher education policy developments both from the Westminster Government and from the devolved administrations, as each grapples with their requirements of higher education during exceptionally difficult economic times. Not just in Scotland, the importance of student engagement in their own learning and in the universities that provide their education has become increasingly recognised. The impact of the sector-wide engagement in quality Enhancement Themes by students and staff, and the growing external reputation of Scotland from its lead here, is rightly a source of pride.

While Scotland has its own distinctive approach to higher education quality, students move within and to the UK for their higher education, and graduates from Scottish universities rightly expect their UK degrees to have currency and recognition worldwide. This highlights the overall role of QAA, and QAA Scotland works effectively within this structure. It is pleasing that the various consultation documents and White Papers, from Westminster and from the Scottish Government, recognise the role of QAA in safeguarding standards and promoting quality enhancement.

The current Scottish Government is developing its own distinctive approach to policy in higher education. QAA Scotland must play its part in ensuring that students can have confidence in the education they gain in a Scottish university and the preparation it provides for them to make an effective contribution to the economy and society. The annual report demonstrates the breadth of QAA Scotland's work over the past year. I look forward to supporting QAA Scotland in defining its strategic approach to the opportunities and challenges of the coming years, working in partnership with Government, the funding council, and universities.

Dr Jenny Rees
Chair of the QAA Scotland Committee

Introduction - Bill Harvey, Director



This has been my second year in the post of Director of QAA Scotland. I continue to be very impressed with the professionalism and commitment of my colleagues in Glasgow and in Gloucester, and I particularly want to thank the team in Glasgow for their unfailing support, as well as for the very valuable work that they do, not only on behalf of QAA but for the Scottish HE sector and its students. I would also like to thank Jenny Rees, the Chair of the QAA Scotland Committee, for the excellent service she has provided to the Committee, to QAA Scotland, and to the QAA Board over the last year.

This has been a busy year for us as we continue to support a wide range of review and enhancement activities in Scotland, while also participating in a wide-ranging review of the Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework. We have seen many new policy developments in the area of higher education and as was evident last year, QAA now operates in a higher education sector which is developing in very different ways in the various countries of the UK. It has been very rewarding to engage with colleagues in Gloucester as we work together to ensure that QAA is well equipped to survive and thrive in this increasingly complex world, and I greatly value the support and cooperation I have received from my fellow Directors, and in particular from Anthony McClaran, our Chief Executive.

I hope you find it interesting to learn more about our activities during 2010-11, and I look forward to leading QAA Scotland in our future work.

About QAA

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) was created in 1997. It operates throughout the UK from offices in Gloucester and Glasgow. QAA is an independent body funded by subscriptions from HE institutions and through contracts with the higher education funding bodies.

The primary responsibility for academic standards and quality in UK higher education rests with individual institutions, each of which is independent and self-governing. QAA checks how well they meet their responsibilities, through periodic audits and reviews, and publishes reports which include judgements about the effectiveness of institutional quality systems. Our reports also identify good practice and make recommendations for improvement. We provide development and enhancement services to help institutions to ensure that students have high quality learning experiences.

QAA in Scotland

QAA Scotland has devolved responsibilities for the work of QAA in Scotland, and its operation is overseen by the QAA Scotland Committee, which is a subcommittee of the QAA Board. Much of our work relates to the distinctive Scottish approach to quality which has been developed over the past decade under the aegis of the Universities Quality Working Group. This is a partnership body involving the HE sector, the Scottish Funding Council, QAA Scotland, the Scottish student body, and the Higher Education Academy (HEA). The Scottish approach, known as the Quality Enhancement Framework, is based on the principle that quality activities in a mature, effective HE system should not focus solely or primarily on threshold issues of quality assurance, but should focus on the sector's aspirations for ongoing enhancement of the quality of provision. The framework identifies some key roles for QAA Scotland.

- Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) - based on a four-year cycle of reviews, managed by QAA Scotland, which reports on the effectiveness of institutions' management of academic standards, and the assurance and enhancement of the student learning experience.
- National Enhancement Themes - a programme of activities, managed by QAA Scotland, which operates across all Scottish HE institutions, focusing on issues of common concern to the sector.
- Institution-led quality reviews at the level of disciplines and service areas - QAA Scotland engages with each institution on an annual basis to reflect on the outcomes of these reviews, and compiles an annual report to the Scottish Funding Council summarising these activities for the whole Scottish HE sector.
- Student engagement in quality systems - as described in more detail below, QAA Scotland plays an active role in supporting student engagement, including the use of student members in all ELIR review teams, and through student membership of our committees and working groups.
- Public information about quality - particularly through publication of the outcomes of ELIR reviews.

Our partners

QAA Scotland aims to work in partnership with all institutions and agencies operating in the Scottish HE sector, including:

- the student body in Scotland, particularly through the use of student reviewers as full members of each ELIR review team; our role in supporting the work of student participation in quality scotland (sparqs) (a development agency for student representatives); and through regular liaison with NUS Scotland
- the HE sector, including our support for the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC), which oversees the operation of the national Enhancement Themes, and regular liaison with the sector through annual meetings with each institution as well as participation in wider sector groups such as Universities Scotland's Learning & Teaching Committee and Teaching Quality Forum
- the Scottish Funding Council, including our role in advising the Council's Quality, Equalities and General Purposes Committee and our preparation of an annual overview report of quality issues in the sector
- the Higher Education Academy in Scotland, through regular liaison at officer level, HEA support for Enhancement Themes, and joint activities in areas such as employability

- the broader education sector in Scotland, through our work with the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) Partnership; collaboration with educational bodies in the health and social care sectors; emerging linkage between the current Enhancement Theme (on Developing and Supporting the Curriculum) and the Curriculum for Excellence; and regular liaison with colleagues in Education Scotland (formerly Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education) to share views on areas of common interest and potential collaboration
- the Scottish Government, through our work with the Scottish Bologna stakeholders group, our regular liaison with senior staff in the Scottish Government's Higher Education Division, and providing expert advice to Scottish Ministers on relevant matters including the award of university title and degree awarding powers.

Our role in the Scottish higher education sector

QAA Scotland plays a key role in Scottish higher education, both as an independent guardian of quality and standards and as a catalyst for change and development within the sector. We safeguard the interests of students, taxpayers and other external stakeholders, and we support the work of our partners within the sector through our emphasis on peer review, quality enhancement, and the central role of the student learning experience.

QAA Scotland provides vehicles and platforms to support the dissemination and exchange of good practice, through mechanisms including institutional reviews and national enhancement activities.

We are committed to building and maintaining strong and effective relationships with our partners in the sector, with student representative bodies, and with other agencies. We are confident that the Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework continues to represent world-leading practice and we will continue to seek ways to make the framework even more effective and fruitful.

Our work in 2010-11

Quality and standards

Five Enhancement-led Institutional Reviews took place during 2010-11 at: Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh Napier University, Glasgow Caledonian University, the University of St Andrews, and the University of the West of Scotland. In each case, QAA expressed confidence in the systems that these institutions have put in place to assure and enhance quality. The review reports also contain many specific recommendations and comments on areas of good practice and issues for potential improvement. Both full and summary versions of these reports are available for download from QAA's website.

Annual discussions were held at all 19 higher education institutions. These annual discussion meetings form a key part of the ELIR method, providing an opportunity for QAA Scotland officers to discuss with institutions progress being made in addressing ELIR outcomes, as well as key outcomes arising from institution-led quality reviews at the subject level.

QAA publishes a regular series of reports under the general title of *Learning from ELIR*. These reports highlight particular areas of good and interesting practice across the sector, drawing on the evidence and judgements presented in our institutional review reports. This year, we have been working on a revised methodology for the Learning from ELIR series, which will allow us to report more rapidly on relevant practice across a range of topics. The first two reports published under this revised method are on Student

Representation and Engagement with Quality, and on Staff Development. We will continue to review and develop our approach to the reporting of good practice, with a view to enabling greater synergy with the work of the Enhancement Themes.

Enhancement Themes

Work on the national Enhancement Theme 'Graduates for the 21st Century: Integrating the Enhancement Themes' drew to a close. The focus for the next national Enhancement Theme, 'Developing and Supporting the Curriculum', was agreed with the sector, and we are pleased to note that Professor Philip Winn, the chair of the previous theme, has agreed to chair the steering group for the first year of operation of the new Theme. We have developed a new website to support the future work of the Enhancement Themes, which will provide greater scope for interactivity and the dissemination of interesting practice in learning and teaching.

The annual Enhancement Themes conference was held in March 2011, attracting over 300 delegates from inside and outside the UK. As in previous years, there was a large number of workshops and presentations, including presentations from senior academic leaders from the UK and overseas.

The Enhancement Themes newsletter, which was redesigned last year, now has a distribution of over 1,800. Themes in Practice (the TiPZone) was introduced to the newsletter in June 2010 to enable practitioners to share innovative examples of implementing Themes outcomes. This has proved to be a very successful addition, attracting considerable interest and demonstrating the level of engagement with the Themes within institutions and across disciplines.

A new National Symposium series of discussions was launched, focusing on the nature and purposes of higher education and what this means for the students and graduates of the 21st century. Three symposia were held between October 2010 and October 2011 involving seven different presentations from a varied group of speakers, including the Chief Scientific Adviser for Scotland, senior academics from the UK and Europe, and the National Union of Students. Collectively this provided a very rich resource of diverse views on the future shape of Scottish higher education. Videos and copies of the presentations are available on our Enhancement Themes website.

Learning from international practice

QAA manages a programme of work which seeks to identify interesting and relevant practice in other countries which may have a bearing on the needs of the sector and students in Scotland. This activity was previously entitled 'International Benchmarking' - we feel the new title is more helpful in stressing our desire to have a positive impact on our own practice within Scotland. We are currently completing a workstream on the research degree student experience. This area of activity included a seminar held in March 2011 which QAA Scotland organised in Brussels. The event, 'The 21st century doctorate - sharing European developments', was attended by around 40 participants from across Europe. The next programme of work in this area, which began in January 2012, will be on taught postgraduate provision.

More generally, in all aspects of our work we encourage the Scottish HE sector to actively engage with practitioners in other countries and to learn from international practice. Our strong commitment to an international approach is demonstrated through our use of international reviewers in every institutional review, through our systematic engagement with good practice in other countries as part of our enhancement approach, and through our professional links with quality agencies and review processes in many other countries.

Personal development planning

QAA Scotland continued to work with the Higher Education Academy and the Centre for Recording Achievement to support Scottish higher education institutions to develop and enhance their personal development planning (PDP) schemes. The process of engagement changed from running sector-wide workshops to introducing an institutional change model around the Scottish PDP Institutional Development (ScotPID) programme. Twelve institutions each agreed to engage in an institutional project and produce a case study detailing their project outcomes. Evaluation of the model was positive, indicating support for this approach to engaging colleagues in and across their institutions, and institutional contacts indicated that they valued the involvement of colleagues from the agencies. QAA Scotland also worked with the sector to produce two new sections of the *Personal Development Plan Toolkit*, *Aspect O: placement learning* and *Aspect P: work-based learning*.

Flexible delivery

QAA Scotland continues to support the development of flexible delivery in the Scottish HE sector through support for projects, networks and workshops on areas such as work-based learning, practice-based learning, and recognition of prior learning (RPL). In particular, a QAA Scotland officer currently chairs the European RPL Network, which involves colleagues from all across Europe.

Equality and diversity

QAA published its Single Equality Scheme (SES) in July 2011. The SES has been developed to help ensure that QAA can agree, articulate and achieve a clear set of goals and aspirations for its work in support of equality and diversity, both in terms of its internal procedures and in its engagement with the wider higher education sector. The SES is available on the QAA website at www.qaa.ac.uk/AboutUs/corporate/Pages/Single-Equality-Scheme.aspx.

Processes have been in place since ELIR was first developed for monitoring the composition of the ELIR reviewer pool and of those reviewers allocated to teams. Consideration is also given to the diversity of other groups who work with QAA Scotland, including staff and students engaged in the Enhancement Themes activities and members of committees and working groups. The emphasis in future is likely to be on more proactive measures to encourage greater diversity in these groups. However, in many cases we are reliant on nominations from sector bodies and other agencies. Reflecting the nominations from institutions, there has been a trend towards an improving gender balance among the ELIR reviewer pool and, consequently, among those allocated to ELIR teams.

Key trends and issues

QAA provides an annual briefing to the Scottish Funding Council in which we seek to identify key trends and issues in the sector. This year's briefing document will be published in due course on the Funding Council's website. In summary, drawing on all our engagements with the sector over the past year, we identified the following issues as major features of the Scottish HE context:

- the Scottish HE sector continues to have effective arrangements for securing academic standards and enhancing the student learning experience
- institutions are placing increasing emphasis on finding ways to demonstrate and measure the impact of quality enhancement on students' learning experience

- there is strong and widespread engagement across the sector with issues around graduate attributes, transferable skills, and employability
- there is growing awareness of the potential impact of the new school framework of Curriculum for Excellence, and of the need for the HE sector to engage actively with this development
- student engagement with learning and teaching, including the role of students in quality enhancement and management of delivery, continues to be an area of strong active development
- institutional engagement with the national Enhancement Themes has benefited from QAA Scotland's new model of funding for institutional teams, and there is potential to further strengthen this engagement through a disciplinary focus
- there is widespread interest in learning from international practice and in building strong links with relevant international partners
- there is clear evidence of increasing alignment between institutional quality enhancement strategies with the developmental opportunities provided by the national Enhancement Themes.

The policy environment

As mentioned earlier, this has been a very eventful period for HE policy throughout the UK. At the start of 2010-11, the Browne Review made recommendations to the Westminster Government not only on the future of tuition fees, but also proposing that QAA (in England) should be merged with a number of other bodies. Fortunately, the Government did not accept that particular recommendation, noting the legal independence of QAA and its UK-wide constitution, and the future of QAA and its programme of institutional reviews in England now appears secure. Indeed, QAA has been given a major additional role by the UK Borders Agency, conducting Educational Oversight reviews of private providers wishing to recruit international students. An interesting current development in England is the proposal to develop a risk-based approach to quality assurance, in which the intensity and/or frequency of external review might be more explicitly linked to the perceived level of risk to quality or standards.

The Scottish Government has developed its own distinctive policies on higher education, with notable divergence from the rest of the UK on the issue of tuition fees. The Scottish Government has conducted consultations on a range of HE issues including governance, the strategic shape of the sector, widening access, and the contribution of HE research and teaching to the economic development of Scotland. We expect legislation to be tabled in the Scottish Parliament during 2012.

A major activity over the period since January 2011 has been the review of the Quality Enhancement Framework. This work has been managed by the Universities Quality Working Group, which has looked closely at our current arrangements, particularly in relation to institutional review, annual reporting, public information, and student engagement. At the time of writing, we are finalising the detail of the review methodology for the next cycle, which will begin in academic year 2012-13. This will continue to be based on a four-year cycle of institutional reviews, but with some changes in the ways in which reviews are operated and outcomes are reported.

Organisational change within QAA Scotland

Government funding for HE during the academic year 2010-11 was reduced, and this had consequences for QAA Scotland. The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) made cuts to the main teaching grant of around 10 per cent, and the same level of cuts was applied to SFC's funding for QAA, both in our main contract and in funding for enhancement activities. Inevitably for a body such as ours, funding reductions have a major and immediate effect on staffing. Two staff left during the course of the year - Frances Morton, who supported our development activities particularly in relation to RPL and flexible delivery, and Liz Piper, one of our administrators - and these vacancies have not been filled. In addition, David Bottomley, Assistant Head of QAA Scotland, took early retirement from QAA as part of our voluntary severance arrangements. David has played a major role in the work of QAA Scotland since the organisation was created and I know that his contribution has been greatly appreciated by colleagues throughout the sector. We all wish him a long and happy retirement. We have been busy conducting a review of the structure of QAA Scotland and a new staffing structure will be implemented from early in 2012. We are confident that the new structure will allow us to build on our twin strengths in review and enhancement activities, and to provide further opportunities for synergies between these two complementary dimensions of our work.

Looking ahead

As we look ahead to 2012 and beyond, the future appears to be dominated by the continuing impact of the economic recession and its implications for public sector funding. The policy context of HE funding in the various UK countries is now becoming clearer, although the full implications for areas such as student recruitment and institutional income may still be subject to considerable volatility and uncertainty while the new arrangements bed down. To take a single example, we must expect that in future cohorts of students in Scottish HE there will be many students who are domiciled in Scotland and hence do not pay fees, but there may also be a significant proportion of 'rest of UK' students who may be paying up to £9,000 a year in tuition fees. What effect will this divergence in costs have on students' attitude to their learning experience and to their sense of what constitutes an appropriate level of teaching and support?

It seems likely that the operation of quality assurance and enhancement processes across the UK will be subject to increasing policy divergence, and significant efforts will be needed to maintain and strengthen the important UK-wide dimensions of the HE sector while clearly explaining the distinctive aspects of the Scottish approach to quality.

We in QAA Scotland are ready to play our part in supporting the sector, its students and its wider stakeholders, in order to ensure that higher education in Scotland continues to thrive, and that the quality of students' learning experience in our sector is maintained and further enhanced.

A key priority for us in 2012 will be to reflect on and refresh our strategic vision for the future. At a UK-wide level, QAA has published a strategic plan for 2011-14, and we will wish to ensure that we are well placed to deliver that plan in our work within Scotland. But we also intend over the coming year to reflect on and articulate distinctive elements of our philosophy and our mission within the Scottish HE context. As we take forward this review, we will seek to engage actively with our partners in Scotland, stimulating a vibrant and productive debate across many aspects of the policy environment, and engaging with all of the key elements of our approach, including partnership working, student engagement, international perspectives, and meeting the needs of Scotland. We hope this will ensure that that we have a clear, coherent and appropriate strategic framework to shape the future work of QAA Scotland.

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