



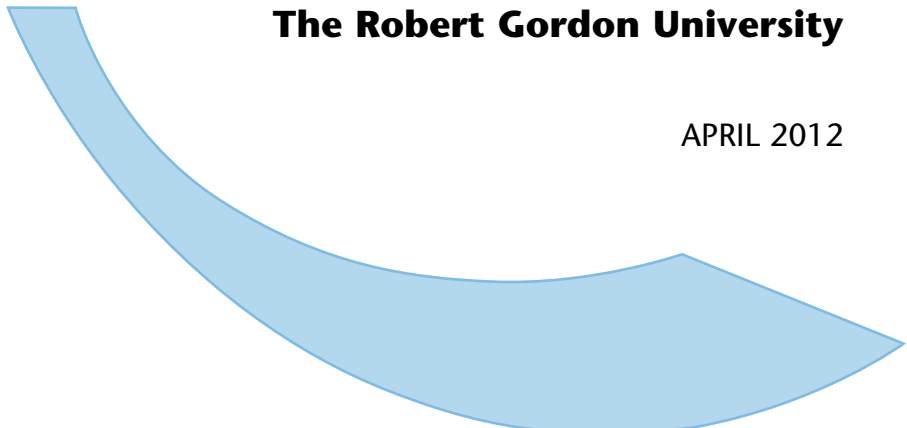
**QAA**  
**Scotland**

A large, light blue abstract graphic consisting of several overlapping, curved lines that form a circular shape, resembling a stylized 'Q' or a series of concentric arcs.

# Enhancement-led Institutional Review

**The Robert Gordon University**

APRIL 2012

A large, light blue abstract graphic consisting of a thick, curved line that starts from the left and curves downwards and to the right, ending in a pointed shape.

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## Preface

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's (QAA's) mission is to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualifications and to inform and encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education. To do this, QAA carries out institutional reviews of higher education institutions. In Scotland, this process is known as Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR). QAA operates equivalent but separate processes in England, Northern Ireland and Wales.

### The enhancement-led approach

ELIR is one element of the Quality Enhancement Framework which was developed and is implemented on a partnership basis in Scotland with the Scottish Funding Council, Universities Scotland and representatives of the student body. The five elements of the Framework are:

- a comprehensive programme of review at the subject level, managed by the institutions, known as institution-led quality review
- an agreed set of public information about quality
- a greater voice for students in institutional quality systems, supported by a national development service (known as student participation in quality scotland, sparqs)
- a national programme of Enhancement Themes aimed at developing and sharing good practice in learning and teaching
- a programme of Enhancement-led Institutional Review involving all Scottish higher education institutions being reviewed over a four-year period.

### Conclusions and judgement within ELIR

ELIR is an evidence-based method of peer review. Each ELIR team makes a judgement about the institution's management of academic standards and of the assurance and enhancement of the student learning experience. This judgement is expressed in the form of the level of confidence that can be placed in the institution's current and likely future management of these activities. Each ELIR team also provides a commentary on:

- i the effectiveness of the institution's management of the student learning experience
- ii the effectiveness of the institution's arrangements for institution-led monitoring and review of quality and academic standards of awards, however and wherever delivered
- iii the effectiveness of the institution's implementation of its strategic approach to quality enhancement.

### ELIR reports

From 2008-09, full and summary ELIR reports are produced and made available on the QAA website at [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk). The summary reports are aimed at an informed lay audience and are intended to promote wider engagement with ELIR outcomes.

## Enhancement-led Institutional Review

### The Robert Gordon University

#### Introduction

1 This is the report of an Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) of The Robert Gordon University (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 the QAA 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 the QAA 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 two case studies on developments supporting the University's approach to quality enhancement: the Student Experience Questionnaire, and the review of Student-Facing Support Services. The ELIR team also received the report of the University's previous ELIR which took place in 2007.

5 The production of the RA was led by a Steering Group, comprising the Deputy Principal, vice principals, deans, the Academic Registrar, and the Student Union President. The Student Union led a consultation workshop on the draft RA, facilitated by the Student Participation in Quality Scotland (sparqs) service. A draft of the RA was also circulated to staff and students, the responses of whom, alongside the outcomes of the Student Union workshop, informed the final version of the RA.

6 The ELIR team visited the University on two occasions: the Part 1 visit took place on 21 and 22 March 2012 and the Part 2 visit took place in the week beginning 23 April 2012.

7 The ELIR team comprised: Professor Rae Condie (following Part 1); Ms Correen Dickson; Ms Tess Goodliffe; Professor Paddy Maher (up to Part 1); Professor Diane Meehan; Ms Rowena Pelik; and Mr Paul Probyn. The review was managed on behalf of QAA by Dr Janice Ross, Assistant Director, QAA Scotland.

#### Background information about the institution

8 The origins of the University can be traced back to the establishment of Robert Gordon's Technical College in 1910. In 1965, the College became the Robert Gordon's Institute of Technology, and the institution obtained university status in 1992. The University states that it remains true to its origins by maintaining a focus on the provision of high quality vocational and professional education to enable its students to secure and retain rewarding employment. At the time of the ELIR, there were around 15,750 students (by headcount) enrolled for awards at the University.

9 The academic activities of the University are grouped into three faculties: the Faculty of Design and Technology; the Faculty of Health and Social Care; and the Aberdeen Business School. The faculties of Design and Technology and Health and Social Care each comprise a number of schools, and the Aberdeen Business School comprises a number of departments. The academic work of the University is supported by 13 central support departments.

10 The University has a relatively small number of collaborative arrangements with other education providers, these being: articulation arrangements with regional further education colleges; validated courses (in Scotland and Switzerland); and the credit rating of third party provision (in Scotland and The Netherlands). The University's articulation arrangements with five Scottish colleges account for the majority of collaborations, and the University leads the North East Articulation Hub, which includes a strategic partnership with Aberdeen College.

11 In 2011-12, the University entered into a partnership with a private sector education provider, Navitas, to form the International College at RGU. The partnership with the College seeks to promote managed growth in international student numbers, by providing foundation programmes and articulation entry routes for students into the University's courses.

12 The University also offers a small number of 'closed' corporate courses to support workforce development in the international oil and gas industry.

13 The University is currently located on two sites within the city of Aberdeen: the Schoolhill site in the city centre, and the Garthdee campus in Aberdeen's suburbs. The University's Estates Master Plan is for all academic provision to be located on the Garthdee campus by 2013.

#### Institution's strategy for quality enhancement

14 The University's strategic approach to quality enhancement is embedded within the institutional Strategy, A Clear Future, and three of the Strategy's key priorities relate directly to quality enhancement: to enrich the all-round experience of students throughout their engagement with the University; to enhance the quality and relevance of taught provision; and to increase the diversification of the student population. These priorities are delivered through its quality arrangements, including: the annual planning processes; monitoring and review activity; the support provided by the Department for the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching and Assessment (DELTA); and student engagement in quality processes.

## **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**

15 In 2010-11 the University had a student population (by headcount) of some 15,754 students. Of this total, some 9,690 (61 per cent) were undergraduate, 5,788 (37 per cent) taught postgraduate and 276 (2 per cent) postgraduate research students. The majority of students (62 per cent) study full-time, with 38 per cent studying part-time. Over recent years, the number and proportion of part-time students has grown, particularly the taught postgraduate numbers. The majority of undergraduates are based on-campus, while over half of postgraduate taught students are classed as distance learners. The overall proportion of distance learning students remains similar to that at the time of the 2007 ELIR (approximately 30 per cent) although, within that, the proportion of taught postgraduate students has grown and the proportion of undergraduate students has declined.

16 Overall, some 9 per cent of students are from the European Union and 22 per cent are international. Over recent years there has been a steady growth in the number and proportion of international students at all levels of study, but there has been a particular increase in international postgraduate taught students. The number of students articulating into the

University has increased to approximately 10 per cent of the undergraduate intake. The number of students studying for collaborative awards is small, representing about 1 per cent of the overall student headcount, and student numbers on corporate courses has declined in recent years, now representing some 1 per cent of the overall student headcount.

17 Relatively recently, the University has introduced a new Business Information System (BIS) which operates in real-time and provides data on student applications and enrolment, student achievement, student feedback and evaluations, and first destination data. The University considers such information to be a key input and driver to all its processes, including strategic and operational planning, quality appraisal, review and enhancement activity, resource allocation, marketing, and recruitment. During the ELIR, it was evident that the BIS enables information on students to be analysed in detail, and that effective use is made of the extensive information available (see paragraphs 50, 77 to 80, 81 to 87 and 90 to 93).

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

18 The University considers student engagement in quality, which it identifies as including partnership working with the Student Union, student representation arrangements, and the use of student questionnaires and surveys, to be a key element of its approach to quality enhancement.

#### **The Student Union and student representation**

19 The University works in partnership with the Student Union to consider, develop and implement enhancement actions, indicating that it values the informed perspective provided by the Student Union. Student Union officers are active contributors to University committees associated with learning and teaching, namely the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee; the Learning Infrastructure Sub-Committee; and the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Sub-Committee. The Student Union has also played a significant role in enhancement activities such as the development of the Student Experience Questionnaire (see paragraphs 23 to 25); the introduction of the student faculty officers' role (see paragraph 22); and the development of the Master Plan for the new Garthdee campus (see paragraphs 13 and 45). Additionally, the Student Union has successfully implemented its own Student Led Teaching Awards (see paragraph 162).

20 The University considers that the constructive partnership approach developed with the Student Union is both a demonstration of effectiveness and an enabler, helping the University respond to issues and opportunities raised by students, and involving students in these responses. Evidence of this effectiveness is demonstrated through the Student Involvement reports submitted annually to the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee. During the ELIR, Student Union officers confirmed that, in recent years, a strong relationship has developed between the Student Union and the University, characterised by successful partnership working and regular formal and informal contact between Student Union officers and senior University staff.

21 The University has a well-established student representative system operating at the course/class level. In 2010-11, there were some 450 student representatives across all the faculties/schools, a slight increase from the previous year. During the ELIR, student representatives confirmed they had undertaken training provided by sparqs (see paragraph 5) to support them in their representative role, and that they were clear about how they might communicate matters raised, both to course staff and to their student peers. Students also identified that there are a number of mechanisms for different groups of students to have their voices heard. For example, some students communicate with their class representatives through the virtual learning environment (see paragraphs 46 to 47) and a virtual student-staff liaison committee has been developed for some of the open and distance learning students. Postgraduate taught and research students also indicated that they were aware of the representative systems to support them, and that they considered these to be effective.

22 In 2010-11, the Student Union instigated new student faculty officer roles, the aim of which is to strengthen the linkages between the class representatives, the faculties and the Student Union. The role usually involves representing the interests of class representatives to the faculty deans, and participation on the relevant faculty and Student Union committees. At the time of the ELIR, students indicated that the new student faculty officer role was still evolving, and that the overall effectiveness of the new role was yet to be evaluated. Although still developing, there is evidence that through the student faculty officer role, the University and the Student Union are taking positive steps to strengthen the Student Union's interaction with academic units. The University and the Union are, therefore, encouraged to progress this initiative.

### **Student feedback and evaluation**

23 The University identified that it has strengthened its approach to student questionnaires and student surveys in a number of ways. Firstly, since the 2007 ELIR, the University has introduced external student evaluations; namely the National Student Survey (NSS), the International Student Barometer, and the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey. Secondly, the University has developed, in partnership with the Student Union, a new internal approach to student evaluation through the Student Experience Questionnaire (SEQ). The new approach seeks to address the recognised issue of student 'questionnaire fatigue'; allow course and module feedback to take place concurrently; promote high response rates; and provide staff with student evaluations in a more meaningful and accessible format to inform Annual Appraisal (see paragraphs 77 to 80).

24 The SEQ is an online questionnaire which asks questions about the effectiveness of learning and student engagement, and is issued to all taught students other than honours year undergraduates who complete the NSS. Quantitative and qualitative data from the SEQ can be linked to the Business Information System (see paragraph 17), enabling detailed analysis by a range of indicators (for example by school, course or stage), and by student category (for example distance learning or overseas students). On completion of the SEQ, students are prompted to visit a webpage promoting the Student Led Teaching Awards (see paragraph 161), and the 'You Said, We Did' messages, the latter of which highlights key actions which have been taken in response to student feedback. The 'You Said, We Did' posters are also distributed in hard copy across the University.

25 The University made a number of enhancements to the SEQ during its second year of operation, establishing a Steering Group to oversee its ongoing development with the Business Information System. The University has also identified a number of further planned enhancements to the SEQ system, for example the development of keyword analysis reports to support enhancement work in both learning and teaching, and student-facing support services.

26 To gather feedback on the research degree students' experience, the University issues evaluation questionnaires on completion of the Postgraduate Certificate in Research Methods course, as well as at the end of year one and at the end of the final year. The University has recently implemented the external Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) and, during the ELIR, research students were positive about the University's use of PRES. Monitoring of the research student experience is also built into supervisor-research student meetings, and informal events such as the annual Research Students' Lunch.

27 The University considers that the high response rates to student evaluations (for example, in 2010-11, response rates of 68 per cent for the NSS and 57 per cent for the internal SEQ) demonstrate the clear engagement of students in quality. Overall, the University has clear and effective mechanisms for gathering and responding to student feedback, and the University's development of its approach to the use of student questionnaires enables it to respond effectively to the needs of different groups of students.

## Student engagement in learning

28 The University emphasised that it expects its students to be active partners in the learning process and that the effectiveness of this engagement is dependent on the partnership of staff and students. Thus a key aspect of student engagement in learning is staff commitment and capability of engaging students, and how staff are supported in this endeavour (see paragraphs 53 to 62). Student engagement is considered to be dependent on students' contribution as individuals, with the University's expectations of them set out in student handbooks, and also dependent on how they are supported by their Student Union and student representatives (see paragraphs 19 to 22). In addition, the University considers effective student engagement to be dependent on the institution's emphasis on professional employability (see paragraphs 34 to 42).

29 The University outlined how its approach to student engagement has been progressively embedded in strategy, policy and practice, such as the institutional Strategy 'A Clear Future' (see paragraphs 124 to 127, 138 to 140), in the University's Guidelines on Effective Learning and Teaching (see paragraph 59), and in monitoring and evaluation, including student evaluations, Annual Appraisal, and institution-led subject review (see paragraphs 77 to 80 and 81 to 87). The University presents the outcomes of external student surveys (see paragraphs 23 and 26) as positive evidence of student engagement in learning alongside the introduction of Student Led Teaching Awards (see paragraph 161).

30 During the ELIR, senior staff indicated that, in recent years, there has been a significant shift in the University's approach to becoming more focused on student engagement. A number of elements were identified by staff as particularly significant in this: the emphasis on graduate attributes; the 'future proofing' of graduate employability through course design and delivery; the opportunities for placements; the opportunities for co-curricular activity; the approachability of staff; and the University's responsiveness to student feedback and evaluation. Students confirmed that many of these elements were important in engaging them in their learning, highlighting the following as particularly motivating: the professional accreditation of courses and focus on employability; the opportunities for practical experience and professional skills development; the support provided by personal tutors and lecturers (see paragraph 31); the encouragement of peer support; online learning; and learning and study skills support from pre-entry and onwards. Overall, it is clear that the University places importance on promoting students as partners in their learning and, in doing so, has created a climate that effectively motivates and engages students.

31 One point of contact for academic support for students is their personal tutor. The University has a personal tutoring policy which sets out threshold expectations for the personal tutor role. This is implemented in different ways across schools and departments, with the arrangements being set out in students' course handbooks. In some schools, personal tutors also provide support for students in personal development planning (PDP) (see paragraph 38). Overall, students, including open and distance learning students, were clear about the personal tutor role, and very positive about the support they provided. Students also indicated that they felt able to approach any staff member associated with their course, including course leaders, if they needed academic support. These arrangements for academic support are clearly effective, and the University is encouraged to continue providing a range of approaches to personal tutoring that meets students' needs.

## Assessment feedback to students

32 Feedback to students on their performance was identified through the Annual Appraisal process as an area for improvement (see paragraph 77 to 80), and the University indicated that this has led to a sequence of enhancement activities aimed at improving the quality of feedback provided to students. The University also identified that the outcomes of the National Student Survey and internal surveys indicate the effectiveness of these enhancement activities, with an improving trend in positive comments from students. With regard to the return of coursework, the University's policy is that coursework is marked and returned to students as soon as possible



or at least within 20 working days. However, during the ELIR, students identified variability between departments and schools in the time taken to provide assessment feedback, and some students were unaware of the University's expectations in this area. The University confirms that assessment remains a focus for improvement, and that recent initiatives led by the faculties and the learning enhancement coordinators continue to progress this. While the University is taking positive steps to enhance assessment feedback to students, it is encouraged to communicate clearly the guidelines on assessment feedback to both staff and students and, in doing so, to manage students' expectations.

### **Postgraduate research student experience**

33 Support for research students throughout their lifecycle from point of application to graduation is provided by the University's Research Degrees Office within the Academic Affairs Department, with faculty-based research institutes and graduate schools forming the local support environments, and the Library providing 'focused support'. The effectiveness of the learning environment for research students is monitored by the Research Degrees Committee. There are a range of development opportunities available to research students; these include training and development events provided University-wide or by graduate schools and support provided by the Department for the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching and Assessment (DELTA). The Postgraduate Research Student Survey (PRES) outcomes indicate that students have a positive view of the research learning environment (see paragraphs 23 and 26) as well as highlighting areas requiring further consideration, such as the intellectual climate for research students. During the ELIR, research students were positive about the resources, support and training available to them, the opportunities to interact as a community, and the supervisory arrangements in place. Overall, the University has effective arrangements for managing and supporting the research student experience.

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

34 A key priority of the University's teaching strategy is the relevance of courses and qualifications for professional employability, and the University's discussion of the concept of 'graduate attributes' has been informed by the national Enhancement Theme 'Graduates for the 21st Century' (see paragraphs 34 to 42). The University has not defined an institutional-level set of graduate attributes but rather has decided to place emphasis on course-level graduate attributes that are informed by subject-specific reference points, and reflect the University's emphasis on employability. To ensure this emphasis on employability at the course level, explicit consideration of employability has been embedded in all core quality assurance processes for taught provision, specifically course validation, Annual Appraisal; Institution-led Subject Review and course re-approval; professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) accreditation; and student evaluations.

35 There is clear evidence that undergraduate course specifications make clear reference to key employability, entrepreneurial and transferable skills. At module level, learning outcomes include relevant statements on, for example, team working, critical thinking and communication skills. Similarly, at the Masters level, module descriptors include reference to a range of higher order skills such as critical analysis, interpretation and synthesis.

36 The University states that the primary evidence of the effectiveness of its approach to promoting graduate attributes, including employability, is the 'consistently outstanding statistics for graduate employability', and also students' positive views on their development of graduate attributes and employability, as demonstrated through the Student Experience Questionnaire (see paragraphs 23 to 25) and the use of external student surveys (see paragraph 23).

37 During the ELIR, a significant number of students emphasised that they had chosen to study at the University because of its reputation as having a strong focus on vocational and/or

professional education, and a strong record of graduate employment. Students indicated that they value highly the professional accreditation of their courses, as well as the University's graduate employment rates. Undergraduate and taught postgraduate students reported that there was a clear emphasis on employability skills across the University and they provided examples of how they were developed within their own courses. During the ELIR, the Careers Service provided examples of the ways in which it works closely with schools and placement offices to support students in identifying skills and preparing curricula vitae, as well as delivering the Preparing to Succeed module within specific courses. Students were very positive about the range of support provided by the Careers Centre. The University stated that the employability of postgraduate research students is supported through the Postgraduate Certificate in Research Methods; online resources; personal support from the Careers Centre; and opportunities for teaching (see paragraph 55). However, during the ELIR, postgraduate research students showed less awareness of employability skills or their inclusion within their programme than students on taught courses.

38 During the ELIR, staff indicated that the use of personal development planning (PDP) and progress portfolios has been implemented flexibly, so that the form these take varies across the schools; those courses with PSRB accreditation being more likely to utilise PDP and portfolios. On other courses, the opportunity to use an e-portfolio facility, 'MyPortfolio', has been provided through DELTA, funded through a Scottish Funding Council strategic funding initiative to promote graduate employability. During the ELIR, some students could give examples of how they had used PDP in their learning. However, overall, it is unclear exactly how widely PDP is embedded in courses, and the University is encouraged to continue to develop its PDP provision to ensure that all students have some mechanism for reflecting upon and recording their personal and professional development.

39 The University also emphasises that a key element of its approach to promoting employability is a commitment to providing and supporting placement opportunities for students; this is delivered through placement offices, school placement coordinators and the Placement Coordinators Forum. During the ELIR, students were generally very positive about their placements. A smaller number of students noted that placements had been difficult to secure, or had not been such a positive experience, although they also recognised that the University had taken steps to address this. Staff confirmed that they were working hard to address such challenges, including through exploring non-traditional placement opportunities. At the time of the ELIR, the University identified that it had recently undertaken a review of placements, and that the review took cognisance of the potential risk to maintaining good practice in high volumes of placements in a challenging economic environment. The University identified that this challenge was the focus for future work, and will inform future enhancement of placement provision. Overall, the University is taking positive and proactive steps to maintain and enhance the quality of placement learning opportunities for students.

40 The University further identified that work is ongoing on other initiatives to support student employability, including promoting entrepreneurship, student exchange activities, and the recognition of credit for extra-curricular activities. Since the 2007 ELIR, the University has established the Charles P Skene Entrepreneurship Programme with the aims of inspiring, nurturing and supporting students in taking forward business ideas, through the delivery of a range of activities and events intended to develop enterprise skills. The Programme has established links with a range of external businesses. During the ELIR, there was some evidence of student awareness of the Entrepreneurship Programme, primarily from those attending the Aberdeen Business School. Additionally, the Faculty of Health and Social Care has been exploring the development of entrepreneurial skills as part of a number of initiatives. Overall, while enterprise education is currently embedded into the curriculum in all first-year modules, and there is specific reference to enterprise skills within Annual Appraisal and review report templates, the Programme is not yet fully implemented and the impact of this initiative on the wider student body is not yet evident. The University is encouraged to progress this Programme, which is a positive development in promoting employability.

41 The University identifies the high number of outgoing students on Erasmus exchanges, and considers that the take-up of this opportunity, along with the positive feedback from students, indicates its effective support for student exchanges. The University's Internationalisation Plan includes actions to increase the opportunities for students to participate in European and international student exchange activities (see paragraphs 39 and 42).

42 During the ELIR, staff suggested that student engagement with co-curricular activity was key to wider student engagement, and students confirmed that they were strongly encouraged to take up co-curricular activities such as Erasmus. The Student Union also indicated that there had been a very significant increase in recent years in the number of students volunteering, including in clubs and community engagement activities. The University has detailed plans to develop an optional Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) credit-rated module to recognise student engagement in extra-curricular activities, such as student representation and quality enhancement activity; ambassadorial and buddying work; and leadership in sports, clubs and cultural events. There are plans for this to be rolled out through the University's e-portfolio, and students' achievement will be recognised on the Higher Education Achievement Reports (HEAR). At the time of the ELIR, the intention was to implement the proposal during 2012-13. The University is encouraged to progress its initiative to recognise students' participation in extra-curricular activities through the award of credit.

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

43 The University's Strategic Planning and Resources Group (SPARG) has overall responsibility for strategy and resource allocation, with individual members of the Group having executive responsibility for specific aspects of the learning environment. The Learning Infrastructure Sub-Committee (see paragraph 69) supports the effective management of the learning environment, and also provides a forum for discussion between the heads of all services associated with the physical and virtual environments and the Student Union. The Student Union represents the student voice on all aspects of the learning environment, as well as managing a range of resources, services and activities for students.

44 The University identified a range of ways in which the effectiveness of the learning environment is considered, including planning and resource allocation; approval and validation, appraisal and review; and student evaluations. For example, the University identified that the National Student Survey findings included very positive feedback on the learning environment in relation to resources and opportunities, while also identifying areas of concern, primarily relating to timetabling. The University's 'You Said, We Did' campaign (see paragraph 24) communicates back to the wider student body the action taken to enhance the learning environment in response to issues raised (for example, new social facilities, improved disabled access, and extended library opening hours).

45 At the time of the ELIR, the development of the University's Garthdee campus was underway (see paragraph 13). The University is seeking to create a more holistic and integrated campus which will consolidate all academic activity; facilitate co-location and collaboration between departments; and create a campus centred around the learning activities and needs of the student. The University emphasises the importance of the student learning experience to the development of its estate, and the campus Master Plan includes a strong student focus, being informed by evidence of student experience and behaviour, and the successive contributions of the Student Union. For example, the Master Plan gives due priority to informal learning space and social space, including a dedicated facility for the Student Union, alongside more formal and specialist learning spaces, and has been mindful of the needs of current students while development is ongoing.

46 The University identified that, since the 2007 ELIR, its virtual learning environment (VLE) has been upgraded, and the previous in-house VLE has been replaced with 'Moodle open source'

software. The University believes that the new VLE has greatly enhanced the e-learning infrastructure for on and off-campus students. All modules are required to have a presence in the VLE, and there is an expectation that material will be made available in advance for open and distance learning modules. During the ELIR, students indicated that, in general, they considered the new VLE and associated online material to be helpful for their learning. Students in later years of their courses were enthusiastic about the upgrades to the VLE and IT provision. Distance learning students were appreciative of the effective use of the VLE for learning, and identified a number of innovative ways in which the VLE was used in some modules. Overall, during the ELIR, open and distance learning students considered that their learning, as well as their wider support and information needs, were being met by the University.

47 Staff suggested that increasing use is being made of the VLE as an embedded learning tool (for example for electronic submission of coursework, formative testing and placement support) and that this will potentially benefit all students, whether they are studying on or off-campus. Academic staff indicated that the e-learning team in DELTA and the e-learning advisers in schools were proactive in supporting staff in their use of the VLE.

48 Given the significance of the off-campus student population for the University (see paragraph 15), the learning experience of this student group has been the thematic focus for the recent Student-Facing Support Services Review (S-FSSR) (see paragraphs 90 to 93). An underlying intention is for any redesign of services for off-campus students to also provide opportunities to enhance services for on-campus students. The University stated that the reviews indicate that off-campus students' views of the learning environment are generally positive, though a number of areas for enhancement have been identified, such as information on the nature of off-campus study and support available to prospective students; providing support services for use of the VLE; responding to queries and referring students to appropriate services; and assisting off-campus students to achieve a better work-life-study balance. Overall, the University is taking positive steps to enhance the learning environment for off-campus students.

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

49 The University stated that its approach to promoting equality of opportunity and effective learning for all of its students is to focus on the implications of an increasingly diverse student population for all of the institution's activities. This approach is set out in the University's Equality and Diversity Policy and is overseen by the Equality and Diversity Advisory Group (EDAG). The University has an annual Equality Action Plan and an Inclusivity Statement. The Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee monitors equality and diversity data. An annual report, produced by EDAG, is submitted to the Board of Governors which reports on actions against the previous year's plan.

50 Institution-Led Subject Review includes consideration of 'who are the students?' which is intended to focus on the nature and character of the student population and its constituent groups, and the University indicated that Student-Facing Support Service Review had been deliberately designed to consider all students in ways that reflect their context and needs. There is clear evidence of consideration of specific groups of students, which is made possible by good management information. For example, in providing and targeting study skills support, use is made of management information and progression rates for specific groups such as students enumerated in the lower quintile of the Scottish index of multiple deprivation, and male mature students.

51 The promotion of widening access is important to the University and 'access for all' is one of its six strategic priorities within A Clear Future. One of the principal ways in which this is progressed is through articulation routes and agreements with regional colleges. General support for this group of students is provided through the associate student scheme, which provides early access to the University and its resources.

were highly regarded by staff and widely seen as having a crucial role in supporting staff development to promote effective student learning and promoting enhancement activity.

58 The University has significantly revised its appointment process for the promoted post of Teaching Fellow to place emphasis on the recognition of outstanding personal practice in learning and teaching and, in particular, a deliberate focus on the positive impact of this on the learning experience of the University's students. The University believes that for the first time there is now a critical mass of Teaching Fellows within the institution, and thus scope to encourage and support collective activities such as a Teaching Fellow-led conference and Teaching Fellow network. During the ELIR, some staff indicated a clear aspiration towards promotion through the Teaching Fellow route. Overall, the Teaching Fellow scheme has the potential to make a positive impact on students' learning.

59 The University's Guidelines on Effective Learning and Teaching are intended to provide concise and high-level guidance for academic staff, applicable to all taught provision, and are founded on the principle that good teaching engages students. The Guidelines sets out eight statements on the characteristics of effective learning and teaching at the University, and staff are invited to use these as an internal reference point to inform dialogue and discussion. At the time of the ELIR, the Guidelines were relatively new and academic staff indicated only a limited awareness of them. The University is to be encouraged in its intentions to build wide ownership of the Guidelines and ensure their impact on learning and teaching.

60 Research supervisors are required to undertake both initial and refresher training. In addition to generic supervisor training, specific training is offered on, for example, supervising international students, and information and guidance is available online for supervisors.

61 During the ELIR, staff identified the University's relatively new Employee Performance Review (EPR) process as a positive development in supporting individual academic and career development and enhancement of practice. It was evident that the Performance Review process is already having an impact on practice, for example staff reported good linkages between the identification of an individual's development priorities in Performance Review and their school's enhancement agendas. Staff discussed the ways in which they are supported to develop their academic practice including attendance at conferences, workshops and seminars, and the support provided by DELTA. Staff indicated that topics for staff development events were often identified by feedback provided by students, PSRBs or industry. Staff also highlighted the many informal mechanisms that serve to support and help develop staff in supporting students, such as informal meetings between staff fulfilling the same role within a school, graduate school or faculty. These informal activities provide evidence to support the view of a culture of quality enhancement within the University (see paragraphs 148 to 150).

62 Overall, the University has established an effective range of mechanisms to develop and support staff to promote effective learning for their students, with DELTA providing a useful linking point for internally and externally informed staff development and an overall effective service.

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

63 Collaborative activity predominately involves articulation arrangements, mainly with local and regional further education colleges, and the University's arrangements account for the vast majority of students from the regional colleges who articulate into higher education. Articulation arrangements account for some 10 per cent of the overall undergraduate intake and some 4.5 per cent of total student numbers. In recent years, the number of students on the University's corporate courses has declined to around 200 students, although the institution is seeking to reverse this decline in student numbers. The wider portfolio of collaborative activity is small but increasing. In 2010-11 it comprised 140 students on four validated collaborative courses, some 38 on third-party credit-rated provision, and a small number on other collaborative arrangements.

52 During the ELIR, students were very positive about those student services which support students with specific needs. The service for dyslexic students was praised highly by students, and both course leaders and disability coordinators play key roles in identifying and referring students. In line with much of the sector, the University has identified a growing complexity in student needs, and a growth in mental health issues. As a consequence of the latter, there has been a shift in approach towards an emphasis on student health and well-being. For international students, specific classes are provided to support their needs and the Careers Service identifies international students and their needs as a specific group in its work. Open and distance learning students indicated that they felt well supported by the provision of clear information available to them online.

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

53 The University provides both central and locally based support for staff and seeks to provide a range of developmental opportunities through, for example, participation in periodic review activity. Central support is provided by the Department for the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching and Assessment (DELTA) (see paragraphs 134 and 144 to 147). DELTA's provision includes a Higher Education Academy (HEA) accredited Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Learning and Teaching (PgCert HELT), developmental services, and resources to support e-learning and articulation. It also provides focused support for the learning enhancement coordinators (see paragraphs 135 to 136 and 157 to 160) and e-learning advisers (see paragraph 47). During the ELIR, staff identified a range of support provided by DELTA, including drop-in sessions on the VLE; support for individual staff development needs; and a resource bank of innovative practice, 'Snapshots' (see paragraphs 145 and 161).

54 The PgCert HELT is targeted at staff new to teaching in higher education with completion of the first module a requirement of probation. The second module requires staff to identify and undertake a project linked to a strategic development and enhancement need within their school. During the ELIR, new staff indicated that this opportunity to undertake a project likely to lead to change within their discipline was highly valued, and also developed confidence and skills in the scholarship of teaching and learning. Successful completion of both modules entitles individuals to apply for professional recognition as a Fellow of the HEA.

55 Postgraduate research students who teach are required to undertake training. During the ELIR, research students were generally positive about the training programme provided, but students from some schools expressed some frustration that there were not always opportunities available to teach, and thus they were not able to fully complete the training.

56 The University does not have an institution-wide approach to the development of technology-enhanced learning, and responsibility for this lies with the schools. Nevertheless, a wide range of support is provided locally by e-learning advisers and centrally by DELTA. The University regards the range and quality of online resources for staff as evidence for the effectiveness of DELTA's support for e-learning. A number of schools, including those in the Faculty of Health and Social Care, have appointed school-based e-learning advisers who provide specialist development support. During the ELIR, staff confirmed the active role that e-learning advisers play in some schools, and staff in those schools which did not have an e-learning adviser indicated that they were able to draw on DELTA staff support for e-learning needs. Overall, e-learning advisers provide good support for staff, but such support is variable across the institution in that it does not exist in all schools. The University is encouraged to continue to support staff development in technology-enhanced learning.

57 The Learning Enhancement Coordinator (LEC) scheme (see paragraphs 135 to 136 and 157 to 160) seeks to support staff development in learning and teaching through developmental activities for staff in schools and faculties led by the LECs, as well as providing developmental opportunities for the individual staff appointed as LECs. During the ELIR, it was evident that LECs

64 The extent of the University's direct responsibility for the student learning experience varies between the different types of collaborative provision. With articulation arrangements, the University's primary responsibility is to work closely with its college partners to ensure appropriate curriculum alignment, and student support and induction arrangements, to make the transition to higher education a smooth and effective learning experience. It is evident that the University works closely with college partners, and is active in working with staff and students, to ensure students experience an effective transition from college to the University. Joint staff development events are offered by the University and Aberdeen College, and DELTA's Study Skills and Access Unit supports both students and staff in college articulations. During the ELIR, students were enthusiastic about the support and opportunities available to them before and after moving to the University. Staff also indicated that there would normally be interaction between University staff and college students prior to the students articulating, and that there were regular opportunities for students to visit the University in advance. The University operates an associate student scheme which provides access to facilities and support for college students on articulation routes prior to transition and assigns staff to act as the link with articulating colleges.

65 With validated provision and with the award of credit, the partner institution has primary operational responsibility for the student experience, for engaging students and supporting their learning, and for provision of an appropriate learning environment. The University uses its approval and review processes to ensure initial and continuing capability and provision. Annual Appraisal and review of collaborative activity are embedded within routine quality processes, and the Business Information System enables the analysis of student groups for each collaboration, and sub-reports on the operation of the collaboration where appropriate. This information is considered by partnership course teams, enabling evidence-based partnership working to tackle performance issues and manage the student learning experience. The University considers that this partnership monitoring promotes the improvement of student achievement and enhances the student experience for students articulating from Scottish colleges.

66 Overall, the University is managing the student learning experience in collaborative arrangements effectively.

## **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**

67 The University's approach to institution-led monitoring and review is supported by a quality framework that seeks to establish and maintain academic standards and the quality of the student learning experience. The University considers that this framework which encompasses institution-wide policies, procedures and regulations, together with its committee structure and executive responsibilities, helps to ensure consistency of approach. Consistency of approach is also supported through the Academic Affairs department which oversees the development and implementation of the University's quality procedures; in particular a member of Academic Affairs works with each faculty in the role of Faculty Quality Officer. During the ELIR, academic staff expressed unanimous support for the Faculty Quality Officer role in providing support and advice to schools and faculties in the implementation of policy and procedures, and also in terms of helping to ensure consistency of practice across the University.

68 The University's approval, monitoring and review processes are set out in three main documents: the Academic Quality Handbook (AQH), which describes its quality assurance procedures; the Academic Regulations which define the regulatory framework; and the Organisational Regulations which describe the governance and deliberative procedures. An overview of processes is provided in the Guide to Academic Quality Procedures. These comprehensive documents, which are available on the University's website, have been developed with reference to the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher*

*education (Code of practice)* published by QAA, and staff confirmed that they are a useful resource. The University applies its processes both to on-campus and off-campus provision, with all collaborative provision being subject to approval, monitoring and review.

69 The University identified those committees with a key role in the implementation and oversight of its approval, monitoring and review processes. The most senior of these committees, Academic Council (AC), has several standing committees including the Academic Development Committee (ADC); the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (QAEC); and the Research Degrees Committee (RDC). The QAEC also has a number of key sub-committees including the Learning Infrastructure Sub-Committee (LISC); the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Sub-Committee (TLASC); and the Academic Regulations Sub-Committee (ARSC). The faculty quality enhancement sub-committees (FQESCs), which are also sub-committees of QAEC, play a key role in the University's approval, monitoring and review processes. At school level, school academic boards are responsible for the operation, management, quality assurance and development of the schools' academic provision, and report through the committee structure to faculty and University levels. Graduate school boards, reporting to the Research Degrees Committee, have a role in the monitoring of research degrees. The effectiveness of Academic Council and its standing committees is evaluated annually.

70 The key University committees are chaired by senior managers with executive responsibility. Implementation of approval, monitoring and review processes at faculty and school level is overseen by the deans of faculty who play a key role in the annual monitoring processes and have devolved responsibility for a number of quality assurance activities, such as approval of modules and minor course changes.

71 The outcomes of all approval, monitoring and review processes are reported annually through the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee to the Academic Council and the Board of Governors. The review outcomes inform the production of the Annual Statement to the Scottish Funding Council which is endorsed by the Board of Governors.

72 Overall, the University has an effective committee structure through which to consider its approval, monitoring and review processes and outcomes. The roles of committees are set out clearly in the Organisational Regulations and documentary evidence demonstrates that business is discharged diligently, with action planning and follow up, and clearly identified reporting.

### **Module and course/programme approval**

73 The processes for the approval of new modules and courses or programmes are set out in the Academic Quality Handbook. The approval of modules is delegated to deans of faculty; module descriptors are submitted through the school academic board having had external scrutiny, and once approved are made available on the University's Module Database. Deans also have devolved authority to approve amendments to courses that affect no more than 25 per cent of their credit value; course amendments are submitted through the school academic board.

74 The approval of new provision or of substantial amendments to existing courses or programmes involves two stages. Approval starts with the Academic Development Committee (ADC). Thereafter, validation is the process through which the University assures itself of the quality and standards of new provision or approves substantial changes to existing provision. Programme approval takes into consideration the use of external reference points such as the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) and subject benchmark statements. Validation panels include at least one external member.

75 Overall the University's arrangements for programme approval are effective. The procedures are well established and operate consistently. Reports of validation events demonstrate a thorough approach, with appropriate external involvement.



## Monitoring and review

76 The University identifies the following processes as key elements of its approach to institution-led monitoring and review: Annual Appraisal, Institution-Led Subject Review, and Student-Facing Support Services Review. At the time of the ELIR, the University had recently developed a new Research Degree Internal Review process which had yet to be fully implemented. In general, appraisal and review of collaborative provision is embedded within the routine processes for the relevant course, with analyses of specific student groups enabling identification of information relating to collaborative provision.

### Annual Appraisal

77 The University states that Annual Appraisal is a process whereby the delivery of all courses/programmes and output standards achieved are monitored, and that it is also designed to encourage the identification and dissemination of enhancement activities and to facilitate the provision of good quality feedback to students on an ongoing basis. The evidence gathered during this process is used to inform Institution-Led Subject Review (see paragraphs 81 to 87).

78 The Annual Appraisal process was refined in 2010 to make the primary focus on the course/award level and to introduce a finer-grained analysis of data. The process involves the completion of a template by course/programme teams for each course/programme and consideration of a prescribed set of information relating to the effectiveness of course delivery. The latter includes student intake and achievement; graduate employment; student evaluations; external examiners' reports; outcomes from any internal and external review events during the year; examples of good practice/innovation; and a risk assessment of future quality and standards. Annual Appraisal provides opportunities to identify and share good practice as well as matters raised by students, and to feed into the University's enhancement agenda. Students are formally involved with the Annual Appraisal process through student feedback mechanisms such as student experience questionnaires (see paragraphs 23 to 25) and staff-student liaison meetings (see paragraphs 21 to 22); additionally Student Union representatives sit on institutional-level committees where Annual Appraisal reports are considered. Since 2010-11 a meeting between the Deputy Principal, deans of faculty, Academic Registrar and faculty quality officers has been held early in the academic year to consider a high-level analysis of the Annual Appraisal data with the purpose of ensuring that prompt action is taken where necessary and to promote the effective implementation of the appraisal process within schools and faculties.

79 As part of the Annual Appraisal process, school academic boards are required to review the relevant course-level reports. This results in a school academic board appraisal report which includes confirmation of the effectiveness of the key analyses undertaken at course and programme level; identification of significant achievements or issues to be addressed at school level; analysis of equality and diversity data; and identification of potential risks to the quality and standards of the school's academic course portfolio. At faculty level, the dean reviews the school report and produces a dean of faculty appraisal report which is considered by the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee, with the relevant school academic board appraisal reports also being made available to committee members. This report to the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee enables the dean to comment on the data and report actions, and also gives the Committee assurance regarding adherence to procedures.

80 The University acknowledged that a small number of staff at course level still tend to see Annual Appraisal as a form-filling event rather than part of a wider process of enhancement, and indicated that this was being addressed. The deans' overview reports generally comment positively on schools' engagement with the process, noting that more significant engagement is taking place. Documentary evidence shows that the consideration given to the Annual Appraisal reports at various stages through school, faculty and University-level committees is comprehensive and that actions are identified and monitored. Overall the University's Annual Appraisal process is effective and achieves its stated purpose of contributing to enhancement processes through the identification and dissemination of good practice.

## Institution-Led Subject Review

81 Since the 2007 ELIR, the University has introduced Institution-Led Subject Review (ILSR) to replace the former Internal Subject Review process. Institution-Led Subject Review is implemented on a school basis, normally on a six-yearly cycle. Schools are supported in the process by the Academic Affairs Department and DELTA (see paragraphs 134 and 144 to 147).

82 A key element of the review is the Reflective Analysis which summarises the outcomes of a school/department's evaluation. Guidance on its production is provided in the Academic Quality Handbook. The guidance includes the requirements for a 'Look Model'. This comprises 'Look Back' which is an evaluation of the outcomes of the past five years' Annual Appraisals and other relevant quality assurance information; 'Look Inwards' which involves consideration of the current working of the school/department and its courses; 'Look Outwards' which considers external reference points; and 'Look Forward' which is expected to consider the future context for students, graduates and the school/department. Within the Reflective Analysis, the statement of future directions and plans is intended to form the primary focus for dialogue between the review panel and the school/department.

83 Institution-Led Subject Review panels typically include at least four external members, are chaired by a dean of another faculty, and include two independent internal representatives - one of whom is normally a learning enhancement coordinator from a different school/department - and one or more student representatives. Panels meet with staff and students. During the ELIR, students reported the value of these meetings.

84 The confirmed report of the review event is posted on the Academic Affairs website and is also made available to students. School/departments produce a response no later than three months after the review event has taken place, which is also published on the Academic Affairs website. Three years after the original review, the school is required to produce a report providing an update on developments arising from the review. The report is considered by the dean of faculty, who is responsible for formally recommending it for approval to the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee. An additional outcome is the set of 'Snapshots' highlighting distinctive or particularly effective aspects of practice within the school/department, which are made available on DELTA's website (see paragraphs 145 and 161).

85 Course re-approval, which is largely a desk-based exercise, is linked to Institution-Led Subject Review. The outcomes from the reviews inform revision of courses which are submitted for re-approval. There is continuity in membership of the panels, for example a number of the external subject members of the review panel are retained as critical readers for the course documentation submitted for course re-approval. Reports from re-approvals, which are made available on the Academic Affairs website, demonstrate that the process is robust and has appropriate external involvement.

86 The Institution-Led Subject Review reports are comprehensive and focus on improvement and enhancement. The focus of the approach is on forward planning, and staff reported that they felt Institution-Led Subject Review to be strategic, forward-looking and to provide an opportunity for sharing practice across departments and schools. The self-evaluation requires schools to both review past activities but also to look forward with specific reference to the University's Strategy. ILSR panels are constructively critical and are able to make wide-ranging recommendations. Committee minutes demonstrated that the outcomes of Institution-Led Subject Review are carefully considered and actions followed up.

87 Overall, the University's revised Institution-Led Subject Review process is effective and meets the Scottish Funding Council's guidance for institution-led quality review.

## Research degrees

88 The University's research degree provision is considered annually through annual progress monitoring. Research students complete an annual progress report which includes a self-assessment by the research student, and a section completed by the principal supervisor. As part of the process the research degree coordinator, or an appropriate alternative, interviews all research students. The annual progress reports are reviewed by the appropriate graduate school board, which may approve or refer them back to the research institute/centre or school for further clarification or, exceptionally, refer any substantive issues to the Research Degrees Committee. During the ELIR, postgraduate research students indicated that they understood, and were generally positive about, annual progress monitoring.

89 At the time of the ELIR, the University had recently developed a new periodic Research Degree Internal Review process for implementation during 2011-12. The University noted that the process, which is set out in the Academic Quality Handbook, is similar in concept to the Institution-Led Subject Review process. Originally the University had intended to hold a single review event which encompassed all three of its graduate schools. Following reflection, the University has decided that a review process with greater granularity will be more meaningful and focused. The process has therefore been disaggregated into three separate reviews with the first event scheduled for June 2012. While the timing of the current ELIR meant that it was too soon to evaluate the effectiveness of the Research Degree Internal Review process, it is clear that the University has demonstrated a willingness to reflect on, and to revise, the process in order for it to be fit for purpose.

## Student-Facing Support Services Review

90 The University's Support Services are monitored annually through the Annual Appraisal of Student-Facing Support Services which is reported through the Learning Infrastructure Sub-Committee to the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee. Support Services complete a template which asks them to consider a number of aspects: how the service is performing against its identified outcomes and impacts, as well as the common service standards that have been developed for all the student-facing support services; the impact of significant changes to the service in the most recent academic year; and how the service plans to enhance its services in light of its self-evaluation. The process incorporates the appraisal of feedback from students. As with the University's other monitoring and review processes, evidence confirms that actions arising from the annual appraisal are systematically followed up and monitored.

91 The University has also developed a new periodic Student-Facing Support Services Review process. The University stated that they consider this to be an opportunity not only to examine the way its support services are reviewed but also to develop a process that promotes enhancement of these services, with the focus on the collective impact on the student experience. Student-Facing Support Services Review covers all student-facing services rather than reviewing these services on a department-by-department basis. The process involves production of a Reflective Analysis and consideration by a panel which includes internal staff, external members and student representatives.

92 In year one of implementation (2008-09) the process focused on developing and implementing a common set of service standards and in year two (2009-10) the outcome of the process was the establishment of a set of desired impacts. The University is using years three and four of the process (2010-11 and 2011-12) to evaluate the extent to which the services are achieving the desired impacts, initially exploring this from the perspective of off-campus students in recognition that this provision has already increased significantly over the last decade and that the University wishes to grow it further. During 2011-12, the review is examining the way in which student-facing services are delivered to off-campus students to help ensure commonality of experience across the service standards and the impacts on the student experience for both off and on-campus students (see paragraph 48).

93 During the ELIR, staff involved in the review process were positive about it, expressing the opinion that it has given them a better understanding of each other's services and is helping to promote a more unified view of service provision, particularly from a student perspective. Staff also expressed the view that focusing on the impact of services on the student experience was more beneficial than measuring student satisfaction, and gave several examples of changes made to services as a result of this approach. The University considers that its approach to reviewing its student-facing services has involved not only the ongoing development of a process, but also the promotion of a culture change among these services. Overall, it views its Student-Facing Services Review process to be a 'journey that has commenced but not yet completed'. At the time of the current ELIR it was too early to fully evaluate the effectiveness of this approach, but it is clear that the University has begun to implement a forward-looking, enhancement-focused approach.

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

94 The University stated that its monitoring and review processes consider all students on credit or award-bearing modules and courses, including students studying on-campus and those studying through distance learning and collaborations.

95 The University identified a number of mechanisms used for capturing the views of all students including the Student Experience Questionnaire, staff-student liaison meetings, the National Student Survey, the International Student Barometer, and the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (see paragraphs 23 and 26). Collaborative partners are expected to collect feedback from students through questionnaires, and the University has adapted the module questionnaires completed by distance learning students to include specific questions relevant to this group of learners.

96 Student feedback from both formal and informal mechanisms is systematically analysed at course and school level as part of the Annual Appraisal Process (see paragraphs 77 to 80). The process includes the analysis of issues raised through feedback from different groups of students including in relation to equality and diversity, collaborative activity, and articulation arrangements, and actions are targeted appropriately. Consideration of students on collaborative courses is embedded in the routine course appraisal and review processes, which include analyses of student achievement and student evaluations for these groups of students. Management of articulation arrangements with colleges also involves consideration by partnership course teams of student data specifically associated with their course, and leads to enhancement actions.

97 As part of its Annual Appraisal process, the University undertakes a comprehensive analysis of the outcomes of student feedback, which is reported through the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee, and which demonstrates that consideration is given to feedback from different categories of students. The University also stated that the separation of the processes for reviewing taught (through Institution-Led Subject Review) and research (through Research Degree Internal Review) provision will also enable it to better focus on each category of student.

98 There is clear evidence that the University has adapted its monitoring and review process to encourage the consideration of open and distance learning students, for example the University's current focus on off-campus students in Student-Facing Services Review (see paragraphs 90 to 93). There are also examples of the establishment of virtual staff-student liaison committees (see paragraph 21) and the modification of the student evaluation questionnaire for these students (see paragraphs 23 to 25).

99 Overall, the University takes effective steps to ensure its monitoring and review arrangements include consideration of all students.

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

100 The University noted that external reference points are used in the design and implementation of its approval, monitoring and review processes, including the *Code of practice*; the Academic Infrastructure, the Scottish Funding Council's guidance to higher education institutions on quality; the European Standards and Guidelines; and the national Enhancement Themes. The University's course provision is designed using the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF), and the University's approval process includes the use of benchmarks and professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) requirements. Updates to the *Code of practice* and consideration of consultations on sector-wide policy and practice, such as the new UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code), are dealt with through the University's committee structure.

101 The University's approach to monitoring and review encompasses extensive analysis and evaluation. Annual Appraisal involves analysis of a wide-ranging data set (see paragraphs 77 to 80) and makes systematic use of the external benchmarking of key information. Institution-Led Subject Review, Research Degree Internal Review and Student-Facing Services Review all include a Reflective Analysis or similar document. External experts are widely and consistently used by the University in its approval, monitoring and review processes. For example, Institution-Led Subject Review panels include significant external membership, including employer/professional perspectives (see paragraphs 81 to 87). The University considers external involvement to be a key part of its processes with staff benefiting from the engagement of, and critical conversations with, external experts. The University regards PSRB accreditation and review as primary external reference points. The Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee receives an annual update of the outcomes of PSRB visits and the list of accredited courses appears on the Academic Affairs website. Students commented that they consider the professional accreditation of the University's courses as one of the institution's strengths (see paragraphs 30 and 37).

102 Overall, the University has a clear commitment to a self-evaluative approach to monitoring and review, and is making effective use of external reference points. The work of the main committees demonstrates an evaluative approach to the University's performance, a key feature of which is the use of a wide range of internally and externally generated data, external involvement and the use of external benchmarks.

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

103 All the University's monitoring and review processes for both academic provision and student-facing services have clearly defined expectations about information inputs and analyses and how these should be considered and reported. The University noted that its Business Information System (BIS) is a recent development which enables access to key information in real time (see paragraph 17). The BIS provides data on student applications, enrolment and achievement; student evaluations; and first destination data. Senior management is now able to take prompt action where necessary in response to the early indicators provided by the BIS. Staff consider the BIS to be a very positive tool to support decision making about specific groups of students, such as open and distance learning students, and students on collaborative programmes. For example, data generated by the BIS has informed a revision to the entry-level requirements of international students enrolling on open and distance learning programmes, and a revised induction programme for students articulating onto accounting and finance programmes. A Steering Group has been formed to oversee the further development of the BIS interface, which acts as a gateway through which key information is made available to relevant staff.

104 The University's online Student Experience Questionnaire (SEQ) (see paragraphs 23 to 25) is linked with the BIS which enables analyses of students' evaluations by course, module and student category. Data from external student surveys, such as the National Student Survey and

International Student Barometer, are fed into the main University committees, with a focus on the quality rather than the quantity of the feedback; the International Student Barometer data is considered by the Internationalisation Strategy and Planning Group.

105 Since the 2007 ELIR, the University's Course Information Database has been fully implemented. Information on courses is provided in course specifications generated from the Course Information Database, and in module descriptors generated from the Module Database, both of which are available online. The University noted that the Course Information Database has been a long-running project, and that a milestone has recently been reached with the new format for course specifications, all of which are available online.

106 Overall the University has an effective approach to the generation and use of data to inform its monitoring and review activities.

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

107 The University's approach and requirements in relation to setting and maintaining academic standards are set out in the Academic Quality Handbook, the Academic Regulations and the Organisational Regulations. Academic standards are set through course validation processes and defined in course specifications and module descriptors. Academic standards are maintained through practice guided by the University's documentation including assessment policies, procedures and guidelines; internal moderation and external examiners; Annual Appraisal; course/programme change procedures; Institution-Led Subject Review; and course re-approval. Faculty quality officers have an important role to play in providing support, for example by reviewing the evidence used in Institution-Led Subject Review and in the course approval process. Feedback from the external examiners' reports confirms that academic standards are appropriate.

108 External examiner appointments are overseen by the Academic Affairs Department and final approval is given by the Academic Council. Guidance about external examiner appointments is made available in the Academic Quality Handbook. Briefing materials are sent to new external examiners and this is complemented by an induction process. Course management teams have responsibility for responding formally to external examiners' reports and these responses are submitted to the school academic board as part of the Annual Appraisal process. In addition, an overall analysis and synthesis of external examiner reports is submitted to the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee for consideration.

109 In addition to its Academic Regulations, the University publishes on its website a wide range of assessment policies and procedures including those relating to anonymous marking; double marking; late submission and return of coursework; examination procedures; the conduct of assessment boards; and computer-assisted assessment. The University is developing a new Academic Honesty approach to promote positive behaviour and practice, and this has been disseminated to the student body.

110 Overall, there can be confidence in the effectiveness of the University's approach to quality assurance and the setting and maintaining of academic standards. The University's approach to the management of assessment is secure and includes a wide-ranging set of policies relating to assessment practice.

### **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**

111 The University provides key information and documentation online for prospective and current students. The information held on the website for prospective students is informed by the

University's Publishing Plan, with an agreed schedule for the auditing of the webpages on a biannual and annual basis. The Marketing team, in conjunction with staff in faculties, is responsible for agreeing and finalising all publications and public information. Information about courses is presented to validation panels for their consideration and approval. Prior to this, the accuracy of the information is confirmed by the University's scrutiny process which includes the faculty quality officers and senior academics. Following validation, the course specification is made publicly available. The University approves any publication materials produced by collaborative partners. Handbooks and other course documentation are approved and monitored at the faculty level.

112 Public information is also considered during the Institution-Led Subject Review and Research Degree Internal Review processes. The University notes that evidence from Institution-Led Subject Review reports indicates that current students are satisfied with the information they were provided with prior to entry and during their studies; this was confirmed by students during the ELIR. The University indicated that it plans to provide Higher Education Achievement Reports from 2012-13.

113 At the time of the ELIR, the University was revising its website in order to better meet the needs of key target groups, including prospective students and the business and research communities, and was also considering how best to respond to emerging external developments relating to public information including the Key Information Set.

114 Overall, the University is taking an effective approach to managing public information about quality and academic standards.

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

115 The University stated that all of its planning, appraisal and review processes are designed to consider both assurance and enhancement, and that a clear linkage between these processes and the enhancement agenda is achieved through action setting and monitoring and the identification of good practice. The faculty quality enhancement sub-committees have a key role to play in disseminating good practice, channelled through the learning enhancement coordinators (see paragraphs 135 and 157 to 160) and course leader meetings.

116 Monitoring and review activities, such as the Annual Appraisal, Institution-Led Subject Review (ILSR) and the Student-Facing Services Review provide opportunities for the identification and sharing of good practice and inform the University's enhancement agendas. The University indicated that Institution-Led Subject Review is specifically focused on enhancement and the involvement of staff from external schools provides further opportunities for identifying potential enhancement activities. Aspects of effective practice identified in the review processes are published in DELTA Snapshots on the University's website (see paragraphs 145 and 161).

117 Overall, the University has effective approaches in place to link its monitoring and review processes to its enhancement arrangements.

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

118 In 2010-11, the University had some 214 students studying through collaborative arrangements. The most significant form of collaborative activity is the articulation arrangements with Scottish further education colleges. In 2010-11, around 10 per cent of the student intake entered the University through this route and the University is seeking to increase its articulation activities. In addition, a recent development has been the establishment of the International College at the University (see paragraph 11) to support growth in the number of international students. Students at the International College have the status of associate students of the University. The University also has a small number of students studying off-campus through collaborative arrangements.

119 The University's approach to collaborative activity is driven by its Strategy 'A Clear Future' and its Internationalisation Strategy, and there are clear criteria upon which the University decides the suitability of a potential collaboration. At the time of the current ELIR, the University was exploring new opportunities in accordance with its strategic plan.

120 Collaborations are governed by Contracts of Collaboration which are signed by both parties before any collaborative provision is delivered. Articulation arrangements are governed by institutional-level Memoranda of Agreement, supported by course-level agreements. The University retains control over all information, publicity and promotional activity and for the standards of programmes and awards for which it has responsibility. External examiners are approved in the same way as for on-campus provision. The University briefs all external examiners involved in the collaboration on their duties and, where appropriate, external examiners for collaborative courses are invited to attend an induction.

121 A member of University staff is designated as University Moderator for collaborations involving validated courses, joint awards and the award of credit. The Moderator takes responsibility for the overall administration, general operation, coordination and monitoring of the collaboration, and provides the primary point of contact and academic link between the University and its partner. The Moderator also prepares an annual report as part of the Annual Appraisal process.

122 The University's processes for managing collaborative academic awards are set out in the Academic Quality Handbook. The University defines five types of academic collaboration for award-bearing taught provision: validated course; award of credit for external provision; student exchange study period; articulation agreement; and joint award. All academic collaborations are subject to the University's quality assurance arrangements for approval, monitoring and review and follow the principles and, as closely as possible, the procedures used for all University courses. The approval of academic collaborations normally involves two stages: initial approval and formal approval by the Academic Development Committee. In general, appraisal and review of collaborative provision are embedded within the normal processes for the relevant course, with specific analyses of student groups for each collaboration, and sub-reports on the operation of the collaboration where appropriate. Procedures for the cessation of a collaborative agreement are also set out in the Academic Quality Handbook.

123 Overall, the University is effectively managing its collaborative arrangements, including its arrangements for monitoring and review of this provision.

## **Strategic approach to quality enhancement**

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

124 The University stated that its strategic approach to quality enhancement is embedded within the University's Strategy, A Clear Future, and is delivered through a range of activities including annual planning processes at institution, faculty and school levels; Annual Appraisal and periodic review of academic provision and student-facing support services; the workings of the University's committees; the support provided by DELTA, learning enhancement coordinators and research degree coordinators; staff performance and review activities; and student engagement in quality processes.

#### **A Clear Future**

125 The University's Strategy, A Clear Future, was developed in 2007 and refreshed in 2009. The University stated that learning and teaching to promote the professional employability of its students is at the heart of the Strategy. In 2009, the University reviewed the timescales for the achievement of some of the Strategy's objectives, and also confirmed that the six strategic priorities within the Strategy would, in the main, remain unchanged for the foreseeable future.



126 The University identified that three of the key priorities in A Clear Future explicitly relate to the enhancement of the student experience and learning, these being: to enrich the all-round experience of its students throughout their engagement with the University ('student experience'); to enhance the quality and relevance of the University's taught provision ('teaching and learning'); and to increase the diversification of the University's student population ('access for all'). Within each of these three strategic priorities, the University identifies 15 specific activities in order to achieve these priorities.

127 At the time of the ELIR, the University's Strategic Planning and Resources Group had recently spent time reflecting on the ongoing currency of the Strategy, in doing so confirming that the key elements of A Clear Future remained valid and core business. Related to this, the University was also undertaking a 'foresight' exercise, looking 20 years ahead at possible trends and challenges. Senior staff indicated that when the outcomes of the foresight exercise are complete, the University will reflect on whether A Clear Future will need to be further refreshed.

### **Internationalisation Strategy**

128 At the time of the ELIR, the University had recently finalised its Internationalisation Strategy. The Internationalisation Strategy identifies that in order for the institution to continue in its mission to be an outstanding regional university, it must have a global outlook. The Strategy aims to allow the University to benefit from being open to international influences and opportunities, and recognises the effects and importance of globalisation to the region and professions it serves, and to its students. To increase the University's global outlook, the Internationalisation Strategy identifies four 'strategic intents': internationalising the curriculum; supporting students to maximise the benefits of their experience, including the development of all students as global citizens; promoting the region's international ambitions; and developing the University's international profile for excellence in professional education. The Internationalisation Strategy further identifies a number of 'enablers' in achieving the strategic intents, these including staff capacity, focused partnerships, and sharing of knowledge and experience between the four strategic intents.

129 During the ELIR, academic staff indicated a clear awareness of the Internationalisation Strategy and viewed it positively, commenting that rather than the Strategy being a top-down development, it reflected activity at the local level and has been, at least in part, informed by matters arising through monitoring and review processes. For example, academic staff identified the well-established international opportunities for students, such as overseas placements and exchanges (see paragraphs 39 and 41) while also acknowledging that the distribution of such opportunities across the University is currently uneven. Academic staff also highlighted ways in which their course curriculum was informed by international developments, including themes arising during Institution-Led Subject Review, and the ways in which their teaching was addressing cultural differences in learning styles.

130 The recent finalisation of the Internationalisation Strategy at the time of the ELIR means that there was limited evidence on how the Strategy was being implemented. However, existing evidence suggests that the Strategy, in addition to offering an overview of current international activity, provides a clear framework for development and innovation which is likely to enable existing practices to be harnessed more strategically. The University is encouraged to progress the implementation of its Internationalisation Strategy, including through the design and delivery of the curriculum.

### **The role of committees in managing enhancement**

131 At University level, the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (QAEC) has strategic oversight of the development and implementation of policy relating to the enhancement of the student learning experience. The University regards the QAEC as key in aligning assurance and enhancement activity, and the QAEC has recently developed a more

strategic role with its two sub-committees: the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Sub-Committee (TLASC) and the Learning Infrastructure Sub-Committee (LISC), which focus on the operational level and the impact of policies and initiatives on the student experience. In addition, the Research Degrees Committee's remit includes quality enhancement.

132 Within each faculty, the faculty quality enhancement sub-committee plays a key role, and there is clear evidence that the sub-committees give serious attention to enhancement, with substantive discussion on a range of topics such as the Internationalisation Strategy, the outcomes of the National Student Survey, and graduate attributes. The faculties' learning enhancement coordinators (see paragraphs 135 to 136) are core members of the faculty quality enhancement sub-committees, and reports from the learning enhancement coordinators appeared as a regular feature in all faculties.

133 Overall, it is evident that the QAEC and its sub-committees have clear and complementary remits which provide effective oversight of enhancement strategy, policy and implementation.

### **Department for the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching and Assessment**

134 The Department for the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching and Assessment (DELTA) was established in 2006, just prior to the 2007 ELIR, with the remit to promote and support enhancement activity across the University. The Department supports development in three key areas: e-learning; academic practice (for staff); and study skills (for students), and can call on the resource of approximately 25 staff (fractional, by headcount). In addition, the Dean of DELTA contributes to the development of strategy and policy at the institutional level through membership of the University's Strategic Planning and Resources Group (SPARG).

### **Learning enhancement coordinators**

135 Learning enhancement coordinators (LECs) are experienced academic staff members who have a part-time remit, typically 0.2 full-time equivalent, to coordinate and support enhancement activity at school and faculty levels. The LECs are initially appointed for two years although this can be extended for an additional one or two years. LECs are core members of their own faculty quality enhancement sub-committee (see paragraph 69) and the University's Teaching, Learning and Assessment Sub-Committee. They also serve on review panels outside their own faculty. The LECs, therefore, provide an important link between central and faculty committees, as well as across faculties, giving the potential for effective cross-fertilisation of ideas and the sharing of good practice. During the ELIR, staff considered that this potential was being realised, and that the LEC role had promoted a greater consistency of approach across faculties. LECs are supported in their role by DELTA.

136 Overall, the University's Strategy, A Clear Future, the institution's committee structure, and the establishment of specific mechanisms to support enhancement, such as DELTA and the learning enhancement coordinators, form a sound basis for promoting enhancement at all levels and ensuring that staff have the capacity to initiate and implement enhancement activities.

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

137 The University noted that many of the elements and developments of its approach to promoting enhancement are relatively recent, but that there is clear evidence of good progress in the right direction. The University further stated that the effectiveness of its strategies and policies for promoting quality enhancement can be demonstrated through the workings of the planning, approval and review processes.

### **A Clear Future and annual planning**

138 The University's Strategy, A Clear Future, is complemented by the University

Implementation Plan (UIP). The Implementation Plan sets out two key business objectives: income generation; and business efficiency, effectiveness and improvement. A number of key strategic actions and anticipated outcomes are listed under each objective.

139 The UIP identifies the member(s) of staff with primary responsibility for action, and the committees or units with responsibility for monitoring progress. The Plan is comprehensive and addresses all aspects of activity including those that impact upon the student experience. For example, the implementation of a strategic review of student placements (see paragraph 39) and the Internationalisation Strategy (see paragraphs 128 to 130) are explicitly mentioned in the UIP, as is a more general commitment to implement 'enhancements to the student experience through improved effectiveness of teaching and learning within constrained resources'. The Implementation Plan is monitored by the Strategic Planning and Resources Group which produces a quarterly report on progress, using a traffic light system of assessment.

140 The University Strategy and the UIP together provide the basis for annual planning at faculty level. For example, the Aberdeen Business School and the Faculty of Design and Technology have identified a series of actions which relate directly to the six priorities and six key performance indicators in A Clear Future. The Faculty of Health and Social Care identifies six priorities for 2011-12, although these are not directly tied to the strategic priorities and the key performance indicators in the same manner. All three faculties provide considerable detail on how they intend to meet the business objectives in the UIP, including anticipated outcomes and timescales. Overall, there is clear evidence that the faculty-level plans are closely aligned with University's strategic framework and contribute to the strategic aims of the University in relation to enhancing the student experience. Within these plans, the faculties' specific targets and actions reflect disciplinary differences and faculty/school developmental needs, while also remaining within the parameters set by the University's strategic framework.

### **The role of annual appraisal and periodic review in enhancement**

141 The University's guidance for Annual Appraisal (see paragraphs 77 to 80) and Institution-Led Subject Review (ILSR) (see paragraphs 81 to 87) make explicit reference to the identification of good practice and innovation leading to enhancement. The annual appraisal and review reports are analysed at school and faculty levels, and a summary of the key outcomes and issues arising is provided to institution-level committees and boards.

142 Evidence from recent high-level reporting of Annual Appraisal outcomes confirms that the process highlights examples of good practice and innovation at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels across the three faculties. The Reflective Analyses prepared for ILSR and the subsequent review reports confirm a clear emphasis on the identification of good practice and innovation within and across subject areas, frequently in the form of case studies or 'Snapshots' of effective practice (see paragraphs 145 and 161). The ILSR process requires the production of a subject-based enhancement plan which is intended to be forward-looking and strategic. The Annual Appraisal and periodic review of Student-Facing Support Services also seek evidence of practices that have made a positive impact on the student experience.

143 Overall, the University makes effective use of the monitoring and review processes, and the supporting committee structure, in implementing its strategies and policies for enhancement.

### **Department for the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching and Assessment (DELTA)**

144 In addition to supporting the learning enhancement coordinators (see paragraphs 53 to 62) and contributing to the enhancement agenda through staff development opportunities (see paragraphs 135 to 136), DELTA has a specific role in the development of technology-supported learning. In doing so, it has adopted a 'hub and spoke' approach to supporting staff in faculties and schools through a team of DELTA e-learning advisers. The advisers provide guidance and support through University-wide workshops and seminars, as well as working with specific

departments or individual staff members. Several schools have appointed school-based e-learning advisers who provide specialist development support to their colleagues and these are, in turn, supported by the DELTA e-learning team (see paragraph 56).

145 DELTA also manages 'Snapshots', an online repository of case studies of effective practices, which can be accessed through DELTA's webpages. The Snapshots have been identified primarily through appraisal and review processes, and are organised under a series of themes. Some of the Snapshots contribute to the resources used in the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Learning and Teaching for new or inexperienced lecturers (see paragraph 54).

146 In addition, the DELTA study skills team provide support to students in acquiring and developing study skills, through the provision of one-to-one and online support, and through working in partnership with course teams across the schools. DELTA is also working in partnership with the Student Union on the Study Skills and Access Ambassadors Scheme, which has established remunerated student roles to support DELTA's Study Skills and Access Unit through event support, material development and service evaluation.

147 Overall, DELTA holds a central role in developing, contributing to and reporting on enhancement activity across the University, and also takes a central role in supporting engagement with external agencies and initiatives.

### **Culture shift from assurance to enhancement**

148 The University identified a number of key changes in quality management that it had instigated since the 2007 ELIR with the intention of promoting a shift in quality culture from quality assurance to 'future-orientated quality enhancement', informed by evidence generated through quality assurance activity.

149 During the ELIR, both academic and student-facing services staff identified examples of what quality enhancement meant to them at the school or services level. These included preparing students for future professional employability; developing students' transferable skills; and supporting learning and teaching strategies. Overall, staff are knowledgeable and confident about the University's enhancement agenda, including how it relates to the national Enhancement Themes (see paragraphs 151 to 155). Many staff identified examples of school or service-based initiatives which had been established in response to either or both of these. Examples included enhancing research-teaching linkages; implementing graduate attributes within programmes; and innovation in assessment practices. Overall, staff provided clear evidence of a shift in institutional culture to one of quality enhancement.

### **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**

150 The University places considerable emphasis on externality in all aspects of quality assurance and enhancement. This is evident in a range of ways including: monitoring the implementation of A Clear Future against a set of external key performance indicators; using external reference points in both the design and implementation of quality assurance and enhancement processes; engaging with external student surveys; responding to feedback from external examiners and employer organisations; and engaging with external agencies and initiatives.

### **Enhancement Themes**

151 The national Enhancement Themes have been a significant reference point for the University. They are regarded as a primary reference point for evaluation and enhancement practice in Institution-led Subject Review. They have also informed the development of the Guidelines on Effective Learning and Teaching (see paragraph 59) as well as other guidance for

staff on a range of learning and teaching matters. The following Themes have been particularly significant in informing the University's enhancement activities: Graduates for the 21st Century (see paragraph 34); Research-Teaching Linkages; and Assessment and Integrative Assessment.

152 University-level responsibility for engagement with the Enhancement Themes rests with the Deputy Principal and the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee. DELTA also has an important role in supporting engagement with the Themes, and provides funding both to promote staff activities associated with the Themes and for staff to attend Themes events. Enhancement activities informed by the Themes are supported by the work of the learning enhancement coordinators (see paragraphs 135 to 136).

#### Assessment and Integrative Assessment Theme

153 The University stated that the outcomes of engagement with the Assessment Theme are well integrated into the academic regulations and associated procedures, as well as embedded in course design. A range of work on assessment practice has been undertaken, including on reducing over-assessment, introducing a broader range of approaches to assessment, and developing integrative and synoptic forms of assessing students' performance and progress. The University is continuing to reflect on assessment practices, including through the current Developing and Supporting the Curriculum Theme, and through a Higher Education Change Academy project to consider assessment feedback/feedforward (see paragraph 32).

#### Research-Teaching Linkages Theme

154 The University indicated that it intends to pilot an approach to encouraging and supporting staff to engage in scholarly activity informed by the Research-Teaching Linkages Theme. A position paper on research-informed teaching at Masters level provides guidance to staff on Masters level graduate attributes, emphasising the need to integrate these attributes into programme learning outcomes. The paper also sets out the importance of research and scholarly activity to support effective teaching at Masters level. DELTA Snapshots (see paragraphs 145 and 161) include a small number of case studies of effective research-teaching linkages and these indicate that there is potential for further development of such practice across the University.

155 It is evident that the University is engaging actively with the national Enhancement Themes and there is considerable evidence within the schools and faculties of enhancement activity informed by the Themes. These enhancement activities have impacted positively on the student experience, particularly in relation to assessment practice and student employability.

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

156 The University's approach to identifying, disseminating and implementing good practice covers a number of elements which include the identification and reporting of good practice in monitoring and review processes and onwards to the relevant University-level committees; the role of the learning enhancement coordinators; the role of DELTA, including its 'Snapshot' approach (see paragraphs 145 and 161); and the Student Experience Questionnaire (see paragraphs 23 to 25) as a means of identifying good learning and teaching practice. During the ELIR, staff identified a number of additional ways in which good practice was shared across the University, such as through the faculty quality enhancement sub-committees (see paragraph 69); faculty quality officers (see paragraph 67); the Placement Coordinators Forum (see paragraph 39); and the Teaching Fellows Scheme (see paragraph 58).

#### Identifying and sharing good practice

157 Staff view the learning enhancement coordinators (LECs) as having a key role in drawing attention to innovative and effective practices developed in other schools and faculties, often identified through their membership of committees and review panels. The LECs also support

each other and share good practice through their own network. For example, two schools have developed learning enhancement teams, and in doing so have developed a more coordinated approach to promoting enhancement.

158 At the time of the current ELIR, the University had recently reviewed the role of the LEC. This has resulted in clarification of the purpose of the LEC scheme and some modifications to the appointment process. The University's review found that some schools have appointed several LECs, and that the enhancement role of the LEC was most effective where the LEC was empowered by the Head of School and supported, through DELTA, in undertaking the role. Following the University's review, faculties continue to be encouraged to implement the scheme flexibly and DELTA has been charged with providing an annual overview of the impact of LEC activity to the Strategic Planning and Resources Group.

159 In line with the findings of the University's review of the LEC scheme, during the ELIR, staff highlighted the time required to undertake the LEC role effectively. Individual schools have implemented the LEC role in slightly different ways, with variation in time allocations and remits. Given the range of demands on LECs and the critical role that they are expected to play in staff support and dissemination of good practice, the University is encouraged to keep the scheme under review in order to ensure that the LECs have adequate time and opportunity to effectively discharge their role. The University is also encouraged to monitor and evaluate the variation in the number of LECs and their remits across the schools in order to ensure that all students benefit from the enhancement work of the LECs.

160 The University views the LEC role as a developmental opportunity for staff, and this is reflected in the number of LECs who subsequently apply for, and gain, Teaching Fellow status based on the expertise and experience gained in the role. The Teaching Fellow scheme (see paragraph 58) is an important component in the range of mechanisms in place to identify and disseminate good practice in learning, teaching and assessment.

161 The DELTA 'Snapshots' initiative (see paragraphs 145 and 161) seeks to give staff access to approaches that others have found to be effective. However, the extent to which Snapshots is used by staff is unclear, as is whether that usage is monitored in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the repository. The University is encouraged to take a proactive approach to monitoring and further developing Snapshots as a mechanism for sharing good practice.

162 Since 2009-10, the Student Union has promoted its Student Led Teaching Awards to recognise particularly positive practice in learning and teaching. During 2010-11, 97 members of staff were nominated by students for the award, resulting in 15 award winners and a further 10 staff receiving recognition awards.

163 Overall, the University's approach to identifying good practice is effective. The University has a range of mechanisms in place for the dissemination and implementation of good practice. However, these mechanisms have not yet fully harnessed the potential of good practice across the schools. The University is encouraged to take a more proactive approach to raising awareness among staff of good and innovative practice, particularly where these practices can be harnessed to support institutional priorities.

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

164 The University's approach to enhancing collaborative provision is embedded within its monitoring, review and enhancement activities which apply across all of its courses. In addition, focused support for the enhancement of articulation arrangements is provided by the University's Study Skills and Access Unit.

## Conclusion

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

165 Since the 2007 ELIR, the partnership between the Student Union and University has strengthened, with the Student Union making an active and effective contribution to enhancement activities across the institution. The student representative system at the class level is well understood by students and, generally, is effective. The University and Student Union have worked together to establish the new role of student faculty officer in order to strengthen the linkages between student class representatives, the Student Union and the faculties. The University and the Student Union are encouraged to continue to progress this initiative.

166 Overall, the University has clear and effective mechanisms for gathering and responding to student feedback. The University has developed its approach to the use of student questionnaires, introducing a new online Student Experience Questionnaire, the results of which can be analysed in detail so that the University can respond effectively to the needs of different student groups. The University also participates in a number of external student surveys, including the National Student Survey (NSS), and has used the outcomes of the NSS, alongside internal evaluations, to enhance its approaches to giving students feedback on their assessment. Students report that there remains some variability in the timeliness of feedback on their work, and the University is encouraged to communicate clearly to staff and students its guidelines on this and, in doing so, also to manage students' expectations.

167 The University's Master Plan for the development of the learning environment at the new Garthdee campus has a strong student focus, and has been significantly informed by evidence of student experience and behaviour, and the successive contributions of the Student Union.

168 The University places strong importance on promoting and supporting students to be partners in their learning, and is successful in creating a climate that motivates and engages students. Students are positive about the academic and other support available to them, including specialist support services for specific student groups. This includes the University's arrangements for managing and supporting the research student experience.

169 The University places a strong emphasis on the provision of high-quality vocational and professional education. Students confirm that this focus on employability is significant in their decision to study at the University, and continues to be a strong motivator during their studies. The University has recently reviewed its placement provision, and is exploring ways of improving placement opportunities for students, which it is encouraged to continue doing. The University also promotes student participation in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities and is in the process of developing a credit-bearing module which will recognise students' extra-curricular activity. This is clearly a positive development. Students' experience of personal development planning (PDP) varies across the University, being more embedded in some schools and faculties than others. The University is encouraged to continue to develop its PDP provision to ensure that all students have a mechanism for reflecting upon and recording their personal and professional development.

170 The University provides a significant range of support for staff to develop their academic practice, both at institutional level and through the schools and faculties. There is some variability across faculties in the support for staff to develop their use of technology-enhanced learning, including the virtual learning environment (VLE), and the University is encouraged to continue supporting and encouraging staff development in this area.

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

171 Overall, the University's arrangements for the approval, monitoring and review of its academic provision, both on and off-campus, are appropriate and their consistent application is

supported through the key role played by the faculty quality officers. Since the 2007 ELIR, the University has revised its Annual Appraisal process to have a greater focus on the course level. Overall, Annual Appraisal is supported by comprehensive procedures, and is effectively linked to the University's enhancement agenda. The University has recently introduced a revised Institution-Led Subject Review (ILSR) process, which meets the expectations of the Scottish Funding Council's guidance, and has a strategic and forward-looking focus. The University has also developed a process for the periodic review of its research degree provision, although this had not been fully implemented at the time of the ELIR.

172 The University's arrangements for the monitoring and review of Student-Facing Support Services, which include Annual Appraisal and the Student-Facing Support Services Review, are making a positive contribution to the enhancement of the student learning experience.

173 The University has appropriate arrangements in place for setting and maintaining academic standards. These include an effective committee structure, a wide-ranging set of assessment policies and procedures, and a robust external examining system.

174 As part of its approach to self-evaluation, the University makes use of a wide range of evidence and external reference points in its approval, monitoring and review processes. The University's new Business Information System has facilitated the analysis of data on different student groups, including those on open and distance learning programmes and collaborative provision, and the data is being used effectively in the University's monitoring and review processes. In addition, the University's approach to managing public information about the quality and academic standards of its provision is effective.

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

175 The University's Strategic Plan, A Clear Future, and its institutional-level committees provide an effective framework for setting and overseeing the institution's enhancement agenda. Within the faculties and schools, the committee structures and the annual planning process form a sound basis for setting and monitoring local enhancement priorities, while continuing to reflect institutional aims and priorities. The University has taken deliberate steps since the 2007 ELIR to move from a quality assurance to a quality enhancement culture, and staff demonstrate an awareness and understanding of the institution's enhancement agenda, and the ways that it has impacted upon their practice within the faculties and schools. Specific enhancement roles, such as the learning enhancement coordinators (LECs) and e-learning advisers, have been very beneficial in the development of an enhancement culture, notably through their contribution to the development of innovative practice in faculties and schools. There is some variation within and across schools in the specific remits, deployment and time allocation for the LEC role, and the University is encouraged to keep this under review in order that all students can benefit from their enhancement activities.

176 The Department for the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching and Assessment (DELTA), which has developed significantly since the 2007 ELIR, has an important role in supporting enhancement through three key strands of activity: contributing to strategy and policy; supporting academic practice and capacity building; and supporting students in the development of a range of study and transferable skills. The University has developed a range of ways by which it identifies and gathers evidence of enhanced practices and innovative approaches to support the student learning experience. Through initiatives such as the 'Snapshots' repository of good practices, DELTA has an important role in capturing these practices, and the University is encouraged to take a proactive approach to raising staff awareness of these good practices in support of institutional priorities. The University's engagement with the national Enhancement Themes, at institutional and local levels, has been effective in contributing to a range of enhancement activities, particularly in relation to employability and student assessment.



177 The recent development of the University's Internationalisation Strategy is positive. The Strategy is comprehensive, both setting institutional priorities and capturing ongoing activities within schools and faculties. The University is encouraged to progress with its implementation.

### **Overarching confidence judgement**

178 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 offers.

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