

Universities Scotland response to HEFCE Quality Assessment Review 2015

Universities Scotland is committed to a high quality higher education sector which assures itself – and others – that it is delivering a world-class education to the benefit of its students, the country and the economy.

Fundamental to this commitment is the distinctive Scottish approach to quality assessment – an enhancement-led approach. Since implementation of the Quality Enhancement Framework and enhancement-led approach in 2003, Scotland has successfully developed not just enhancement processes but an enhancement culture. This facilitates meaningful engagement of students in reviewing the quality of opportunities available to them, it supports institutions to take risks without fear of punishment and it supports the building of partnerships across the institutions. This approach is built on rigorous quality assessment processes – largely conducted by institutions but with crucial external validation.

The development of this culture has been aided by the tripartite arrangement to manage quality assessment in Scotland – an agreement between the Scottish Funding Council, Universities Scotland and QAA (Scotland) – which has helped build trust and understanding between the three bodies. The quality culture has also been allowed to build steadily over time and through the stability of the Quality Enhancement Framework and evolutionary enhancement to quality activities.

The Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF) in Scotland combines institution-led review, institutional review, improved public information, enhanced role for students and a programme of enhancement themes. The QEF is stronger than the sum of its parts: the combination of these aspects and the role of external examiners and professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) reviews provide a comprehensive programme of quality and standards assurance that supports and buttresses the individual processes. The proposals from HEFCE to increase the reliance on external examiners or PSRBs threatens to reduce or remove their value by placing unrealistic burdens on these systems.

The external examiner system has been strengthened by developments, led by the sector, following the Finch Review in 2012 and the introduction of the Quality Code Chapter B7 on External Examining. The increased expectations on training, preparation and public information have been welcomed and recognised as important steps. We welcome HEFCE's recognition that 'the external examining system is a valued and important part of the UK quality assurance system' and would wish to see proposals which build on rather than undermine the critical aspect of this: 'the critical engagement of external peer academic reviewers with the academic achievement of real students on real programmes'. It is our view, discussed in more detail below, that the proposals for external examiners would develop the external examiner role as the primary authority of academic standards and reduce or remove the value identified by the sector and the HEA research of an external examiner as a critical friend and increase, rather than decrease, the arbitrariness of external examining. We are concerned that the proposals would limit the numbers of academics willing to serve in the role due to increased pressure and expectations and time commitments required for training and calibration events. There are, however, opportunities to strengthen the external examining system and we identify those below. As the external examiner system is implemented UK-wide Universities Scotland will work closely with colleagues in UUK and GuildHE to define enhancements that truly benefit the sector and enhance quality and maintain standards.

Institutions already make great use of, and benefit from, the role of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies. There is, however, a fundamental difference in the use of PSRBs to inform quality processes and

PSRB processes being used in place of established quality mechanisms. The proposals to place greater emphasis on PSRB reviews is, again, putting at risk an established and effective aspect of quality monitoring by placing an unreasonable burden on it. The diverse nature of PSRBs and their purposes for conducting review and criteria against which the review is judged can diverge from the purposes and expectations of existing quality assessment processes. Institutions are increasingly aligning institution-led reviews and PSRB accreditation reviews to minimise burden and using PSRB outcomes to inform internal quality assessments and this is the appropriate method of greater engagement with PSRBs

Contrary to the HEFCE proposals, universities in Scotland remain committed to periodic institutional review. This is viewed as an essential element of the QEF and, as the ELIR method has matured, an effective, enhancement-led, process which is of benefit to the institution under review. It is crucial that independent, external review by peers is maintained as a core facet of the UK HE quality assessment.

Scotland has been proud to be at the vanguard of meaningful student engagement. The engagement of students remains an ongoing priority and something which the sector has set out aspirations to drive further through the QEF Review. This is a strength of the Scottish HE system which we believe should be a core part of quality assessment processes more broadly. It is questionable the extent to which meaningful student engagement would be achieved by the HEFCE proposals.

Universities in Scotland value the strength of the combined UK higher education sector – while valuing its diversity. While a number of the proposals under consultation will not directly impact on Scottish universities there will be many indirect impacts on reputation, comparability across the UK and the international perceptions of UK HE.

Scotland has developed a distinctive approach within the broad UK HE biosphere and have maintained comparability of standards and quality across the UK during a period of significant changes in HE, in funding and in geopolitics. This broad UK-wide framework which encompasses all publicly funding HE provision in the UK is essential to protect and best serve individual institutions – acknowledging the routine transfer of staff and students and significant partnerships in learning, teaching and research which cross the borders of the UK – and for preserving the confidence in UK HE as a brand across the world. The framework has been, and must remain to be, sufficiently flexible so as to preserve – or even encourage – the diversity of process and practice required in diverse sectors in England or across borders.

This response was produced by Universities Scotland and was endorsed by members as reflecting the shared view of Scotland's higher education institutions.

Question 1: Do you agree with our proposed principles to underpin the future approach to quality assessment in established providers?

No. While Universities Scotland can welcome a number of the proposed principles, we specifically do not agree with principles C and H.

Principle C articulates a limited role for students – as partners in the design, monitoring and review of processes – which does not align with the Scottish approach to student engagement. Students are already at the heart of the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF) and in the QEF Review institutions and sector bodies are considering ways to deepen and enhance the engagement of students further still. Students should be partners in quality not just the creation of quality processes.

Principle H advocates the implementation of a risk-based approach. In Scotland a purely risk-based approach would be contrary to the enhancement-led approach which is undertaken. It is not necessary for an entirely risk-based approach to be introduced to achieve the desired outcome of finessing institutional review and quality mechanisms to meet diverse institutions needs and to ensure effective scrutiny of the aspects which require it most.

There should also be a clear and unambiguous commitment to the co-ownership of quality assessment between funders and the sector. The tripartite agreement in Scotland – between the Scottish Funding Council, Universities Scotland and Quality Assurance Agency (Scotland) – which governs quality assessment in Scotland is a good example of effective relationships developed by co-ownership of quality assessment.

Question 2: Do you agree that our current proposals for the use of meaningful external scrutiny as set out in paragraphs 32-34 are sufficient? If you do not agree, please indicate what additional or different external scrutiny you propose and provide the reasons for this.

No. Universities in Scotland, and we believe across the UK, place great significance in the compliance of the UK with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and we do not believe these proposals would meet the standards required, specifically in relation to the expectation of cyclical review.¹

Question 3: Do you agree that future approaches to quality assessment should be based on an assumption that ‘one size’ can no longer sensibly fit all?

Yes, however, we do not consider that the proposals made are the only way to achieve this outcome. The Enhancement-led Institutional Review process has evolved through time to take a more nuanced approach to institutional review to more closely reflect the institutions mission and vision. From ELIR3, institutions have been asked to identify in the Reflective Analysis “what it hopes to achieve from the ELIR. In particular, the institution has the opportunity to identify aspects of its strategic intentions (or their implementation) on which it would particularly welcome the ELIR team's view.”² There is scope to build on this and enhance this aspect further in ELIR4 as we evolve and develop the review processes as we embed and grow the enhancement culture.

Question 4: Do you agree that there should be a baseline requirement for the quality of the academic experience for students, and that this should be published and maintained?

Yes. We consider that this baseline requirement for the quality of the academic experience for students is provided by the publication of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education. In February 2015, members agreed:

¹ http://www.engq.eu/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/ESG_3edition-2.pdf Section 2.7

² <http://qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/ELIR-handbook-3.pdf> Paragraph 26

“The UK Quality Code for Higher Education is the culmination of a huge amount of effort across the sector and provides a comprehensive framework of expectations and indicators against which Scottish higher education quality can be assessed. While there was acknowledgement from some members that the Quality Code was a work-in-progress, it is fundamental to the comparability of quality across the nations of the UK.”³

Universities Scotland consider that the sector-led approach to the development of the Quality Code was critical to the acceptance of and the maintenance of quality and standards in a quality assessment process which is co-owned by funders and autonomous institutions.

Question 5: For England, do you agree with the proposal that an individual provider, once it has passed the gateway for entry into the publicly funded system in England, should not be repeatedly externally retested against the baseline requirements for an acceptable student academic experience, unless material evidence suggests otherwise?

Not applicable.

Question 6: For Northern Ireland, do you agree that providers should provide annual evidence and assurance that they are meeting the baseline requirements for an acceptable student academic experience?

Not applicable.

Question 7: Do you agree that the funding bodies’ verification of an institution’s review methodology provides a reasonable mechanism through which to operate risk-based scrutiny of a provider’s arrangements to secure a good and improving student academic experience and student outcomes?

No. We consider institution-led reviews and other predominantly internal quality processes to be effective and rigorous however, these are strengthened by an institutional review process which is supported by an independent quality body and led by a group of peers. This externality provides confidence to the institution and, crucially, is an internationally respected model which helps maintain the recognition of the UK HE sector as high quality. It is not considered that the funding council would have the appropriate experience, staff or externality to the sector to achieve equivalent outcomes.

Question 8: Do you agree that student outcomes data should provide the basis for continuous improvement activities within an individual provider?

There are many benefits to greater utilisation of data. However, developing a risk-based trigger system based on student outcome metrics risks a reductive approach which stifles innovation, increases the fear of risk, places unreasonable pressure on governing bodies and to the proliferation of audit contracts to private bodies to assure governing bodies that all responsibilities have been met. This would frustrate the intention to create more cost effective, less burdensome quality processes.

From ELIR3, QAA Scotland introduced the Advance Information Set. This set of data, received in advance of the institutional review, includes a range of documentation:

- a mapping of the institution's policies and processes to the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code)
- full reports of the institution-led quality reviews for the preceding 12 month period
- SFC annual returns for the period since the previous ELIR
- a sample of annual monitoring reports
- an analysis of the external examiner comments for the preceding 12 months
- an analysis of student feedback for the preceding 12 months

The Advance Information Set was introduced at the behest of the sector to allow for more timely consideration of data and quality assurance information by the review team to allow for early identification

³ Universities Scotland submission to the QEF Review – available on request

of quality assurance challenges or data queries and to allow the institutional review visits to take a more enhancement-led approach. This model – with perhaps a greater focus on data – could be an effective approach to utilisation of available data to inform continuous improvement within institutions and in institutional review.

Question 9: Do you agree that we should take forward into detailed design and pilot phases further work on the use of student outcomes data to identify patterns and trends and on the development of approaches for monitoring and supporting institutions as they address areas of concern?

The sector would benefit from further research and testing of student learning data (e.g. learning analytics and learning gain.) However, this data should predominantly be used by institutions to better understand their own practices in learning and teaching, to inform pedagogy and better support the activities and behaviours of their student body. Using this data as a trigger for institutional review risks corrupting the value of this information.

Question 10: In Northern Ireland, do you agree with the approach outlined to introduce more effective and consistent arrangements for collecting and analysing feedback from higher education learners?

Not applicable.

Question 11: Do you agree with the proposal that more emphasis should be placed on the role of a provider’s governing body to provide assurances about the quality of the student academic experience and student outcomes in line with the Higher Education Code of Governance? If you agree, please indicate what, if any, additional support they should receive to provide such assurances.

No. Universities Scotland are concerned at unintentional impacts on aspects of good governance. The premise of the proposal is that greater reliance on the governing body will reduce expenditure and that the governing body would provide ‘external independent scrutiny’. This premise is flawed in both respects.

In 2015, the Scottish Government recognised that academic boards are “charged with supervision and regulation of the academic matters of an HEI”. It is notable, however, that this is still “subject to the control of the Governing Body.”⁴ In the context of this complex, and developing, area with various legal imperatives, it is inadvisable to further complicate the relationship between academic boards and governing bodies.

Academic boards are constituted to carry out roles such as monitoring and review of academic quality in the institution, in their role as regulators of academic matters, and their membership (academics) and support staff (academic quality officers) are experienced in the process and content of these processes.

The constitution of governing bodies – and their membership – are not well-placed to take detailed overview of this process nor to provide public assurances. There is a likelihood, therefore, that governing bodies would require to undertake a significant amount of work – perhaps appointing third party private providers – to sufficiently assure themselves of these standards. There is limited evidence, including from the commissioned report on the costs of quality assessment, that placing greater reliance on the governing body to provide assurances about the quality of the student academic experience and student outcomes would reduce expenditure. In fact, it is our view that this could increase the costs of quality assessments by the introduction of contracts with private sector providers and increasing risk-averse behaviour. This would reduce or remove any potential cost-savings.

Equally, it is very unlikely that a range of stakeholders (including international HE partners, students, governments, the requirements of ESG or other funders) would consider the institutional governing body to be able to provide external, independent scrutiny. These implications may be less immediately tangible than

⁴ [http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S4_Bills/Higher%20Education%20Governance%20\(Scotland\)%20Bill/b74s4-introd-pm.pdf](http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S4_Bills/Higher%20Education%20Governance%20(Scotland)%20Bill/b74s4-introd-pm.pdf)

the direct cost implications but have the potential to be significantly more of a threat – financially and otherwise – to the UK HE sector.

The transfer of greater responsibility to governing bodies would have practical and perception implications from which UK HE would be fundamentally weakened.

Question 12: For England, do you agree that, for English institutions, HEFCE should develop and use the existing external accountability mechanisms, particularly the HAR, in the ways described?

Not applicable.

Question 13: For Northern Ireland, do you agree that DEL should develop and use the existing accountability mechanisms in the ways described?

Not applicable.

Question 14: Do you agree that there should be a 'probationary period' for new entrants to the publicly funded sector in England?

Not applicable.

Question 15: Do you agree that international activities should be included in the remit of future quality assessment arrangements as described?

We believe that institutions should remain fully and equally responsible for student outcomes and for the quality of academic experience regardless of where the student is based.

Question 16: Do you agree that a future quality assessment system must provide reliable assurances to students and other stakeholders about the maintenance of academic output standards and their reasonable comparability across the UK higher education system?

Yes. The maintenance of a UK-wide comparability of academic quality and standards is essential (this should not be confused with comparability of quality processes which should remain flexible to meet the various needs of the individual nations.)

This is currently supported by the UK Quality Code for Higher Education which provides for a clear baseline set of indicators which are applicable and measured against for provision across the UK. This is also meaningfully supported by the appointment of a single quality assessment body (the Quality Assurance Agency) to manage quality assessment across the UK.

The retention of a set of UK-wide indicators and a single body to support quality assessment across the UK is crucial to the ongoing ability to provide reliable assurances to students and other stakeholders about the quality and standards of UK HE.

Question 17: Do you agree that the external examining system should be strengthened in the ways proposed, i.e. through additional training and the establishment of a register?

Question 18: Do you agree that our proposals in relation to the external examining system are sufficient, i.e. do they go far enough to provide the necessary assurances about academic output standards to students and other stakeholders?

Question 19: Do you agree that it would be helpful to explore approaches to the calibration of academic output standards in different disciplinary and multi-disciplinary contexts?

Universities Scotland do not support the proposals.

Universities Scotland consider that the proposals would fundamentally weaken the external examining system. The proposals are aimed at creating a system with a different role from that currently held – and not one that we consider would be effective. While there are opportunities to improve the external examiner system – more detail below – the current system gains strength from being one aspect of a multifaceted approach to reviewing and monitoring academic quality and standards. The proposed elevation of external examiners would undermine the key values that they currently provide.

Specifically, we would be concerned that the additional formalities (e.g. register, centralised training, calibration events) and enhanced dependence on external examiners (e.g. increased role as final arbiters of academic standards) would dissuade high quality candidates from being willing to act as external examiners.

It is challenging to see how subject calibration events could meaningfully consider output standards across the range of assessments conducted in UK higher education providers. There are both practical and principled concerns with these proposals. It is challenging to see how calibration events could meaningfully consider a range of student assessment outputs and to consider comparability of standard without some standardisation of curriculum, assessment methods or marking schemes across institutions. This would be an unwelcome development – as an infringement of institutional autonomy and to the detriment of UK HE by artificially limiting academics' and students' freedom to develop, deliver and engage with a range of learning topics and assessment methods. Equally, in a sector which is increasingly developing cross-, multi- and inter-disciplinary courses and programmes it would be challenging to see how these could be supported by subject or disciplinary calibration events. Rather, academics should be encouraged to build upon existing links and networks (e.g. HEA support for disciplines, PSRBs, established subject networks) to maintain their subject-wide knowledge and professional standards.

Universities Scotland would propose that enhancements can be brought to the external examining system through building on the recommendations of the Finch Review and the indicators and expectations of the Quality Code Chapter B7. Universities Scotland would support an expectation on institutions to publish the details of their external examiners with a public information obligation primarily to students, employers and funders. This information should contain e.g. external examiner name, courses responsible for, previous training and qualifications, current academic (or other) position, any conflicts of interest. Enhanced training and induction should also be delivered to better support external examiners to understand their role. Crucially, this training should be delivered by the institutions to ensure that the context of the institution and the specific role of an external examiner at that HE provider is clear. There is limited value in central delivery of training when the specific role of an external examiner is likely to be determined by the institution they are examiner of.

Question 20: Do you agree that providers should use the accreditation activities of at least some PSRBs more centrally in future approaches to quality assessment?

Universities Scotland consider professional, statutory and regulatory bodies to be of great value to the Scottish HE sector – in improving quality, in providing support to our students and graduates and in recognising the quality of the provision in Scotland to attract students.

Institutions work closely with PSRBs and are, increasingly, aligning institution-led review processes with PSRB reviews. This is the appropriate mechanism through which to work more closely with PSRBs, to get better value from PSRB processes, to strengthen institution-led reviews and to minimise bureaucracy.

However, the purposes and approaches for a PSRB review do not always align with the expectations that funding bodies and external expectations (e.g. ESG) would have of quality assessment reviews. For example, it may be appropriate for a PSRB review team to be largely made up of industry and business experts. This would not, however, equip the team well to review and comment upon strict academic standards.

PSRB reviews are an integral part of a multifaceted approach to quality assessment and have a valued role and strength within that. Placing greater reliance on PSRBs for external review (or in place of institution-led

reviews) would be, as with external examiners, to reduce the value and validity of a process by placing an unrealistic burden on it.

Question 21: Do you agree with the proposal that we should place more emphasis on the role of the governing body of a provider with degree awarding powers to provide assurances about security and reasonable comparability of the academic output standards of students?

No. See question 11.

Question 22: Do you agree with the proposal to develop guidance to providers on a sensible range of degree classification algorithms at the pass/fail and 2i/2ii borderlines?

We welcome the recognition from HEFCE that review of degree algorithms is not an appropriate topic for a funding council to take a lead on and is a matter for the sector to manage. Universities Scotland do not believe that the review of institutional degree algorithms and the development of a range of agreed algorithms is an effective or meaningful manner with which to address concerns about degree classification outcomes.

HEFCE correctly identify that there is a strong student interest in the degree classification and in the algorithms which calculate this. However, Universities Scotland would propose to manage this as a public information concern rather than a regulatory matter. Primarily, the deficit is in student understanding of degree algorithms and how this impacts individual student outcomes. This does not, however, indicate that degree algorithms – individually or collectively – are inappropriate.

Universities Scotland are willing to work with UUK and Guild HE to further consider degree classifications and mechanisms for recognising achievement.

It is not, however, considered proportionate or necessary to develop standardised degree classification algorithms. Where individual issues are identified across the sector these outliers and individual cases of failure should be dealt with quickly through existing quality assessment mechanisms (e.g. concerns scheme, protocol).

Question 23: Do you agree with our proposals to develop and implement a strengthened mechanism to investigate rapidly when there is an indication of serious problems within an individual provider which has not been addressed in a satisfactory and timely manner?

Question 24: Should the mechanism to investigate problems in an individual provider require, in addition to the investigation of the specific issue of concern, the re-testing of the arrangements in the provider under review against the baseline requirements set out for the gateway for entry to the higher education system?

We believe there should be an effective mechanism for rapid investigation and resolution of serious problems with higher education providers across the UK. In Scotland, we are confident that this is managed effectively by the QAA Protocol for Managing Potential Risks to Quality and Academic Standards.

The management of risk should be determined by the reported problem and the investigation – a re-test against baseline requirements should be an option, if it is required, but not an automatic response.

Question 25: Do you agree with the proposal that providers seeking entry to the publicly funded sector in England and Northern Ireland should be tested, through an external peer review scrutiny process, against a set of baseline requirements for quality?

Not applicable.

Question 26: Are there any particular areas of our proposals that you feel we should concentrate on as we undertake a more detailed design phase?

The proposals as currently formulated do not take sufficient cognisance of the impact of these proposals on the ability to maintain a UK-wide framework for quality assessment.

The UK higher education sector is internationally recognised and renowned – this is on the strength of the collective quality of provision as well as the excellent institutions in the individual nations of the UK. As a result of this the nations of the UK, and individual institutions, are dependent on each other for the preservation and development of the quality reputation and nations and institutions must therefore retain an interest and shared responsibility for the principles and processes of quality assessment in other UK nations. This does not, however, require uniformity of practice.

A crucial aspect of the UK-wide framework is a shared set of benchmarks, indicators and expectations through Subject Benchmark Statements, Frameworks for HE qualifications and the Quality Code. This is currently provided for across the UK by the appointment of a single body to manage quality assessment – the Quality Assurance Agency.

The continued existence of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) as an independent, quality assessment body with responsibility for the managed of quality assessment in each nation of the United Kingdom is essential for the preservation of UK HE quality. The QAA acts as a unifying organisation – distinct from government or funding councils and unrestrained by borders.

QAA have already demonstrated that they can support or deliver quality assessment in devolved nations with flexibility and differentiation to suit the particular need or desire of the sector, while retaining an underlying capability for comparability. This experience should be built on rather than disregarded.

Question 27: Are there proposals not referred to above that you feel we should have in consideration? If so, what are they and what is the rationale for their inclusion?

No.

Question 28: Are there any particular areas pertinent to the devolved nature of higher education in Wales and Northern Ireland that you feel we should have considered further? If so, what are they and what is the rationale for their inclusion?

Not applicable.