

University Quality arrangements

- This paper updates the Council on the review of the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF), and asks it to note and endorse the revisions made. The paper also updates Council on UK wide changes to HE quality arrangements, including the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), and other emerging policy issues.

Recommendations

The Council is asked to:

- Note and endorse the outcome of the review of QEF.
- Note progress with development and implementation of TEF.

Financial implications

- There are no immediate financial implications.

University quality arrangements

Purpose

1. This paper updates the Council on the review of the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF), and seeks its endorsement of the revised quality arrangements for Scottish higher education institutions.
2. The paper also updates Council on UK wide changes to HE quality arrangements, including the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), and other emerging policy issues for learning and teaching and quality in Scotland.

Background

3. In 2015-16 SFC initiated a review of the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF). The review was overseen by the Universities Quality Working Group (UQWG) on behalf of SFC, which includes representation from institutions, students' representatives groups, and QAA Scotland.
4. The Council received an update on progress with the review at its meeting on 26 August 2016, and noted the conclusions of the review at that point (SFC/16/Min05). These highlighted that all partners reaffirmed their commitment to Scotland's distinct, enhancement-led, approach to quality assurance, and the effectiveness of the Quality Enhancement Framework, but had also identified some specific areas for improvement, which would be developed further in AY 2016-17.
5. At that meeting the Council also received an update on the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), which was being introduced as part of UK Government legislative changes for HE providers in England. Council recognised that some Scottish universities might opt to enter the TEF; however, it confirmed that participation in the QEF would be the mandatory approach to quality assurance for the HE sector in Scotland.

Outcomes of review of the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF)

6. The Universities Quality Working Group (UQWG) completed its review of the QEF in May 2017. As noted earlier, there were no changes to the structure of the QEF, or the enhancement-led approach. The changes introduced aim to

strengthen the existing five interconnecting components of the framework¹, and include:

- Greater awareness of public information.
 - Refining the ELIR method.
 - Aligning national enhancement activity with Institution-Led Review and reporting.
 - Developing a new national enhancement theme on evidence-based enhancement.
 - Embedding student engagement.
7. SFC published revised guidance to HE institutions on quality on 11 July 2017: http://www.sfc.ac.uk/web/FILES/GUI_SFCGD112017_ScottishFundingCouncilguidancetohighere/SFCGD112017_SFC_Guidance_to_HE_Institutions_on_Quality.pdf
8. The main changes are outlined below.

Public information

9. The design and presentation of public information about the quality of learning and teaching has been an increasingly important background contextual issue during the review of QEF. This has highlighted the importance of having a clear narrative about the Scottish approach to HE quality which is backed up by evidence.
10. Public information is one of the five elements of the QEF. As part of this, Scottish HEIs participate in UK-wide public information exercises, such as National Student Surveys and the Unistats website and data collections. But the context into which this public information is delivered is changing. The emergence of different HE legislative, funding, and regulatory arrangements across the UK nations is leading to a situation where there is no longer always unity of purpose behind the creation and presentation of public information across the UK. The emergence of the TEF at the same time as the review of QEF, brought this into relief. Throughout the review there has been an awareness of the responsibility of stakeholders in Scotland to contribute public information, which both explains the enhancement-led approach and demonstrates its effectiveness through evidence, and which ensures that the

¹ The five QEF components are Enhancement-led institutional review (ELIR); Institution-led review (ILR); Student engagement; Enhancement Themes; and Public information.

design of UK data collections and student surveys are fair and representative of Scotland. (There is more on UK issues later in this paper).

Changes to Enhancement-led Institutional Review

11. The next ELIR external review cycle introduces a 4+1 model, comprising four years in which QAA Scotland carries out external reviews in all HEIs (except the Open University), and a new and additional year for the sector to devote time to enhancement and developmental activity, drawing on thematic information about strengths and challenges as identified by QAA. The first two ELIRs will take place in AY2017-18, (the Royal Conservatoire Scotland and Queen Margaret University). There will be six ELIRs during AY2018-19.
12. The revised Enhancement-led Institutional Review method will be referred to as ELIR 4 to differentiate it from the previous method, which was called ELIR 3. The most significant change in the ELIR 4 method is the emphasis it places on the contextualisation of each review, maximising the value to individual institutions, and acknowledging the importance placed on evidence-based self-evaluation by universities. Contextualisation should allow reviews to focus where there will be most benefit, both to provide assurance and to promote enhancement.
13. ELIR 4 will enable a range of outcomes to be achieved:
 - Promoting holistic, evidence-based evaluation by institutions and the opportunity to engage in discussion on the outcomes of that evaluation with a team of peers.
 - Delivering a clear statement on baseline quality and academic standards and, beyond that, providing a suite of differentiated commendations and recommendations.
 - Enabling whole-sector enhancement and developmental activity to be conducted, drawing on thematic information about strengths and challenges of the institutions reviewed.

Institution-led Review (ILR) and reporting on quality

14. HEIs will continue to provide SFC with annual reports on institution-led review and enhancement activities, signed off by Boards/Courts. Annual reports are the main source of information on quality and learning and teaching in institutions provided to the Council, and SFC uses these reports to understand how institutions are managing quality. Institutions are being encouraged to adopt the national enhancement theme of 'evidence-based enhancement' in

their own quality activity and reporting, to better demonstrate how the enhancement approach achieves results.

15. Annual reports also assist SFC to gain a more holistic understanding of how institutions are addressing policy priorities, such as widening access, progression and attainment. We will continue to encourage institutions to draw on the information in their Quality Reports to inform their Outcome Agreements. QAA provides SFC with an analysis of these reports, and also draws more broadly on them, alongside other evidence, as part of its annual reporting to Council. SFC uses this evidence as assurance and also to inform broader discussions including Outcome Agreements. In a new development, evidence from annual reports will also contribute to SFC's developing risk assurance framework for HEIS, on which Council is receiving a separate paper (SFC 17/66).
16. SFC has said it will continue to ensure that the use of evidence from quality and Outcome Agreement processes is aligned and that unnecessary reporting is avoided.

National Enhancement theme

17. National Enhancement Themes remain an important element of the QEF. The review recognised that there was scope to make the evidence about the impact of enhancement themes more accessible. Consultation with the sector found broad support for a new theme on Evidence Based Enhancement. A key aim of this theme will be to combine the use of qualitative and quantitative evidence more effectively. There is an associated expectation for institutions to align their enhancement evidence with quality assurance evidence in their Institution-Led Reviews and annual reporting. There will also be opportunities for QAA and SFC to align and make better use of this evidence.

Student engagement

18. The review called for an intensification of student engagement across all five elements of the Framework. HEIs are expected to continue extending student engagement and participation in quality in line with the Student Engagement Framework for Scotland.

UK wide changes to HE Quality arrangements

Higher Education and Research Act (2017)

19. The Higher Education and Research Act (2017) was passed by the UK Parliament in April 2017. The key features of the Act in respect to teaching quality only apply on a mandatory basis in England and Northern Ireland, and are summarised below:
- Enables the creation of a new body Office for Students (OfS), that will hold the statutory responsibility for quality and standards.
 - The OfS will be empowered to make arrangements for assessing the quality of teaching in universities, in an exercise known as the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF).
 - Enable tuition fees to increase by the rate of inflation for universities participating in TEF and meeting minimum eligibility requirements. After 2020, this can be linked to results in the TEF.
 - The OfS will be able to designate an independent body to carry out its statutory duties in relation to quality and standards.
 - The OfS will incorporate the functions of the Office for Fair Access.

UK Standing Committee on Quality Assurance

20. The four UK higher education funding bodies established the UK Standing Committee on Quality Assurance to provide some ongoing sector-led oversight of those aspects of quality arrangements that continue to be shared across the UK. The Committee also has a role in promoting quality, standards, and the student interest, and will support a co-regulatory approach by bringing together academic expertise and students with regulatory and other bodies. In November 2016 Professor Andrew Wathey, Vice-Chancellor of Northumbria University, was appointed to Chair the Committee. The Universities Scotland representative is Professor Lorna Milne, Vice-Principal, Learning and Teaching at the University of St Andrews. The SFC executive is also represented on the Committee.
21. The Standing Committee is working with the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) to develop the Quality Code as an important UK-wide reference point for quality and standards. The UK Quality Code sets out the expectations that all providers of UK higher education are required to meet. The Code gives all HE providers in the UK a shared starting point for setting, describing, and assuring the academic standards of their higher education awards and programmes and the quality of the learning opportunities they

provide. QAA and QAA Scotland use the code as their main reference point for their review work.

22. The Standing Committee is also currently steering six projects, which were set out in the HEFCE operating model for quality assessment. Two of these are UK wide, and involve Scotland, with a financial contribution from SFC:
 - Ensuring the reliability of degree standards (including projects on developing training for external examiners, approaches to the calibration of standards, and a review of degree classification algorithms).
 - Developing a strategic understanding of transnational education (TNE), including through review of TNE activities to ensure that students studying for a UK higher education qualification overseas receive a high-quality academic experience, and that the reputation of the UK higher education system as whole is protected.

Teaching Excellence Framework

23. Scottish Government and SFC continue to make clear to our universities and to the Department for Education (DfE) and HEFCE / OfS that we are unwavering in our commitment to Scotland's enhancement approach to quality assurance. TEF is additional, it is not in lieu of, nor superior to, the Quality Enhancement Framework.
24. TEF Year 2 outcomes were published in mid-June with a total of 295 institutions taking part: 134 universities; 106 further education colleges; and 55 alternative providers, with 26% awarded gold, 50% silver and 24% bronze. The awards are valid for three years.
25. Five Scottish universities entered TEF Year 2 with the following outcomes: RGU, (gold); Abertay, (silver); Dundee, (gold); St Andrews, (gold); and Heriot Watt, (silver). It should be noted that Scottish colleges are not eligible to enter TEF as their quality assurance arrangements are not covered by the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.
26. There will be an opportunity this autumn for institutions that chose not to participate in Year 2 to take part in TEF Year 3. As those institutions that did opt into Year 2 performed well, it may be that more Scottish HEIs will enter Year 3. However, the sector remains somewhat sceptical of the TEF as a measure of teaching excellence.
27. Concerns have been raised not only in Scotland but across the UK about how students – both UK and international – perceive the TEF awards, particularly the

Bronze Award. The public does not necessarily understand that institutions with a TEF award have met the baseline quality standard. The DfE is considering how to address this.

28. SFC and Universities Scotland are contributing to the DfE's lessons learned exercise with both participating and non-participating institutions invited to provide feedback via the US TEF Working Group.
29. The DfE is moving ahead with subject-level TEF with two pilots planned to operate in parallel with Year 3 TEF. The specification for the pilots was recently issued and the DfE is seeking 30-40 institutions to participate. At least one Scottish HEI is considering taking part in one or both of the pilots.
30. The two models are as follows:
 - **Model A:** A 'by exception' model giving a provider-level TEF rating and giving subjects the same rating as the provider where metrics performance is similar, with fuller assessment (and potentially different ratings) where metrics performance differs.
 - **Model B:** A 'bottom-up' model fully assessing each subject to give subject-level ratings, feeding into the provider-level assessment and rating. Subjects are grouped for submissions, but ratings are still awarded at subject-level.
31. The DfE expects that subject-level TEF will be fully implemented in Year 5, with assessments in AY2019-20 and subject-level ratings published in spring 2020.

Opportunities and challenges in the emerging UK quality landscape

32. This paper has highlighted that different policy and regulatory environments are creating greater divergence in approaches to quality between the devolved nations. The Scottish Government and SFC are committed to the enhancement approach to quality embodied in the QEF, in conjunction with Outcome Agreements, as the means of negotiating policy objectives and directing funding.
33. The review of QEF concluded that there was an opportunity to develop the capacity of the Scottish sector to demonstrate the effectiveness of the enhancement-led approach through better use of evidence in the next cycle. This thinking has been reinforced by the engagement with TEF by Scottish stakeholders. There is now more public interest in the measures of quality of learning and teaching in the UK and internationally, so universities in Scotland, which recruit students from the UK and overseas, along with other stakeholders

are alive to the importance for Scotland to ensure that it controls how Scottish HE is represented.

34. In England the new legislative arrangements are driving a requirement for new and better information to inform both the regulatory environment and student choice. Some pre-existing information is being adapted as proxies for teaching excellence, or to serve new purposes, for which it was not originally designed. HEFCE is also seeking to develop new data sources, including Longitudinal Educational Outcomes data; a new taught post-graduate survey, a new DLHE; use of NSS, and so on. This brings into question the nature and viability of some UK-wide public information work, where in Scotland we have a different approach to understanding and responding to the student experience, and to use of information; and it highlights the importance of ensuring that the design of UK data collections and student surveys suit our purposes, and are fair and representative of Scotland.
35. We suggest that it will be important for SFC to discuss and take decisions on some of these complex issues, and that these could be part of the remit of a future Learning Enhancement Committee.

Risk assessment

36. It is likely that more Scottish HEIs will feel it necessary to take part in TEF as it develops – particularly those institutions that recruit significant numbers of rUK and international students, who may view TEF outcomes as badges of quality. This risks undermining the profile of QEF and the Scottish sector's focus on enhancement-led quality assurance. Conversely, those institutions that chose not to take part in TEF may see their national and international profiles diminished, and could experience a decline in rUK and international fee income as a result.
37. As touched on above, flawed TEF metrics may not fairly represent the particular performance, characteristics and context of Scottish HEIs.

Equality and diversity assessment

38. The use of employment, destination, and retention metrics in TEF could act as a perverse incentive for institutions not to admit disabled or older students, or those suffering chronic ill health.

Financial implications

39. There are no immediate financial implications.

Recommendations

40. The Council is asked to:

- Note and endorse the outcome of the review of QEF.
- Note progress with development and implementation of TEF.

Publication

41. This paper will be published on the Council website.

Further information

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