



This review was conducted in compliance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)

# Quality Enhancement and Standards Review

University of the  
Highlands and Islands

**Review Report**

May 2024

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## Introduction

This is a report of a review under the [Quality Enhancement and Standards Review](#) (QESR) method conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) as part of Phase 1 of the Scottish Quality Enhancement arrangements at the University of the Highlands and Islands.

The review took place on 2 May 2024 and was conducted by a review team, as follows:

- Dr Zachary Davis, Student Reviewer
- Peter Watson, Coordinating Reviewer
- Professor Valerie Webster, Academic Reviewer.

QESR is Phase 1 of a two-phase approach that enables the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) to fulfil its statutory obligation under Section 13 of the *Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005* to ensure that provision is made for assessing and enhancing the quality of fundable higher education provided by fundable bodies for academic quality and enhancement between 2022-24. The second phase of QAA's external quality review arrangements starts in 2024-25 to coincide with the implementation of new tertiary quality arrangements.

The main purpose of this review was to:

- provide assurance about the provider's management of its responsibilities for academic standards to inform an enhancement-led full institutional review in Phase 2
- provide assurance about the provider's management and enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities for students to inform an enhancement-led full review in Phase 2
- report on any features of good practice
- make recommendations for action.

## About University of the Highlands and Islands

The University of the Highland and Islands (UHI) is a federal institution that offers both further and higher education. Incorporated in 1998, it was known as 'UHI Millennium Institute' from 2001. It received Taught Degree Awarding Powers in 2008; University Title in 2011; and Research Degree Awarding Powers in 2017.

UHI comprises 10 colleges and research institutions which form the Academic Partners. Academic delivery is offered both on campus and online, and there are over 70 local learning centres across the Highlands and Islands. Academic provision is structured into two faculties, each having three cognate subject groups within them, that cross the Academic Partners. Extensive restructuring has been taking place since the ELIR 4 review, and there has also been a number of changes in leadership.

At the time of the QESR visit, there were 32,733 students enrolled at UHI, of which 8,303 were studying for higher education qualifications (4,694 full-time / 3,609 part-time) and 22,701 were in further education (4,611 full-time / 18,106 part-time). The higher education students included 1,405 postgraduate taught students (174 full-time / 1,231 part-time) and 190 postgraduate research students (80 full-time / 110 part-time).

## Findings

From the evidence presented, the review team is confident that the University of the Highlands and Islands is making effective progress in continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision to enable effective arrangements to be in place for managing academic standards and the quality of the student learning experience.

### Good practice

The QESR team found the following **feature of good practice**.

- **Student support:** Equity of support and access across the federal structure of the University is ensured through a comprehensive and effective student support service. This is characterised by a proactive approach informed by a comprehensive understanding of the needs of, and challenges faced by, the student community and underpinned with effective communication structures that enable deployment of resources with the aim of providing an informed and consistent experience for students (paragraph 5).

### Recommendations for action

The QESR team makes the following **recommendation for action**.

- **Professional development and opportunities for postgraduate research students with regard to teaching:** While recognising that some work has taken place in this area since the Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR 4), a number of issues remains to be addressed, including the need for postgraduate research students (PGRs) to have completed training before they teach, very limited opportunities provided for PGRs who want to teach, an inconsistent understanding across the University of training requirements and a lack of clarity around responsibility for addressing these issues. The University is asked to give greater urgency to its work in this area (paragraph 20).

# Institutional approach to quality enhancement

## Strategic approach to enhancement

1 The QESR team is confident the University has in place effective arrangements to monitor, review and enhance its strategic approach to enhancement. The team reviewed a range of evidence including the Annual Report to SFC, ELIR 4 follow-up documents, Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy (LTES), UHI Strategic Plan 2030 and minutes of key institutional committees. They also met with staff and students of the University.

2 The University deploys a distributed leadership model with strategic and operational accountability clearly identified in the new structure. The QESR team observed that the University had been through a challenging period with a significant number of changes and new strategic initiatives. These include the appointment of a new Vice-Chancellor, changes in executive team members and leadership responsibilities, restructure of the University, new posts, and new LTES and associated action plans. The University is seeking to create a 'One University' approach to strategic development in which the UHI partnership will 'think, plan, act as one to deliver the mission and vision'.

3 The University's new Strategic Plan 2030 (launched 2023) and the new LTES were developed through partnership and consultation, exemplifying UHI's strategic commitment to co-creation and partnership working. This approach is also being deployed as the University develops and implements its new Retention Strategy. To enable the delivery of the University's strategic plan and the effective implementation of the supporting strategies, including the Retention Strategy, the University approved a restructuring plan to create two faculties with six cognate subject groups. The new structures aim to bring learning and teaching, further education (FE), higher education (HE), and research and knowledge exchange together to facilitate sharing of good practice, and to build a collective sense of academic community. Although still at an early stage, staff commented positively on the restructure as this was already enhancing collaboration and partnership working.

4 Faculty Deans have overall strategic responsibility for education, research, implementing university strategies and building strong partnerships. Associate Deans' responsibilities include developing practitioner academic communities across the region, operationalising faculty academic plans, and implementation and evaluation of quality assurance and enhancement across FE and HE provision. Roles and responsibilities of the 10 Academic Partners that comprise the federal university and the two faculties have also been outlined. At this point in the implementation of the new Strategy, the QESR team heard how the focus was on developing the new teams and ensuring systems and processes were clearly articulated, such as the new Faculty Boards. All Academic Partners have agreed to implement the new LTES - an important development in delivering the strategic aim that the partnership operates as a single tertiary institution. Overall strategic responsibility sits with university executive and senior Academic Partners.

5 Teaching, learning and student support remains a key strategic priority. A notable strength that is already established is the co-ordinated approach towards student support across the Academic Partners. Exemplifying the 'One University' ethos, the QESR team learnt through documentary evidence and meetings with staff and students how a comprehensive and effective student support service ensures equity of support and access across the federal structure of UHI. The QESR team was provided with evidence of a proactive approach, informed by a comprehensive understanding of the needs of, and challenges faced by, the diverse student community. For example, staff from across UHI were pulled together into a Hardship Group where the various initiatives - such as affordable

meals - were collated, noting what was available on each site. The group coordinated this work to ensure all sites were able to make some provision, suitable for their students and appropriate to the site. Training is provided and teams continually review and enhance the service. The successful approach is enabled by strong and embedded communication channels which ensure student need across all partners is recognised and resources deployed effectively. An example of this would be the bi-monthly meeting online of all student support managers, complemented by discussion and activity between meetings, where practice is shared, explored and reviewed, and best practice agreed; and then local practice varied to reflect that. In meetings, the QESR team heard evidence that the student experience of the disability service is particularly noteworthy with appropriate support delivered in a sensitive manner to students who would likely have ceased their studies without this intervention. The QESR team considered UHI's arrangements for and operation of student support to be a **feature of good practice**.

6 The QESR team confirmed the University has effective and established quality assurance and enhancement systems and processes in place. Formal committee structures effectively enable monitoring of student outcomes and the impact of initiatives. Policies and procedures are disseminated through faculties, Academic Partners and cognate subject groups. The Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (QAEC) has strategic oversight and reports to Academic Council. Cross-university working groups are deployed to develop enhancement activities and/or develop strategic initiatives. The University aims to further refine quality processes to align with new structures and feedback from staff going forward. The QESR team noted that the UHI 2024 strategic enhancement programme is progressing but there is limited evaluation as yet (see also paragraph 29).

7 The LTES is intended to be a fluid strategy that adapts in response to future need and external change. Its implementation is supported by investment in people and technology. The University's commitment to sustainability is articulated through an aim to have sustainability embedded in all programmes by 2027-28. A new set of learning and teaching values provides the basis for enhancement and innovation, defining the dimensions of learning that all students should experience during their studies. Four enabling pillars help staff embed the strategy in their disciplines and programmes. The University is currently in year of a five-year implementation plan. Plans are evaluated and actions agreed each year. The QESR team found clear linkages between strategy and implementation plans, with evaluation approaches and expected impact clearly documented. The QESR team also heard examples of how the LTES was already enhancing the student experience - for example, by providing a framework that enabled academic staff to be confident that their course was delivering on aspirations. A student-facing version is also being used successfully as a tool to support student reflection and understanding.

8 A new Learning and Teaching department has been developed, led by the Dean of Learning and Teaching, with two distinct but related teams covering the functional areas: Academic Practice Development and Academic Standards and Enhancement. Further restructuring has created a new Learning Technologies team who are working with Academic Practice Development to support staff in developing knowledge and skills in digital education practice. The QESR team heard that the investment in staff academic development was part of the wider Strategic Plan that aimed to recognise and support staff across the tertiary education system and was welcomed by staff.

## Student partnership

9 The QESR team is confident that the University has effective arrangements in place to monitor, review and enhance its approach to student partnership. The team considered the University's Student Partnership Agreement (SPA), committee minutes, and held meetings with staff and students.

10 The SPA identifies key themes for enhancement and partnership work, created in collaboration with the Highlands and Islands Students' Association (HISA). The SPA is reviewed each year and updated with Enhancement Themes, which are informed by and feed into Subject Area Reviews. A recent example of a Theme is the development of learning communities, which was an area of improvement identified through student surveys. Key performance indicators for measuring performance and a summary of previous work from the last academic year, also make up part of the SPA. The SPA involves students beyond those in traditional student representation roles and is written to be accessible to students less familiar with the operational procedures of a university. Students who met with the QESR team all had an awareness of the SPA and its themes. The current SPA focuses on improved academic growth, engagement and quality, active campaigning and community engagement, and celebrating success.

11 The Student Engagement Vision and Strategy defines student engagement for the institution. UHI's work in this area is led through the Student Engagement Group (SEG) and the Student Voice Representative (SVR) Group. Student representation is present at all levels of governance, up to and including University Court, through student membership of key committees. The institution works in partnership with HISA to train and support Student Voice Representatives (SVRs). SVRs contribute at course level to identify key issues and work in conjunction with staff to enhance the student experience. For example, an adjustment to the pace of learning throughout a module to better support the student learning experience was brought about by SVRs working with their peers and the course team. Students who met with the QESR team, expressed the view that their feedback is valued and that they are considered true partners in enhancing the student experience.

12 The Quality Forum - an enhancement-focused group with representation from across Academic Partners and which reports in to QAEC - aims to implement a central register of Student Voice Representative (SVR) post-holders by UHI in the academic year 2023-24, enabling more support to be offered to help address poor engagement and retention of representatives. This work is being conducted in collaboration with HISA. Alongside this, HISA and UHI now have a data-sharing agreement in place to enable HISA to communicate more effectively with the student body, supporting SVRs in better representation of students and to help develop student societies/interest groups, further enhancing the student experience. The QESR team also heard how HISA, working with the University, had, and continues to have, open meetings with staff and students to ensure all are aware of the developments related to the current change programme and that they have a voice.

13 The Subject Area Review process includes a student panel member as a full and equal member on every review. Focus groups are convened to enable the student voice to inform self-evaluation documents for the review, and review panels also meet with groups of students during the review process, engaging students and their feedback directly in quality assurance and enhancement methods. For example, the Engineering, Computing and the Built Environment Subject Area Review commended strong student support services - an area identified by students as part of the review process. Students who met with the QESR team also identified student support services as being valuable and effective, particularly disability support, and that this is consistent across the institution. Additionally, review processes recommended the need to build learning communities for both online/part-time students, which was also discussed by students who met with the QESR team. While there is some evidence that UHI is responding on this issue when it is raised by students, the QESR team considered that there may be opportunities for a more proactive approach to identifying and building online communities.

## Action taken since ELIR 4

14 The QESR team is confident that the University has effective arrangements in place to monitor and review actions taken in response to ELIR 4. A comprehensive and detailed ELIR Action Plan has been created and identifies a number of workstreams aimed at responding to ELIR recommendations. The team considered a range of evidence, including the ELIR 4 Action Plan; SFC Annual Report and Outcome Agreement; Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy 2022-26 (LTES); Academic Council minutes and Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (QAEC) minutes; and met with staff and students.

15 ELIR 4, which took place in November 2021, made seven recommendations, all of which have been or are in the process of being progressed as part of a significant university-wide strategic change programme. Staff and students endorsed the partnership approach to developing and implementing change at UHI. The QESR team noted that many actions were being initiated at the time of the QESR or were planned for implementation in 2024-25. Progress with ELIR actions is monitored through QAEC. Executive team members provide leadership and strategic oversight, reporting to Executive and University Court.

16 The ELIR 4 team asked UHI to improve oversight of collaborative activity. The University's Collaborative Provision project has enabled the University to review all aspects of collaborative provision processes and documentation. This has resulted in the formation of a new External Partnerships Management Group established to review initial proposals prior to consideration by the External Partners Steering Committee (EPSC). A new risk appetite framework has also been developed to enhance the consistency and risk management of new and continuing partnerships, with the review schedule clear at the outset. Refreshed guidance for staff is planned to be available from the end of academic session 2023-24.

17 In response to another of the ELIR 4 team's recommendations and the retention student metrics falling below the University's benchmark, a new institution-wide strategic approach to managing student retention is being implemented. A Retention Strategy and Action Plan 2024-30 has been created and was formally approved in February 2024 with an initial action plan to run from April 2024 to June 2025. The University is initially focusing on undergraduate and HNC/D levels but lessons learned and recommendations will be disseminated and embedded across all areas of UHI. The student voice and sharing of good practice are central to this work. Monitoring is being undertaken by the newly-formed Retention Engagement Group reporting to QAEC. The QESR team heard evidence of good practice in student support, which will be instrumental in the University delivering its Retention Strategy vision (see paragraph 5).

18 In support of the University's aspirations at the time of ELIR 4, a recommendation was made that UHI should develop and articulate an institution-wide staff development approach to ensure parity of esteem between teaching and research. Enhancing learning and teaching practice and staff professional recognition form a key pillar of the University's current learning and teaching strategic plan. The University is working to establish an equitable cross-partner baseline for staff development. External benchmarks are used to support staff development and staff recognition in learning and teaching. The creation of the Academic Practice Development Plan, due for completion May 2024, will not only support UHI in meeting the ELIR 4 recommendations but will be an integral part of the implementation of the LTES and enhancing staff skills in use of virtual learning environments and digitally-enabled learning and teaching.

19 The University acknowledges that progress with another of the ELIR 4 recommendations - consolidating and analysing the outcomes of the range of all Student Surveys to support cross-network enhancements - has been constrained by university



resources and the lack of capacity to integrate survey outcomes at this time. However, the individual groups responsible for each survey now meet twice annually and UHI is working to bring management and operationalisation of the different surveys closer together (National Student Survey (NSS); Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES); Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES); Early Student Experience Survey (ESES); Student Satisfaction and Engagement Survey (SSES)). The QESR team heard how staff are using student feedback and survey data to inform curriculum design and enhance the student experience - for example, the interview process for direct entrants and the creation of online residencies. The QESR team encourages the University to maintain focus on the strategic aim of bringing all FE/HE survey data and analysis together to inform strategic developments (see paragraph 47).

20 The ELIR 4 team identified a need for training for postgraduate research (PGR) students who teach. The QESR team noted that availability of training has been enhanced through the recent appointment of a Head of Postgraduate Researcher Development and the delivery of an introductory workshop by the Dean of Learning and Teaching. A pilot to support PGR students beyond the introductory level is being considered for academic session 2024-25. The QESR team noted that, while initial training is available, PGR students can proceed to teach without having completed the training programme and there was a lack of clarity in the understanding of staff and students as to what training was required prior to teaching. Opportunities for students to teach was a challenge noted by staff and students with a lack of understanding as to why this was the case. While recognising that some work has taken place in this area since ELIR 4, a number of issues remains to be addressed, and the QESR team **recommends** that the University gives greater urgency to its work in this area.

21 In considering the evidence submitted, and through meeting staff and students, the QESR team is confident that the recommendations made by the ELIR team are being taken forward as part of the strategic developments of the University. Comprehensive action plans have been developed that aim to effect lasting enhancements across the University where sharing of good practice is further embedded in institutional culture and practice. The QESR team noted that, at the time of the QESR, a number of ELIR 4-related strategic initiatives were in the very early stages of implementation and, although impact measures have been included, a full evaluation of impact would take time.

## Sector-wide enhancement topic

22 The QESR team is confident that the University has effective arrangements in place to monitor and review its approach to defining and delivering an effective and inclusive digital and blended offering. The QESR team considered UHI's Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy and action plan 2022-26; the University Strategy 2030; UHI's self-reflections on the SFC Tertiary Enhancement Topic and related programme of work; and met with students and staff.

23 The QESR team saw evidence of the University's strategic engagement with SFC's tertiary sector-wide enhancement topic - 'The future of learning and teaching: defining and delivering an effective and inclusive digital/blended offering'. Given the unique positioning of the University, both geographically and through its federated model of Academic Partners, digitally-enabled learning and teaching has been central to the University's academic delivery since its inception. As a consequence, UHI does not have a separate digital/blended learning strategy but has, instead, embedded the strategic development of digital learning and teaching provision within the institutional approach to learning and teaching values as part of the LTES. Specific pedagogical guidance, and staff and student support for effective engagement in digitally-enabled learning and teaching, is made available.

24 UHI's commitment to the strategic development of digital learning and teaching provision is evident within policy and processes - for example, in programme approval and annual quality monitoring. A consistent approach across all Academic Partners has been a key focus for the University, and partner and student involvement continues to be central to the implementation of the University Strategy 2030 and LTES. This is further supported by institutional benchmarks which provide guidance regarding the effective use of the virtual learning environment (VLE) and share examples of good practice. Threshold benchmarks establish the minimum requirements for modules and units. These provide staff with a range of types of activity and features (for example, discussion boards and video-conferencing spaces) which benefit the student learning experience.

25 Student orientation on blended and online study is standard across the institution and within programmes of study. Students who met with the QESR team confirmed that they considered this was effective and they knew where to find additional support if required. UHI provides an essential student skills suite of resources which includes digital skills and technology. Equivalent resources are provided to staff who teach. To support the further development of digitally-enabled learning and teaching, the University has produced extensive guidance and, through the new Learning and Teaching Directorate, has increased staff development and professional recognition of learning and teaching. Pre-existing policy requires staff to articulate how they support students through the use of digital technologies, identifying good practice and highlighting how the values of the LTES are used and realised.

26 Student partnership is evident in the development of digital learning. Student feedback is sought via surveys at module, programme and institutional levels on digital learning. Students who met with the QESR team confirmed that staff are receptive to their feedback and have engaged with Student Voice Representatives - for example, developing policies on the use of generative artificial intelligence in learning and teaching. For some courses, following the COVID-19 pandemic, UHI has retained online and hybrid approaches to learning and teaching owing to the improvements these enabled in the student experience and in response to requests from students.

27 UHI makes use of external reference points in relation to digital learning: the General Teaching Council Scotland's 'Standards for Teaching in Scotland's Colleges' and Advance HE's Professional Standards Framework. The University partners with external organisations such as Jisc and other higher education institutions and colleges to ensure an evidence-based approach is taken to developing academic practices and to inform guidance for staff in enhancing the digitally-enabled/blended student experience. The University is also implementing a Framework for the Development of Open Educational Practices which seeks to encourage the use, reuse and creation of open educational resources. Through this framework, the University aims to extend initial pilot work, develop low-cost and no-cost 'open textbooks', and make increased use of open textbooks available in the sector - thereby supporting students who face challenges purchasing educational resources.

28 UHI is currently developing learning analytics capability within its VLE and has made progress towards this. A new widget on the VLE is available to staff which enables them to monitor student engagement. Previously, data analysis has been retrospective, and the University is looking to move towards real-time processing to better-inform decision-making - for example, on areas of student retention. UHI has been working in collaboration with the Highlands and Islands Students' Association to revitalise staff engagement with the VLE and is about to enter the initial phase of work which will revise VLE benchmarks and roll out Jisc digital capability tools.

29 Strategic development of digital learning and teaching continues to be a focus for the University across both FE and HE provision. The Learning and Teaching Academy and IT and Digital Infrastructure (ITDI) have a joint programme of work - 'Strategic enhancement of

tertiary digital education practice' - that is intended to enhance digital learning and teaching provision further. Phase one, which focuses on how UHI might better understand their current position, was in progress at the time of the review visit.

## **Academic standards and quality processes**

### **Key features of the institution's approach to managing quality and setting, maintaining, reviewing and assessing academic standards**

30 The QESR team is confident that the University has effective arrangements for the monitoring and review of its approach to managing quality and to setting, maintaining, reviewing and assessing academic standards. The QESR team considered UHI's approach to institution-led review through a sample of Subject Area Review reports, together with outputs from the Annual Quality Monitoring process, including Annual Programme Monitoring Dialogues. Minutes of the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (QAEC) and Academic Council were considered, and the team met with staff and students.

31 The QESR team confirmed that the arrangements for managing quality and setting academic standards met the Expectations of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code) and align with the Scottish Funding Council guidance. Institutional policies and procedures in place for programme approval are aligned to sector expectations and take account of relevant Subject Benchmark Statements and the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF). QAEC maintains an effective detailed overview of the quality processes and Academic Council considers all suggested evolutions to policies and procedures. The implementation of the new Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy (LTES) has had a particular impact on programme approval and reapproval, with teams now required to consider how they are applying the LTES values during the exercise - a development valued by staff.

32 UHI has a comprehensive and long-standing approach to Subject Area Review aligned to the academic structure, which has moved from eight subject networks to six cognate subject groups. Events run over two days and include student and external members on panels, exploring a range of matters across all programmes. Progress against action taken in response to commendations and recommendations are considered at QAEC. The QESR team found the recent addition of a forward-looking element to reviews to be valued by staff. Two reviews have run since these changes were introduced and staff commented on the benefits they had gained from more focused documentation and the opportunity to get feedback from colleagues and external members on proposals for the future development of the subject, rather than a more retrospective look.

33 Programmes are reviewed annually under the Annual Quality Monitoring process and the team reviewed a sample of self-evaluation documents - confirming that the process supports effective self-reflection - in which strengths and opportunities for improvement are clearly identified. Under a risk-based approach, some programmes also go through Annual Quality Monitoring Dialogues and outputs from these show a critical and supportive process in operation. The Graduate School has its own annual report which draws on student feedback and external comment and data sources. This provides a clear action plan with an enhancement focus. The Graduate School takes part in the Annual Quality Monitoring Dialogues on a biennial basis.

34 Professional and Student Services are also included within institution-led review and a review of the student experience of Personal Academic Tutors (PAT) was due to start in the week of the QESR visit and conclude in 2025. The team explored this area with students who reported varied experiences of PATs, with a particular issue seeming to be where the

tutor was not a member of staff of the subject area being studied, but from the Academic Partner at which the student was registered, resulting in inadequate understanding of students' issues. The issues around inconsistency are recognised by the University with differences in how each Academic Partner implements the role of PAT. The University sees the review as important which is, as a result, being chaired by the Deputy Principal Academic and Research. Although this demonstrates the University is using its processes to explore an area of concern, as the review is not due to complete until May 2025, the University is advised to consider whether an accelerated timescale for conclusions might be possible and valuable.

35 The University uses its external examiners effectively with reports considered at programme and cognate subject-group level. An overview of the themes from external examiner reports is produced for QAEC with a clear action plan agreed on key areas. For example, an issue raised about the consistency of second marking has been referred to a re-established Academic Regulations Sub-Committee to consider any changes for 2024-25. Specific points from external examiners are also included in Annual Quality Monitoring Dialogues, informing evaluation and action.

36 Collaborative provision is subject to the same annual monitoring processes as UHI provision and included in Subject Area Reviews. The arrangements for the University to maintain an overview of all collaborative provision have been strengthened in response to the ELIR 4 recommendation, with a central collation of all reports, greater use of standard templates, and a new External Partnerships Management Group established (see paragraph 16).

37 The University maintains an overview of the operation of its quality processes through its key committee, the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (QAEC), which meets five times a year. QAEC draws on its monitoring of the operation of Subject Area Review, annual quality monitoring, and external examiner reports, as well as student feedback, to agree a set of enhancement priorities on an annual basis. Membership of QAEC does not include representation from all 10 Academic Partners but does cover a wider range of staff, and a number of groups and committees with wider membership report to QAEC. These include the Quality Forum, of which the quality assurance leads from all Academic Partners are members (see also paragraph 12).

38 The University is currently undertaking a review of the committees that feed into QAEC to consider duplication and coverage, taking into account changes over time and the most recent academic restructuring. QAEC also covers academic regulations, LTES, work on retention and all work on enhancement, plus overall work on external engagement. The QESR team considers the overview taken by QAEC to be effective; however, the wide range of areas covered, and multiple reporting groups and reporting processes make this a very busy committee. The University may wish to consider the value of undertaking a review of QAEC after a suitable period has elapsed, to allow recent restructuring changes to embed, which would include any changes that emerge from the current committee review.

## **Use of external reference points in quality processes**

39 The QESR team is confident that the University has effective arrangements in place to monitor and review its approach to the use of external reference points in quality processes. The team met with staff and students and considered a range of documentation including the mapping of the Quality Code, minutes of key committees, evaluation relating to institution-led review and the institutional summary of external examiner reports.

40 The most recent mapping of university's policies and procedures to the Quality Code was led by the Head of Academic Standards and Enhancement and completed in 2024.

QAEC is charged with regularly evaluating the effectiveness of its regulations and enhancement programme, including the use of external reference points. The QESR team saw evidence of external reference points informing the review and development of policies. For example, the UHI admissions policy was being updated during 2023-24 and explicitly aligned with the Quality Code. The QESR team also saw evidence that external benchmarks were used when considering annual programme dialogues, where a Programme Dialogue Panel meets annually to review the data and develop action plans where required, including SMART objectives. These action plans are submitted to Executive Office. External examiner reports, PSRB requirements and benchmarks are included in the evidence base used. The University's programme approval and reapproval processes also makes use of a range of external reference points including the Quality Code, PSRB requirements and industry standards, where applicable.

41 The UHI LTES was informed by external evidence and reference points. It is being embedded by individual Academic Partners, taking further account of external benchmarks such as mapping the LTES to the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) and local staff annual review. The QESR team heard how the commitment to staff development and recognition in learning and teaching was aligned to the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) and the GTCS standards as well as the LTES.

42 Institutional policies and processes for programme/module approvals and reapproval are embedded across the institution and ensure alignment with sector expectations, such as SCQF, Subject Benchmark Statements, the Quality Code, and requirements and expectations of the relevant PSRBs. The QESR team saw evidence of the use of reference points in the UHI quality processes and heard how staff and students clearly understood and engaged fully in these quality management processes - for example, in programme and module development and review. The use of external subject experts and/or industry partners on, for example, approval panels and development boards, ensures external expertise is used to inform curricula, to align with industry standards and facilitate effective monitoring against standards.

43 External examiners comment on academic standards, alignment with sector benchmarks and consider UHI provision in the light of other higher education institutions. External examiner reports are reviewed annually - at programme, cognate subject group and faculty levels - before a themed report is considered by QAEC, which also allocates leads to each institutional action identified. This report is one element of a suite of reports and feedback provided throughout the year to QAEC which ensure that UHI is assured it is meeting external benchmarks, standards and/or expectations.

## **Use of data and evidence to inform self-evaluation and decision-making**

44 The QESR team is confident that the University has effective arrangements in place to monitor and review its approach to the use of data and evidence to inform self-evaluation and decision-making. Evidence the team considered included student survey reports, external examiner reports, minutes of key institutional committees, and reports on appeals and academic misconduct, in addition to meeting with staff and students.

45 A range of internal and external data is used to inform institutional strategic developments. Metrics are identified and used across university action-planning to ensure impact is measured and institutional committees - such as QAEC and Academic Council - review data in relation to major strategic developments and student experience. These include key performance indicators, student survey results, external examiner reports, Subject Area Reviews and Annual Monitoring Dialogues.

46 The University has a fully-embedded data system to which all staff have access. Staff are required to use data to evaluate performance at module, programme, cognate subject group and faculty levels, and to inform any developments - for example, as part of progression boards and as part of annual monitoring. The software deployed provides a number of interactive dashboards and graphical representation of key datasets to facilitate staff interpretation and use of data. The inclusion of previous years' data allows changes and emerging trends to be identified and enables staff to interrogate the data. Training to support staff in doing this is made available, and the effective use of data by staff for evaluative purposes is also enabled through annual review and quality monitoring processes. In meeting with staff, the QESR team learnt how these data had been used to identify issues in the HNC Acting and Performance programme around non-completion, and to inform action to address this.

47 UHI engages in a range of external student surveys (NSS, SSES, PTES, PRES) as well as internally-managed surveys, to gather feedback from students. Student survey data is analysed by the Survey Group and reported to QAEC for consideration at an institutional level. QAEC is responsible for reviewing and approving resulting action plans. Survey data are also disseminated to faculty and programme levels to inform local enhancement activity. For example, within Engineering, NSS results identified issues with community building, prompting staff to engage with sector leaders from other universities, learning from good practice and making improvements to the culture around community spaces. UHI performed well in NSS and PTES in the last academic year, with above-benchmark and sector results for student satisfaction (81% satisfaction in the NSS and 92% in PTES - the highest overall satisfaction in Scotland). The University acknowledges that progress towards consolidating data and identifying key themes from across the range of student surveys has been limited by resources and the QESR team encourages the University to ensure work towards this continues (see paragraph 19).

48 UHI has an online 'red button' system for gathering informal feedback. By way of an online form, students are encouraged to submit questions, suggestions, issues of concern and positive feedback. Data from the red button system are also considered by QAEC to inform enhancement and decision-making further, including through the identification of any trends. Students who met with the QESR team noted that they receive prompt feedback from the red button system but observed that most issues are usually resolved locally - for example, through the personal academic tutor system.

49 Complaints, appeals and academic misconduct cases are initially dealt with informally at each Academic Partner and only formal escalations are recorded at an institutional level. A short-life working group is to be set up to investigate further how data in this area can be gathered more effectively to promote wider enhancement activity. The QESR team encourages such progress to provide opportunities for greater institutional-level analysis of trends in respect of complaints, appeals and academic misconduct, and further opportunities to bring together sources of data to enable enhancement of the student experience, particularly considering UHI's Retention Strategy and Action Plan 2024-30.

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