**European Forum for Quality Assurance: Embedding quality culture in higher education 23-25 Nov 2006**

**The Scottish enhancement-led approach**

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**Introduction to track**

This thematic track will present and explore the current enhancement-led approach to quality within the Scottish higher education (HE) sector. This approach builds on 14 years of experience of implementing three cycles of external QA.

The parallel session will comprise three papers / presentations:
(1) national perspective
(2) institutional perspective
(3) student perspective

**Paper 1**
**National perspective**
**Setting the scene: the Scottish higher education sector and general approach quality**

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**Introduction**

This introductory paper is intended to provide a descriptive context and reference for a set of papers that explore the Scottish approach from a range of perspectives.

**The Scottish HE sector**

The key players at national level can be considered in four broad headings:
- 21 higher education institutions, including 14 universities. They are autonomous organisations and collectively encompass a wide range in terms of size and mission. Universities-Scotland[1] is the collective organisation that represents, promotes and supports the sector;
- the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council[2] (SFC) is the body that distributes Scottish Executive funding for teaching and learning, research and other activities in the higher (university) and further (college) sectors;
- Quality Assurance Agency Scotland[3] is the national agency responsible for developing and operating external quality assurance and enhancement arrangements reflect the distinctive needs of higher education in Scotland;
- a number of student organisations that have representative and support roles: the National Union of Students Scotland[4] (NUS Scotland), the Coalition of Higher Education Students in Scotland[5] (CHESS), and Students Participation in Quality Scotland[6] (sparqs)

The sector is compact in terms of size and geography and has a distinctive sense of identity. These factors, plus reflection on experience to-date, support a partnership approach to quality across the sector.

**Scotland in the UK and Europe**

Higher education is one of the areas of responsibility that is devolved from UK government to the Scottish Executive[7], the devolved government for Scotland. This encourages an approach to quality in higher education that is distinctive from approaches in other parts of the UK[8] (England, Wales and Northern Ireland), but which shares a number of common reference points for quality and standards in higher education.

The primary areas of difference in policy are associated with:
- national funding councils and their policies
- approaches to quality assurance and enhancement
- approaches to public information on quality
- national qualification and credit frameworks (however there are agreed points of alignment between the different national frameworks)

Common areas include:
- the academic infrastructure[9], providing external reference points for quality and standards
- use of external examiners
- the Research Assessment Exercise[10] (RAE) method used to evaluate research outputs within higher education institutions

The Scottish HE sector is actively engaging with the Bologna Process and is concerned to both learn from, and contribute to the process. This is being taken forward by a partnership approach led and supported by the Scottish Executive, SFC, Universities-Scotland and QAA Scotland

**Three generations of QA in Scottish HE**

Development and evolution of approaches to quality assurance of teaching in Scottish higher education can be summarised as three generations (see Table 1). The first two generations included separate reviews at institution and subject levels. The current (third generation) approach includes review at the institutional level within a wider "Quality Enhancement Framework". This reflects a shared vision and consensus (see Table 2), and comprises five elements (see Table 3), plus detailed references.

**Table 1: Three generations of QA in Scotland**

| 1st generation | 1992-1998 | • Quality Assessment of teaching (by subject); focus on quality <br> • Institutional audit; focus on institutional systems |
|---|---|---|
| 2nd generation | 2000-2002 | • Subject Review of teaching (by subject); focus on quality + standards <br> • Institutional audit; focus on institutional systems |
| 3rd generation | 2004 onwards | • Enhancement-led approach |

**Table 2: Shared vision and consensus**

**Vision, the key characteristics of a high quality sector** are:
a sector which is flexible, accessible, and responsive to the needs of learners, the economy and society;

- a sector which encourages and stimulates learners to participate in higher education and to achieve their full potential;
- a sector where learning and teaching promotes the employability of students;
- a sector where learning and teaching is highly regarded and appropriately resourced;
- a sector where there is a culture of continuous enhancement of quality, which is informed by and contributes to international developments

**Consensus**:

- institutions in Scotland manifestly take a responsible approach to the maintenance of quality and standards;
- ownership of quality and standards issues rests with the institutions and not with the Scottish Funding Council or QAA Scotland;
- institutions are committed to the principle of continuous quality enhancement;
- students should have a major involvement in internal and external quality processes;
- students and other stakeholders should have access to relevant public information about the nature and quality of provision

Ref Handbook for ELIR[11] (paras 3,4)

**Table 3: The Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework**[12]

| |
|---|
| • a comprehensive programme of subject reviews, to be run by institutions themselves[13] |
| • Enhancement-led Institution-level Review[14], [ELIR] which will involve all Scottish HE institutions over a four-year cycle |
| • improved forms of public information[15] about quality, based on addressing the different needs of a range of stakeholders including students and employers |
| • a greater voice for student representatives in institutional quality systems, supported by a new national development service[16] |
| • a national programme of quality enhancement themes[17], aimed at developing and sharing good practice in learning and teaching in higher education |

**Broad developments and trends**

Broad developments and trends in the approach to quality of learning and teaching over the past 14 years can be summarised as:

- emergence of the distinctive Scottish approach within the UK
- a partnership approach, based on dialogues involving key stakeholders
- a concept of quality that combines assurance and enhancement
- learning from successive cycles (generations) of QA
- increasing focus on strategic management of quality within institutions
- internalisation of review at the subject level
- increased use of external reference points

**Evaluation of the Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework**

Systematic evaluation has been built into the approach, and this has informed an ongoing dialogue between the partners. The evaluation has taken two broad forms. First, evaluation of individual elements of the QEF by the organisation(s) responsible. For example implementation of the ELIR external review method includes systematic feedback from the institution being reviewed and from the review team following each review. Second, independent evaluation by a research team commissioned at the start of the new approach[18]

[19] [20]. The independent research combines evaluation experts from two UK universities: the Centre for the Study of Education and Training, Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University and the Institute of Educational Technology, Open University. This evaluation has used a variety of research methods to engage with stakeholders, including:
- institutional case study visits
- key informant interviews
- surveys of staff and student representatives
- evaluation workshops

The evaluation started by establishing a baseline for the sector, and has then sought to explore the nature and extent of impacts and change. Excerpts from the second and third reports are presented in Tables 4 and 5, and the introductory summary from the third report is included as an appendix.

**Table 4: Independent evaluation, summary excerpt from second report**

Overall, the message of our two reports to date is that from the stakeholders' points of view, the QEF is off to a positive start. However, we do want to repeat a point we made in our tender to do this work: innovations, except for the most trivial sorts, take time. Our evaluation has shown that awareness of the QEF is developing, there is stronger evidence that ELIR, in these early stages, is being seen as a rigorous but enhancement-oriented process and we see evidence of internal institutional reviews taking enhancement as their watchword. The enhancement themes have been 'tuned' in the light of experience and have some interesting achievements to their credit. A range of stakeholders in the enhancement process are working together; thus the students, both nationally and institutionally, the staff of Universities, the QAA and the SFC are all part of this connective tissue.

**Table 5: Independent evaluation, summary excerpt from third report**

1. This progress report arrives at an interesting moment. There are signs in the evidence provided by a spread of participants in the Scottish HE system (we have collected evidence staff, students and institutional leaders and with those who have provided a wider view of the sector as a whole) that Scottish HE is undergoing a culture shift from assurance-based to enhancement based-thinking. Amongst those we have so far interviewed, there seems to be a more positive and optimistic attitude towards the QEF than was the case when we conducted our interviews in the first phase of our evaluation.

2. If we were to risk an attempt at capturing the spirit of current perspectives on the QEF overall, we could say that many see it is an ambitious effort to address quality issues from a distinctive perspective. Many believe its principles and procedures are worthwhile, stimulating and innovative. In the words of Professor Joan Stringer, Chair of Universities Scotland Learning and Teaching Committee, 'the quality enhancement framework is about making Scottish higher education energetic, stimulating and attractive to students'. She added that [We are] doing something very progressive in Scotland … if we do deliver, we'll have done something very significant in enhancing the student experience (Keynote speech at the Dundee enhancement themes conference, 27 January 2006).

Throughout the period, there has been a continuing dialogue between partners. This has included reflection on emerging results from the evaluations, and negotiation of incremental improvements for example in operational details, styles of reporting and lines of communication.

Recently, this dialogue has included a complete review of the approach, intended to inform development of the approach for the next cycle. An extensive set of discussions and consultations has been taking place, involving all stakeholders[21]. An iterative approach is being used, with successive identification of issues, potential amendments, areas for further comment and current thinking on the way forward. The review is ongoing, and the emerging view across the sector is very positive, suggesting evolution, not revolution. The next formal step will be for the Scottish Funding Council to present its formal response to the review and its proposals for the next cycle.

**Appendix: Summary from third year evaluation progress report**

This is an excerpt from the third year progress report from the independent research team from the Centre for the Study of Education and Training, Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University and the Institute of Educational Technology, Open University. The authors of the progress report, Prof Murray Saunders, Lancaster University, and Prof Peter Knight, Open University, have kindly agreed for this excerpt to be included as an appendix.

The full report has been published by the Scottish Funding Council and is available at:
http://www.sfc.ac.uk/information/information_learning/final_3yr_progress_report_&_key_inf_in_views.pdf

**Emerging issues and challenges**

**General**

1. This progress report arrives at an interesting moment. There are signs in the evidence provided by a spread of participants in the Scottish HE system (we have collected evidence staff, students and institutional leaders and with those who have provided a wider view of the sector as a whole) that Scottish HE is undergoing a culture shift from assurance-based to enhancement based-thinking. Amongst those we have so far interviewed, there seems to be a more positive and optimistic attitude towards the QEF than was the case when we conducted our interviews in the first phase of our evaluation.

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Absorption effects on the 'front-line'

3. Whilst these sentiments are upbeat and buoyant, there is also a sense of realism abroad. While most of the stakeholders we have spoken to can point to achievements, there is an understanding that it is difficult to assess how far they are being absorbed into the higher education system as a whole.

4. There was a view that most could point to 'enclaves' of positive and exciting work in many institutions. Our own reports (see Deliverable 6) suggest that these enclaves of positive practice have little to do with whether colleagues are men or women, hold positions of responsibility, are older or younger or belong to particular disciplines. Where changes are happening, they seem to be more connected to being in active networks, having a history of particular interests in teaching and learning, working with like-minded colleagues, having material and professional support from senior members of institutions, participating in an environment in which moral, professional and systemic incentives to take teaching and learning seriously are present and finally, developing the capacity to balance seemingly oppositional claims on time and energy. We may look to these factors in an emerging theory of change.

5. Interestingly, all of us who work in HE institutions know implicitly about the work practices that characterise the 'front-line'; how priorities are decided, about the daily juggling of competing demands and the discernable shifting, widening and intensifying nature of work in departments. However, there is precious little evidence, of a more stable or systematic kind, that captures the present circumstances.
Distinctively Scottish?

6. The discussions on distinctiveness and the way quality enhancement has been developed and depicted in Scotland prompted a particular strand of evaluation during the last period. We were asked to collect views on the degree of connectivity and integration between the different agencies and initiatives. Opinions differ about the level of distinctiveness of the Scottish system, but we suggest that arguing about differences rather misses the point. The distinctive feature of the quality enhancement framework is that it is Scottish and that is has become the collective achievement of a set of Scottish institutions that are used to working together. This raises some very interesting possibilities for the development of Scottish higher education.

7. Colleagues tended to point to the initiatives that encouraged collaborative approaches. Initiatives that take into account, and capitalize upon, collaborative approaches are far more likely to be welcomed by colleagues than those that are perceived as promoting competition within the sector. Therefore, those initiatives that are seen as of benefit to the whole sector (such as the E-Learning and Transformational Change) attract a more positive reaction that those initiatives that appear to foster institutional competition (such as TQI and, to a certain extent, the English CETL model).

8. The responses to broader questions about how the Scottish approach might position itself within the UK (in connection with enhancing teaching and learning) presents a complex picture. There was some consensus that further absorption into the system (an approach more thoroughly 'owned' by front-line teachers) might require more targeted, discipline specific strategies. This raises the issue that at the moment the Academy subject centres are apparently not being utilized as much they could be and also the ways in which they might support the Quality Enhancement Themes work requires further reflection. This suggests the possibility of a more integrated, joined-up approach avoiding duplication. Although there was no strong sense of the advantages of separating from the main UK centres, the further development of Scottish sub-groups of the various subject centres, that are still part of the UK centres, and which may run several Scottish-focused activities should be encouraged to increase the level of engagement, communities of practice and capacity building.

9. In the light of changes to the HEA and its strategy in Scotland, a wait and see position seemed to be emerging. From a position of relative strength (clear ideas on how to work together and an emerging systemic confidence in the QEF), a more strategic line might be to insist on much more awareness of the Scottish approach and what its needs within the UK system of support are, along with a keen eye on European based opportunities for development.

**The ELIR experience**

10. Overall, colleagues have found the ELIR process to be rigorous as expected but felt that there was a more 'collegial feel' to the process than previously. Whilst preparing for ELIR has been hard work for those most immediately involved, it was generally acknowledged to have been a productive exercise in reflection and review. One colleague coined the phrase a 'jackets off' approach to capture this mix of collegiality and purposefulness that seems to be emerging. This 'homely' message should not be undervalued or misinterpreted. It is a major culture shift and, for us, represents a move away from what, at its worst, can be ritual and impression management towards a more shared agenda associated with improving the students' experience.

**From 'evaluation to 'policy learning': a note on how evaluation can enhance enhancement**

11. Recent discussions on how evaluation practices and processes might evolve in the next period prompts this contribution. We will of course provide a full set of ideas in due course if required. This note is of a more general kind and takes into account developments in evaluation derived from work in the UK and European Evaluation Societies. There is an argument for depicting evaluation as providing opportunities for 'policy learning'. This idea emphasises ways in which we should learn as much as we can about good policy making (its formation, effects and outcomes). In this light, evaluation can be a resource for policy learning

by providing a continuous commentary on the public's experience of policy, its implementation, effects, successes and developments. Evaluation in this sense becomes more embedded and routinised as part of a 'reflexive' culture within a sector. There are still the requirements of independence, authority and expertise to consider but it is persuasive to recast evaluation in this light. Activities then are focused on inquiries of a more general kind (like the nature of contemporary 'front-line' work practices in HE for example) that provide intelligence on which policy directions might draw, negotiated foci on an annual basis that follow-up longitudinal studies of key stakeholder experience (student surveys for example) or providing sensitive indicators of policy effects and building capacity at institutional level for policy learning through evaluations. Evaluation as policy learning does not involve holding up a mirror but is more a collaborative enterprise of procuring evidential resources that help in judgements of value and worth.

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