



10 December 2014

Dear Colleague

Consultation on a review of the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF)

I am writing to invite you to take part in a review of the Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework. The annex to this letter sets out the scope of the review and presents a framework of enquiry within which we invite you to respond.

The Scottish Funding Council is leading the process of the review working alongside officers of the Quality Assurance Agency Scotland. The work of the review is being overseen by the University Quality Working Group chaired by Professor Peter McGeorge, Vice Principal, University of Aberdeen.

I welcome this opportunity to consider, along with institutions, QAA Scotland and other stakeholders, potentially radical or innovative developments to the already strong system of quality assurance and enhancement in Scotland.

Details of individuals who may be contacted with respect to this review, as well as details of timing and how to respond, can be found at the end of the annex.

Please accept my thanks in advance for your contribution to this important review.

Laurence Howells
Chief Executive

Sent to:

HEI Principals/Vice Chancellors

Student Associations/Presidents (HEIs)

Russell Gunson, NUS Scotland Director

Eve Lewis, Head of SPARQS

Murray Hope, Policy and Strategy Officer, HEA

Heather Jackson, HEA Scotland Director

Alastair Sim, Director, Universities Scotland

Mark Wilde, Policy Officer, Universities Scotland LTC

Thelma Barron, Assistant Director, QAA Scotland Committee

Thelma Barron, SHEEC

Amanda Park, Reviews Information Co-ordinator, QAA Scotland

Timetable

The current quality guidance was published in August 2012 following a review which spanned academic year 2011/12 and applies for the four-year cycle beginning on 1 August 2012. New guidance should be published by the start of AY 2015/16 (this enables a new review method to be developed by Easter 2016 and to be implemented for AY 2016/17).

The Quality Enhancement Framework

When established in 2003, the Quality Enhancement Framework was both radical and innovative in nature. It has been widely admired, envied and emulated. The QEF is characterised by its coherence, its forward-looking nature, its basis in partnership and its involvement of students throughout the various elements of the approach.

The QEF currently has five named elements as follows:

- Enhancement Led Institutional Review (ELIR)
- A national programme of Enhancement Themes
- Institution-led quality review
- An agreed set of Public Information
- Student engagement in quality

We are committed to reviewing all elements of the QEF and intend to consult as widely as possible within the timeframe of the review. We welcome responses which, whilst recognising the strengths of the current approach, both offer challenge to, and new perspectives on, our approach to quality assurance and enhancement.

Background and context*Overview of the purposes of the current approach to quality assurance and quality enhancement in Scotland*

1. It provides public assurance of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities at Scottish HEIs. It ensures that there can be trust in the level of qualifications and the quality of education in Scotland. It is worth restating that the Scottish QEF seeks to achieve more than a threshold level of assurance. Rather it seeks to promote an excellent student experience, to ensure high quality learning and continuing enhancement of learning and teaching.
2. It supports and helps to raise the international competitiveness and standing of Scottish Higher Education and seeks to secure Scotland's position as the best

place to study. It achieves this through the production of publicly reported evidence of an improvement-oriented process, through the promotion and dissemination of research and positive practice, the provision of resources, through the involvement of international reviewers, investigation of practice internationally and the use of international reference points or comparators and by linking the endeavour of our institutions to the wider economic, social and cultural needs, e.g. the work on graduate attributes and employability.

Key qualities or characteristics of the QEF which are considered distinctive and worth preserving

1. It has as its most distinctive feature, setting it apart from almost all other countries' approaches, a coherent framework which goes beyond a simple concern with external review and straightforward quality assurance seeking rather to address all key areas of enhancing and reporting on learning and teaching and the student experience.
2. A collaborative, collegiate ethos based on partnership working. This has come to be the norm over the last three cycles of quality assurance and enhancement. There are a number of elements to this:
 - The partnership which underpins the QEF involving the funding body, the universities and their representative bodies and the quality assurance agency together with the representative body for students
 - The Enhancement Themes and the ways in which institutions and institutional teams increasingly engage with these
 - The follow-up work in ELIR3 and the way in which institutions work together to share learning from that process.
3. A system based on autonomous HEIs with primary responsibility for ensuring that academic standards are set and maintained appropriately and that quality is evaluated systematically and enhanced deliberately. External quality arrangements support this autonomy by testing the effectiveness of an HEI's approach and, through peer review, cross-sector and inter-institutional working enable learning and development to take place. In support of this, QAA UK develops and oversees collective reference points (the UK Quality Code) which, as autonomous institutions, HEIs use in ways that are aligned to their particular mission, strategic objectives, character and culture.
4. The continuing belief that education is a public good and, as such, should be accessible by all and enable equality in participation. Underlying this is the belief that universities have a strong societal benefit, through research and innovation, through the way they work with, and feed into, business and

industry, through the income and revenue they generate and through the life chances they enhance.

5. The enhancement-led ethos which supports and encourages continuing efforts to improve, to innovate and to question. This underpins an approach which is future-focused, engenders reflective practice and informed critical self/institutional evaluation. It strengthens the ability to identify strengths and areas of good practice, to build on those and embed them, alongside the ability to identify new challenges, areas for development and improvement, and systems that enable the rapid identification and addressing of any shortcomings.
6. A culture that recognises learning as a partnership with students, which seeks to provide and promote high quality effective learning opportunities and to involve its learners in partnership in the continuing evolution of provision and its effective management.

We invite consideration of ways in which these qualities and characteristics, whilst valuable and worth preserving, might be maintained within a different approach to quality.

Some evidence of a maturing engagement with the QEF during the last three cycles

Respondents may wish to consider whether this summary of some of the evidence of a maturing engagement with, and development of the QEF, has merit.

1. There has been a significant culture-shift from assurance to enhancement.
2. The profile and status of learning and teaching has been raised since 2003 in the Scottish university sector.
3. Across many areas of practice the capacity for self-evaluation has developed and, as an essential part of that, the willingness to share. This reflects not only maturity in self-evaluation but also the strength of the relationships within the sector and between the sector and QAA Scotland. Openness and transparency are important parts of this and those characteristics are evident in institutional willingness to share challenges and examples of initiatives that have not worked, just as much as those that have been successful.
4. Institutions are now comfortable with areas of positive practice and areas of development being itemised and presented in a clear, concise report.

5. The longer timespan of the Enhancement Themes has enabled a deeper level of engagement and greater collaboration during the life of each Theme.
6. The introduction of student reviewers in 2003 was a radical departure and the extent to which this is now an assumed part of external quality assurance regimes in other countries is an example of how Scotland's approach has been pioneering. Partnership between student associations and the institutions is the norm and students are not only consulted but are an integral partner in the design and implementation of initiatives and the approach to ELIR by institutions

How to frame your response

We are in the first instance looking for strategic, sector-wide perspectives and issues and would be grateful for responses formulated with that in mind. We will, of course, subsequently focus on more detailed issues as initial responses and perspectives are analysed.

It will be helpful in receiving institutional perspectives in particular if these can:

- include student views in the response and identify how this has been achieved
- identify the key elements from the current policy context across the UK and beyond that are likely to impact on the Scottish quality framework. How might these be addressed through revision to the QEF? In responding, we encourage institutions and other respondents to take a five to ten year perspective
- take account of the interface with, and experience of employers/industry, in considering the impact of quality assurance and enhancement processes
- reflect on a sector-wide rather than single institution perspective
- consider ways in which potential innovative new developments to the Scottish approach to quality assurance and enhancement might best be tested or piloted by either institutions or QAA Scotland

Some questions for consideration

We offer the following questions not in order to be prescriptive but as a "framework of enquiry" within which individuals, institutions and stakeholders can formulate a response. We invite respondents to avoid being constrained by a sense of having to work within the current system or approach and to propose for consideration

potentially radical ideas about the governance, ownership and operating paradigm of quality assurance and enhancement in Scotland.

- what is valued about the current arrangements? What do you consider works well? Does the current QEF remain a valid and useful framework? Would there be benefit in changing it, to include other elements or to redevelop it in other ways?
- having considered and commented on the above, how could the system be developed and/or made more effective? Specifically, are there ways in which the current approach could be re-engineered to the benefit of learners and institutions considering the need for a resilient system over a timeframe of ten or more years and in the context of a changing environment in the UK and overseas. What factors should we take into account?
- how might institutions/QAA/SFC better evidence in concrete ways that quality assurance and enhancement arrangements actually make a difference – at student, institutional and sectoral level?

Written responses to this consultation should be addressed to Gus MacLeod, Senior Policy Officer, Scottish Funding Council (0131 313 6536, gmacleod@sfc.ac.uk) by **Friday 6 February 2015**. Enquires about the review may be addressed to Gus MacLeod or Alison Cook (Assistant Director, Quality and Learning, Scottish Funding Council (0131 313 6685, acook@sfc.ac.uk).