

Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

Scottish Office

Seminar:

Methodological Common Instruments for Assessment and Accreditation in the European Framework

Wednesday 28 July workshop contribution from:

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An Enhancement-led Approach

Summary

This presentation will outline the experience of designing and implementing an enhancement-led approach to assuring quality and securing academic standards within higher education institutions in Scotland. The presentation will set this approach within the context of the UK.

Information about the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education and the enhancement-led approach in Scotland is provided below. **Further Information** can be obtained by visiting the Agency's website www.qaa.ac.uk

Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education was established in 1997 to provide an integrated quality assurance service for UK higher education. It is an independent body funded by subscriptions from universities and colleges of higher education, and through contracts with the main higher education funding bodies.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (the Agency) exists in the UK to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualifications and to encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education.

To do this, the Agency carries out reviews of individual higher education institutions (universities and colleges of higher education). In Scotland this process is known as Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR). The Agency operates equivalent but separate processes in Wales, England and Northern Ireland.

Enhancement-Led approach

Over the period 2001-2003, the Agency, the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council, Universities Scotland and representatives of the student body have worked closely together on the development of the enhancement-led approach to quality in Scottish higher education. This approach, which was implemented in academic year 2003-04, has five main elements:

- A comprehensive programme of review at the subject level, managed by the institutions
- Improved forms of public information about quality, based on addressing the different needs of the users of that information including students and employers
- A greater voice for student representatives in institutional quality systems, supported by a national development service (known as the student participation in quality scotland – sparqs – service)

- A national programme of enhancement themes, aimed at developing and sharing good practice in learning and teaching in higher education
- Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR) involving all of the Scottish higher education institutions over a four-year period, from 2003-04 to 2006-07.

The Agency believes that this approach is distinctive in a number of respects: its balance between quality assurance and enhancement; the emphasis it places on the student experience; its focus on learning and not solely teaching; and the spirit of cooperation and partnership which has underpinned all these developments.

Focus of ELIR

The ELIR method embraces a focus on: the strategic management of enhancement; the effectiveness of student learning; and student, employer and international perspectives.

Nationally agreed reference points

In common with methods of review in other parts of the UK, ELIR includes a focus on institutions' use of a range of reference points including those published by the Agency:

- the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)
- the Agency's Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education
- subject benchmark statements, which describe the characteristics of degrees in different subjects
- guidelines for preparing programme specifications, which are descriptions of what is on offer to students in individual programmes of study. Programme specifications outline the intended knowledge, skills, understanding and attributes of a student completing that programme. They also give details of teaching and assessment methods and link the programme to the SCQF.

Conclusions and judgement within ELIR

ELIR results in a set of commentaries about the institutions being reviewed. These commentaries relate to:

- i. the ability of the institution's internal review systems to monitor and maintain quality and standards at the level of the programme or award. This commentary leads to a judgement on the level of confidence which can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's current and likely future management of the quality of its programmes and the academic standards of its awards. The expression of this judgement provides a point of tangency between the ELIR method and other review methods operating in the other parts of the UK. The judgement is expressed as one of: **broad confidence, limited confidence or no confidence.**
- ii. The institution's arrangements for ensuring that the information it publishes about the quality of its provision is complete, accurate and fair
- iii. The effectiveness of the institution's approach to promoting an effective learning experience for students
- iv. The combined effect of the institution's policies and practices for ensuring improvement in the quality of teaching and learning
- v. The effectiveness of the institution's implementation of its strategy for quality enhancement.

The ELIR process

The ELIR process is carried out by teams comprising three academics, a student and a senior administrator drawn from the higher education sector.

The main operational elements of ELIR are:

- A preliminary visit by the Agency to the institution in advance of the review visit
- A Reflective Analysis document submitted by the institution approximately two months in advance of the first part of the review visit
- A two-part review visit to the institution by the ELIR team, Part 1 taking place five weeks before Part 2, and Part 2 having a variable duration of between three and five days depending on the complexity of matters to be explored
- The publication of a report, 20 weeks after the Part 2 visit, detailing the commentaries agreed by the ELIR team

The evidence for the Enhancement-Led Institutional Review

In order to gather the information on which its commentaries are based, the ELIR team carries out a number of activities including:

- Reviewing the institution's own internal procedures and documents, as well as the Reflective Analysis institutions prepare especially for ELIR
- Asking questions and engaging in discussions with groups of relevant staff
- Talking to students about their experiences
- Exploring how the institution uses the national reference points