



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

Heriot-Watt University

Review Report

April 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 Herriot-Watt University.

The review took place on 29 and 30 April 2024 and was conducted by a review team, as follows:

- Liam Brady (Student Reviewer)
- Hilary Grainger Academic Reviewer)
- Paul Probyn (Coordinating 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 Heriot-Watt University

With origins in Scotland in 1821 as the world's first Institute of Mechanics, Heriot-Watt University (the University) was awarded university status in 1966; its vision is to be a progressive, connected, global university. It has 24,510 learners studying worldwide with students in 160 countries, and 2,842 staff. Academic provision is undertaken across five campuses: three in Scotland (Edinburgh, Orkney and Borders) and two overseas in Dubai and Malaysia - which were set up in 2005 and 2012 respectively - each with a purpose-built site. The Edinburgh Campus hosts over 35 companies based on the first University Research Park in Europe.

The University's Strategic Plan: Strategy 2025, runs from 2019 to 2025 and has four strategic themes - Building Flourishing Communities; Pioneering in Education; Excellence in Research and Enterprise; and A Globally Connected University. Its vision is to be world-leading in all areas of specialism and this is underpinned by a mission to create and exchange knowledge that benefits society. Four values have been developed: Inspire, Collaborate, Belong and Celebrate.

In 2023-24, the University has a total population of 24,510 (headcount) including 1,450 Foundation students; 11,105 undergraduates (UG); 10,785 postgraduate taught students and 1,170 postgraduate research students. Overall, there are 16,160 students at five

campuses and 8,350 students enrolled off-campus - studying as independent distance learners or through an academic partner. The University has worked with over 700 companies educating Graduate Apprentices.

Findings

From the evidence presented, the review team is confident that Heriot-Watt University 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 **features of good practice**.

- **Global Strategy:** The QESR team found the University's global vision and the related strategic and operational activity to be a feature of good practice. The University maintains the quality of its provision on a global scale to support 'One Heriot-Watt' as a single, global institution in which all campuses have equal standing. The global strategy drives the nature and ambition of the international activity and the wide range of opportunities for multi-location, multi-mode study. There is a strong commitment from senior staff to implement the strategy and the Globally Connected Learning experience for students. Staff are supported in tailoring the strategy to meet the needs of individual schools, and university policies and procedures ensure that the quality and standards of its programmes are the same across all modes and locations of study and there is a single, overarching operational plan, embracing all learning and teaching and teaching-related projects (paragraph 2 and 3).
- **Institution-led Review:** The QESR team found that the University has successfully developed academic review as a unified global process. The team commends the University on its development of a robust, enhancement-focused approach featuring clear recommendations for improvement and areas of positive practice, which not only gives the University effective oversight of global quality and standards but has also helped to develop multi-campus teaching and management teams, thus supporting the 'One Heriot-Watt' ethos. Academic review reports, including the reports of the Enhancement Workshops, demonstrated a robust, enhancement-focused process featuring clear recommendations for improvement and areas of positive practice. The team identified this as a feature of good practice (paragraph 34).

Recommendations for action

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

- **Availability of external examiner reports:** Students the QESR team met were unaware of external examiner reports and how to access them. The team recommends that the University should review its processes to ensure that external examiner reports are easily and routinely made available to students, including those who do not hold representative roles (paragraph 39).
- **Risk management of collaborative provision:** The team noted that the reports of both academic audits conducted in 2023 had required schools to document risks related to collaborative provision in a risk register. One academic audit report had also commented that the University's expectations in relation to risk management for partnership activity were not clearly articulated, though the QESR team received from the University extensive documentation detailing its requirements in relation to risk

management and ownership for collaborative provision. The team recommends that the University ensures that its requirements in relation to risk management and ownership for collaborative provision are understood by all school staff concerned with the management of collaborative provision (paragraph 43).

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

Strategic approach to enhancement

1 The QESR team is confident that the University has effective arrangements in place to monitor, review and enhance its strategic approach to enhancement. The team considered a range of documents including the Learning and Teaching Strategy and operational plan, the Outcome Agreement report to SFC, and minutes of key institutional committees with responsibilities for quality and academic standards, learning and teaching, and the wider student experience. In addition, the team met with staff and students.

2 The University maintains the quality of its provision on a global scale based on the fundamental principle of *'identical academic standards: diversity of learning experiences'* to support 'One Heriot-Watt' as a single, global institution. The University's global vision is embedded in the Learning and Teaching Strategy, and students receive the 'One Heriot-Watt' global degree. All campuses have equal standing as integral parts of Heriot-Watt. The distinctive features of the University are the scale of its international activity and the wide range of opportunities for multi-location, multi-mode study.

3 The QESR team found evidence of a strong commitment from senior staff to implement the 'One Heriot-Watt' strategy and the Globally Connected Learning experience for students. Staff engagement is fostered through cross-committee membership and staff at all levels are supported in tailoring the strategy to meet the needs of individual schools. There is ongoing, effective oversight with well-considered reprioritisation when required as exemplified by action taken to reschedule the Assessment and Feedback project to concentrate, as a matter of urgency, on responding to the National Student Survey results. The QESR team found the University's global vision and the related strategic and operational activity to be **a feature of good practice**.

4 The QESR team established that all university policies and procedures are designed to ensure that the quality and standards of its programmes are the same across all modes and locations of study. However, the University acknowledges that, as schools have diversified, there have been inconsistencies in some areas, including diverse progression requirements. A new Deputy Principal (Education and Student Life) was appointed in October 2022, and it was agreed that there should be a single, overarching operational plan, embracing all learning and teaching, and teaching-related projects, with oversight by the University Committee for Learning and Teaching (UCLT). The plan has been through appropriate governance structures and has been subject to UCLT scrutiny.

5 The QESR team found that the University has effective and established systems in place to promote the strategic enhancement of learning and teaching, including a Learning and Teaching Strategy which is student-focused, supported by an Operational Plan and linked to the institutional strategy 2019-25. The Operational Plan provides a high-level tracking overview of actions and more detailed operational plans for each activity. There is synergy between the Learning and Teaching Strategy and the Global Access and Inclusion Strategy which incorporates widening participation. The University places great store in its championing of student engagement and partnership to enhance the quality of Learning and Teaching, and examples of success are cited in the Annual Outcome Agreement.

6 The University's Learning and Teaching Strategy has curriculum, teaching and assessment as its three strategic priorities. To support delivery, the University has developed its institution-wide Global Changemaker Curriculum Framework, Globally Connected Learning model and Transforming Assessment initiative. Schools are in the process of developing or refreshing their taught provision and linking with the newly reworked HWU Graduate Attributes. The QESR team found evidence of effective

engagement with the Transforming Assessment initiative and the Global Curriculum toolkit, launched in spring 2023 and with the widespread revision of Learning Outcomes in the context of Global Changemaker Curriculum framework. In response to COVID-19, the University introduced Responsive Blended Learning (RBL), now superseded by the 'Globally Connected Learning' model which provides the opportunity to study the same programme and access the same support in different campus locations and for students to study globally, learning and collaborating as a global cohort. Globally Connected Learning is supported by the Learning and Teaching Academy, which has teams in Scotland, Dubai and Malaysia.

7 Each school and relevant professional service has a Learning and Teaching Enhancement Plan and Operational Plan that aligns with the institutional Learning and Teaching Strategy, supported by Directors of Learning and Teaching to ensure that actions are undertaken and completed across the schools. The University takes a partnership approach between students and school, and professional services staff to ensure effective delivery. This is monitored and evaluated annually through key performance indicators.

8 The QESR team established that the sector Enhancement Themes have impacted positively on the University's strategy, policy and practice development in learning and teaching and the wider student experience. The University is adopting a multi-layered approach designed to amplify the impact of enhancement activities by reinforcing the connection between local and institutional change. This work is being supported by three areas of activity: institutionally commissioned work; the development of special clusters to support collaboration; and connection and mini enhancement projects.

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 documents including the University's Student Partnership Agreement (SPA) and its Development Plan, the SFC Annual Report and Outcome Agreement, as well as meeting with staff and students.

10 Heriot-Watt prides itself on being a global institution and the QESR team noted the standardising of approaches to student representation at all levels across all campuses to allow for parity of experience and more effective communication. However, the QESR team heard mixed views from students based at international campuses on feeling part of a global institution. Students reported the positive experience of being taught with students from other campuses but noted that this has reduced post-Covid, with the move back to more face-to-face teaching resulting in a more local than global experience. Students also reported issues resulting from different time zones as well as deadlines for global activities which fail to take account of events such as Ramadan and Chinese New Year.

11 The SPA is a jointly signed document with each campus represented by a staff and student member which affirms the notion of a global institution committed to improving the student experience across sites. The agreement is supported by the more detailed SPA Development Plan which details objectives and outcomes, both globally and at local levels, with the shared aim of building a strong and supportive university community. Staff and students that the QESR team met, noted the need for improvements to student representation across the institution to address the lack of representation for approved learning partners (organisations delivering HWU programmes through partnership agreements), independent distance learner students, and postgraduate students. The QESR team encourages the University and student representative bodies to work together to ensure that progress is made to improve student representation.

12 The QESR team noted the variable experience of training for student representatives, as well as challenges around postgraduate representation. There has been further evidence of the challenges of student representation through the Registry and Academic Support (RAS) Professional Services Review which notes a separate review by an external, independent consultant of the University's processes for Student Voice with a focus on 'closing the feedback loop'. Actions from this review, such as the aim to join up the Student Representative Bodies, approaches to feedback and the aim to work more in partnership both together and with the University, have already been incorporated into the University's SPA and SPA Development Plan.

13 The University also evidences how the SPA is being used to drive in-year enhancement through its links with the Learning and Teaching Strategy and the Student Experience and Satisfaction Group. The four key objectives of the SPA (Academic, Community, Wellbeing and Sports) were drawn on to identify areas for institutional focus and action for the academic year that link directly with the Learning and Teaching Strategy, including Assessment and Feedback, Community, Student Voice, and Organisation and Management. While the SPA is influencing institutional work, there is varying awareness of this among the student body.

14 The Student Feedback Summary Report notes that the UCLT has approved a revised survey schedule for the academic year 2023-24 with clear timelines and intended audiences defined to minimise survey fatigue. A university-wide, mid-semester Course Check-In - managed by the Strategic Planning, Performance & Projects and Academic Quality teams - was introduced in 2023-24 and has already run for a full academic year; schools no longer run their own mid-semester surveys. Attempts have been made to increase survey engagement through the introduction of QR codes on all digital display screens, increased incentive programmes and prize draws, and promotion through flyers, social media and a staff-facing Student Surveys page.

Action taken since ELIR 4

15 The QESR team is confident that the University has effective arrangements in place to monitor and review its actions taken in response to Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR 4). The team considered the ELIR 4 Action Plan, Follow-up Report and minutes from key institutional committees, and met with staff and students.

16 ELIR 4 made four recommendations. The QESR team saw from the comprehensive action plan that while progress has been made across the four areas, further work remained. An Action Plan was first drafted in May 2021 and approved by UCLT in March 2021, and this has been updated annually each January, most recently in 2024. Two new senior appointments - Vice-Principal and Provost and Director of Strategic Planning and Performance - made before ELIR 4 was resumed, following postponement of the Review Visit due to the COVID-19 pandemic, have supported the work to address ELIR recommendations.

17 In addressing the ELIR recommendation regarding systematic access to, and use of, data, the University acknowledges the difficulty in providing an immediate resolution but has developed three areas for action. First, a data strategy was developed in March 2022. Second, investment in establishing a systematic data solution has been made. The QESR team learned that the work to resource an integrated, accessible and sustainable approach to data has completed all procurement stages and that a Proof-of-Concept task to integrate student data in various campus locations and from the virtual learning environment (VLE) has been completed.

18 As part of the third area of action, funding has been made available to support additional business intelligence analyst posts within Strategic Planning and Performance, enabling the production of dashboards including strategic performance and student number planning. The QESR team was told that staff will be supported in their increased use of these dashboards. The cross-institutional use of a single VLE (introduced after ELIR 4) and the support for the learning management system (LMS) across the academic community have facilitated the use of LMS-based learning analytics. While demonstrable progress has been made in terms of staffing and resources, the University is encouraged to continue its development of systematic access to, and use of data, including the tracking of students, postgraduate data and the availability of data for annual course and programme monitoring.

19 The QESR team found evidence to show that, although progress has been made in addressing the ELIR recommendation to engage proactively and work in partnership with postgraduate research students to identify their sense of belonging in the university community, the Action Plan acknowledges the challenges and the outstanding work remaining.

20 Emphasis has been placed on the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) to mirror the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) and to engender greater student engagement. The Student Union in Scotland, the Student Council in Dubai and the Student Association in Malaysia have restructured their arrangements to direct increased support for postgraduate research students (PGRs) and they are represented on all key university committees and, at school-level, PGRs are participating in Research Institute meetings. Each school has a Research Committee and there are PGR societies in each school. The introduction of the institutional Research Futures Academy is welcomed by students and proving to be beneficial. Measures have been put in place to enhance support for PGRs and none can teach without requisite approval and training. The Personal Tutor Scheme has been extended and PGR students meet with their personal tutors at least twice a year.

21 A sense of community is being fostered by a dedicated document management system for PGRs and a new post of Quality Enhancement Officer for PG Experience has been created to liaise with the Chair of the Research Degrees Committee. A new post in Student Wellbeing Services has led to improved signposting for PGR student support services. The *Building a Resilient Postgraduate Research Community: Staff and Student Perspectives* has been developed as part of the Enhancement Theme. The QESR team recognises the renewed sense of purpose and focus in addressing this work, including the creation of the Graduate School which is to be launched in 2025, and encourages the University to progress work on consistency of postgraduate research experience across campuses.

22 Ensuring that there is equivalence of staff development opportunities across different locations was one of the actions arising from ELIR 4. As of March 2022, all generic staff development is available online across all campuses. Staff development is provided by three departments - People and Organisational Development (POD); the Learning and Teaching Academy (LTA); and the Research Futures Academy - and these departments play a pivotal role in coordinating a global, structured approach to staff development and in encouraging consistency of access. In-house coaching is offered to all staff and the POD offering is targeted to different roles and work groups - for example, Leaders/Managers or Technicians, to provide equity of participation. The Global Hub for Scholarship and Educational Leadership was launched in December 2022 and provides further opportunities for staff development across the campus locations. The QESR team noted that a Learning Management System (LMS) will soon be available to bring development activities and records onto one platform for staff. Actions have been accompanied by investment in three additional posts to enable the LTA to enhance institutional capability. The QESR team found

that the online provision of staff development ensured equitability and was well received by staff across all campuses.

23 The team found evidence that the University is addressing the ELIR recommendation to address variable practice across schools in policy implementation. The restructuring of the Registry and the Academic Support Directorate (RAS) - the final phase of the global, institution-wide restructuring of all Professional Services - has provided the organisational framework for ensuring greater consistency of policy implementation across schools. There has also been a significant review and redesign of processes which are now managed by a central team.

24 The Learning and Teaching Group, in place since March 2020, has encouraged consistency over a range of academic practices, including release of assessment results, access to examination papers, turnaround times for feedback on substantive pieces of course work and feedback on take-home examinations. The issue of variability in the weightings used to calculate honours classification remains.

Sector-wide enhancement topic

25 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/blended offering. The QESR team considered the University's Enhancement Topic Reflection and Summary Plan, their Digital Strategy update, as well as meeting with staff and students.

26 The institution is in a transitional period in its development of digital/blended learning, shifting from their emergency pandemic response work to a sustainable teaching model founded on pedagogically driven design. This work is guided by the 'Globally Connected Learning' initiative which aims to engage students with their studies and other campuses through digital technologies, and update policies and processes to enable this. Academic Review reports evidence the work done in this area - such as creating engaging materials and exploring new ways of teaching - ensuring that positive elements from the previous 'Responsive Blended Learning' are retained while also moving forward with 'Globally Connected Learning'.

27 The QESR team noted the introduction of a new VLE in 2021-22, accompanied by a suite of training and support for teaching teams and students. The University states that all courses now have a strong digital base on their VLE site, and the institution-wide template supports student access to learning materials and helps ensure a more consistent approach. Students the team met spoke positively about their experiences with the new VLE; however, they considered that a more consistent approach to the materials available and less variation between staff and different courses was needed. It was also noted that digital technology is used well to connect students across campuses, although students still reported a sense of isolation at some campuses.

28 The QESR team noted a list of key actions for the current academic year which are divided into different workstreams linked to the Learning and Teaching Strategy. This links external, sector-wide initiatives - such as the enhancement topic - directly into institutional strategic priorities; however, while the QESR team noted the evidence of work being done, it was not clear what, if any, impact of this there was yet. This was explored with staff who reported that there was more emphasis on setting up more standard approaches across the University to ensure that the 'aspirations' of the Learning and Teaching Strategy were understood across the board. The means by which this was to be achieved included working through annual monitoring and review, school-level Learning and Teaching Committees, Programme Boards of Study, and regular meetings with Directors of Learning and Teaching

as well as Programme Directors. Staff concluded that 'aspirations were beginning to cascade down'. The QESR team concluded that while there is not yet enough evidence to determine the nature of the impact of the work related to the digital/blended learning Enhancement Topic, there is a clear commitment to ensure that impact is consistent across the board.

29 The QESR team noted that there is no single institutional approach to developing programmes with an online/on-campus blend and had some concerns about how a consistent experience for both staff and students across programmes would be ensured. The evaluation of the Learning and Teaching Strategic Operational Plan also made it unclear whether this was still an institutional strategic priority which raises questions about consistency of messaging. This was explored with staff who were clear that online learning has been supported for many years and that the University is working to develop this in a modern, post-pandemic context by achieving a balance between face-to-face and online content that benefits all students and creates the best, most consistent experience possible.

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 monitoring and review of its approach to managing quality and to setting, maintaining, reviewing and assessing academic standards. The team considered key elements of the quality framework including annual monitoring, institution-led review guidance and external examining; institution-led review reports; samples of annual monitoring and review reports; institution-level analyses of annual monitoring, the institution-led review summary report, external examining and student feedback; minutes of institutional committees responsible for quality and standards; and met with staff and students.

31 Since ELIR 4, the University has continued to review and develop its processes, drawing on the experience of adapting its procedures during the pandemic. Annual institution-level analyses of the outcomes of key quality management processes are considered by the University Committee on Quality and Standards - both to identify priorities for institutional action and to improve the underlying processes.

32 The team found the University's arrangements for managing quality and setting standards meet the Expectations of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code) and the guidance issued by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC). Procedures are clear and comprehensive, and supported by institutional guidance targeted at a range of audiences. They apply to all forms of credit-bearing provision, across all campuses. Staff who met the team understood the processes and their roles in them.

33 The University's annual monitoring and review (AMR) process is primarily school-focused. Each school produces an annual monitoring report which reviews all academic provision, delivered through all modes and at all locations. The report template is revised regularly to reflect changing needs; post-pandemic, it focuses on key themes rather than providing detailed overviews. There is no single university-wide approach to annual monitoring below school level, and it was unclear to the team what consistent evidence base was used to compile school monitoring reports. The University is alert to this, and during 2023-24 was conducting a review of sub-school level monitoring, with the aim of identifying a more common approach and establishing greater consistency in the evidence base. In the context of the University's evolving data strategy, the team considered a range of appropriate data should be reflected upon at all levels, and staff should be provided with appropriate training to help facilitate this so the University can be assured that there is robust

monitoring and reflection at all levels (for example, school, discipline, programme and course).

34 Academic review is the University's version of Institution-Led Review and reports reviewed by the team, including the reports of the Enhancement Workshops, demonstrated a robust, enhancement-focused process featuring clear recommendations for improvement and areas of positive practice. The team commends the University for its successful development of academic review as a unified global process - a robust, enhancement-focused approach featuring clear recommendations for improvement and areas of positive practice, which not only gives the University effective oversight of global quality and standards but has also helped to develop multi-campus teaching and management teams - thus supporting the 'One Heriot-Watt' ethos. The team identified this approach as a **feature of good practice**.

35 Review of the experience of postgraduate research students is integrated into the University's generic review and monitoring processes. The Chair of the Research Degrees Committee is responsible for leading action on institutional priorities in relation to issues affecting postgraduate research students and programmes identified through these processes.

36 Student assessment and feedback are supported by comprehensive regulations, policies, procedures and guidelines; the team saw evidence that these are kept under appropriate review by the University Committee on Quality and Standards and the University Committee on Learning and Teaching. Institutional learning from the pandemic has led to substantive changes in assessment policies and procedures. A 'Transforming Assessment' initiative, focused on embedding assessment for learning in all programmes and courses and ensuring appropriate use of technology in assessment, forms a key component of the University's Learning and Teaching Strategy.

37 The ELIR 4 report noted that the University was aware of variations in the implementation of policy and practice across schools and encouraged it to seek increased consistency where appropriate. Remaining inconsistencies identified in progression criteria and methods for calculating degree classification are currently under review. The team encourages the University to progress this work to ensure that student achievement is rewarded equitably, irrespective of the subject of study.

38 External examiners are involved in awarding boards, although not in course assessments and progression. They are required to comment on the academic standards of awards, including consistency with Subject Benchmark Statements and comparability with other institutions. They are positive about the University's approach to assessment and provision of high-quality feedback but have commented on their workloads, communication about their responsibilities and access to assessment materials. The University is diligent in ensuring that all issues raised by external examiners are addressed appropriately. However, in 2021-22, only 104 out of 118 expected external examiner reports were received and the reasons for non-submission included that the requisite information required to enable submission was not supplied by the University. The University asserts that there are mechanisms in place to address this.

39 The ELIR 4 report noted that students were almost universally unfamiliar with the external examiner system or how to access external examiner reports. Students the QESR team met were unaware of external examiner reports and how to access them. The team **recommends** that the University should review its processes to ensure that external examiner reports are easily and routinely made available to students, including those who do not hold representative roles.

40 The University's process of Professional Services Review meets the expectations of the SFC guidance on quality. A revised format was introduced in 2022-23 following a successful pilot. The report of the pilot review indicates that the new arrangements are comprehensive, robust and strongly enhancement focused. Reviews focus either on a specific professional service, or on a theme that covers more than one service; the University assured the team that all services and themes that contribute to the student experience will be reviewed over the course of a six-year cycle.

41 Collaborative programmes are subject to a separate process of partnership annual monitoring and review (PAMR). PAMR has been revised since the last ELIR to improve engagement, elicit more meaningful information about quality and standards, and clarify responsibilities. All 'high-risk' collaborative activities are normally subject to an additional three-yearly process of academic audit, which aims to ensure such activities are properly managed and their quality and standards assured.

42 Based on the evidence available to the team, the PAMR and academic audit processes are clear, well-documented and effective. However, the University has been unable to ensure that timely monitoring or visit reports are received for some collaborative provision and the team encourages the University to review the effectiveness of its mechanisms for ensuring the timely submission of reports.

43 The team noted that the reports of both academic audits conducted in 2023 had required schools to document risks related to collaborative provision in a risk register. One academic audit report had also commented that the University's expectations in relation to risk management for partnership activity were not clearly articulated, though the QESR team received from the University extensive documentation detailing its requirements in relation to risk management and ownership for collaborative provision. The team **recommends** that the University ensures that its requirements in relation to risk management and ownership for collaborative provision are understood by all school staff concerned with the management of collaborative provision.

44 At the time of ELIR 4, the University signalled its intention to transition to fewer, more significant collaborative partnerships. The team heard that the University is continuing to work towards this goal, and that a number of partnerships had been terminated.

Use of external reference points in quality processes

45 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 considered the mapping of the quality processes against the Quality Code, minutes from key institutional committees, and met with staff and students.

46 The QESR team found that the University has an effective approach to the use of external reference points in the management of its quality processes and in the setting and maintaining of academic standards through its implementation of its regulations, policies and procedures. The University's quality framework is aligned to the Quality Code and is reviewed regularly. The University notes, however, that the length and detail of the mapping documents hinder practical use and that it will adopt a more practical view when deciding how to map the revised version of the Quality Code. Although a range of external expertise contributes to the design and development of new programmes, the University's mapping is unclear about the involvement of external expertise in new programme approval.

47 The University integrates the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF), the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) and Subject Benchmark Statements in its procedures and reports from its Global Academic Reviews. Periodic review includes external

membership and the Academic Review Guidance provides advice on nominating local and global external panel members in Dubai and the Malaysian Quality Agency.

48 The University makes appropriate use of external expertise in significant amendments to existing modules and programmes through consultation with external examiners and in programme reapproval and programme review, and in the Professional Services review where externality was cited as a principle.

49 The use and role of external examiners is well documented, and the External Examiner Handbook has recently been updated. The annual overview of external examiner reports is comprehensive although, as noted in paragraph 38, in 2021-22 only 104 out of 118 expected reports were received. Response letters to external examiners are reviewed by a Dean of the University and Academic Quality. Draft responses are then scrutinised by a Dean of the University who determines whether the issues raised by the external examiner have been addressed or whether further action is required.

50 Four schools in the University deliver 38 programmes requiring professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) accreditation, all of which were successfully reviewed in 2021-22. In July 2023, the University Committee for Quality and Standards approved a new policy and procedures for the oversight of PSRB activity, which has provided, for the first time, a clear approach for integrating and reporting on institutional and school processes.

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

51 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. The QESR team considered the University's analysis of retention, progression and degree-outcome data, student complaints, appeals and disciplinary data, as well as meeting with staff.

52 The QESR team found that the University uses a suite of dashboards and data has consolidated and enhanced data provision through a central Dashboard Hub which ensures global access to appropriate data for all academic teaching staff, including engagement data, academic performance and course feedback. However, the QESR team considered that the institution has not yet fully addressed the ELIR 4 recommendation on the systematic access to and use of data as noted in paragraph 17. Enhancements have been made including the use of learning analytics in the VLE and new data dashboards, as well as investing in Student Success and Business Intelligence roles to help identify and support at-risk students, but the University does not yet have an integrated, single 'tracking system' with which to engage and support these students. Staff the team met noted that there is a prioritisation on learning and teaching-related data to represent the whole student journey and to enable school-level dashboards to support this.

53 Currently, retention data is considered annually by the University Committee for Learning and Teaching, with schools having access for programme and course review activities. The institutional retention figure has been increasing but saw a drop after the pandemic; however, both pre and post-pandemic figures are still below the University's key performance indicator target. The QESR team noted that retention data focuses on undergraduate students and is available for all years of study but that there are plans to expand this to postgraduate taught (PGT) students in the near future. Postgraduate research (PGR) students follow a very different pattern, with fewer data-driven outcomes for their study duration. This will be picked up by the Graduate School in due course.

54 The QESR team noted the increase in the number of complaints received by the University but considered the approach to managing complaints to be well-organised and monitored, with the institution learning from previous complaints. Similarly, while there is evidence of an increase in academic misconduct cases (2021-22 session: 2,545 cases), and the rate is still higher than pre-pandemic levels (2019-20 session: 215 cases), the team saw data that indicated the University's strategies to address this had achieved significant success (2022-23 session: 952 cases). The QESR team noted the high levels of academic misconduct cases from the School of Social Sciences, including the Edinburgh Business School, which are of concern although the University is taking action to reduce them.

55 The documentation also noted the importance of data to inform processes such as academic reviews, with schools raising difficulties with the lack of central provision of data to make this possible. The QESR team considers that the University has an awareness of issues arising in the data, and schools recognise the importance of accessing relevant data to rectify this, but that there has been a lack of connection between university and school-level, as well as Professional Services, to make this happen. The University has now taken action to provide data dashboards to help support academic staff in all aspects of their role. In addition, the Academic Quality team and Learning and Teaching Academy have been engaged to ensure that staff are directed towards the data provision to support key processes including academic reviews.

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