



**Analysis of findings from Quality Enhancement and Standards Reviews  
(QESRs) conducted during sessions 2022-23 and 2023-24**

**Scottish Higher Education Institutions**

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## About this report

- 1 This report provides an analysis of outcomes from Quality Enhancement and Standards Reviews (QESRs) of Scotland's higher education institutions carried out during sessions 2022-23 and 2023-24.
- 2 A new enhancement-led institutional quality review method for Scottish tertiary education institutions, Tertiary Quality Enhancement Review (TQER), will be delivered from session 2024-25. This development constitutes Phase 2 of a revised approach to quality review in Scotland. Phase 1, comprising Quality Enhancement and Standards Review (QESR) and Institutional Liaison Meetings (ILM), took place in 2022-23 and 2023-24 and involved only higher education institutions. Eighteen QESRs were carried out in total (seven in session 2022-23 and eleven in session 2023-24) and this programme of review is now concluded. A list of the institutions reviewed can be found at Annex 1.
- 3 QESR was an enhancement-led, evidence-based method of peer review. Each review team consisted of staff and students drawn from other higher education institutions (HEIs) across Scotland and the UK. Based on the evidence and information available to the review team, QESR considered how well an institution continued to maintain an effective and enhancement-led approach towards the management of academic quality and standards and the quality of the student experience. The QESR team reviewed the documentation submitted and met with staff and students at the institution in a one-day review visit, which normally took place virtually. After visiting the institution, the QESR team wrote a report, the findings of which will be used to provide context for the institution's TQER.
- 4 This report provides a summary of the findings of QESRs, including a thematic analysis of all good practice and recommendations identified and more detail on findings relating to the tertiary enhancement topic *The future of learning and teaching: defining and delivering an effective and inclusive digital and blended offering*.
- 5 An interim report was published in December 2023 based on the seven reviews concluded in session 2022-23. Rather than updating the interim report, we have looked at all QESR reports in totality as an 'end-of cycle' activity. This has ensured consistent analysis across the 18 reports as well as accurate thematic groupings of good practice and recommendations.
- 6 This analysis is undertaken by the QAA. It is submitted to the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) to support the duty for quality assurance of provision delivered by HEIs in Scotland under the Higher and Further Education (Scotland) Act, 2005. The analysis is also considered by the sector Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC) and The Quality Forum (TQF). It informs sector-led development and enhancement activity, allowing examples of practice to be picked up and shared in greater detail as part of sector enhancement activity or by individual institutions.

## Summary of QESR findings

### Overview

7 Across the 18 reviews conducted, there were 45 examples of good practice and 37 recommendations for action. In both cases, these appear to be distributed across a wide range of topics. The table below shows this distribution. Each example of good practice or recommendation is represented once in this table, with substantive topics listed in order of their overall prevalence (the total count of instances across good practice and recommendations).

Topic	All	Good practice		Recs. for action	
	Count	Count	HEIs	Count	HEIs
Delivering an effective and inclusive digital and blended offering	9	6	6	3	3
Student engagement and partnership	8	8	8	0	0
Development and implementation of strategy	7	6	6	1	1
Skills development for students	7	1	1	6	5
Student support	7	6	6	1	1
Use of data and evidence	7	4	4	3	2
Student voice	4	0	0	4	4
Assessment and feedback	3	0	0	3	3
External examiners	3	0	0	3	3
Institutional approaches to enhancement	3	3	3	0	0
PGR student experience	3	1	1	2	2
Professional services review	3	0	0	3	3
Annual programme monitoring	2	2	2	0	0
Collaborative provision	2	0	0	2	2
Curriculum review and management	2	1	1	1	1
Implementation and pace of change	2	0	0	2	2
Institution-led review	2	1	1	1	1
Personal tutoring	2	0	0	2	2
Development of learning and teaching	1	1	1	0	0

Development of quality processes	1	1	1	0	0
Engagement with the Enhancement Themes	1	1	1	0	0
Global strategy	1	1	1	0	0
Improving retention	1	1	1	0	0
Widening participation	1	1	1	0	0
Totals	82	45		37	

8 The topic that is represented the most strongly across good practice and recommendations is **delivering an effective and inclusive digital and blended offering**. While it is clear that there is a great deal of activity across the sector in relation to this topic (see paragraphs 43 - 51,) it should be noted that this was also a sector-wide enhancement topic that ran concurrently with the QESR period and which was explicitly referenced in the review method. Each institution was asked to submit relevant documentation that outlined enhancement activity or the institution's strategic approach relating to this topic.

9 The findings suggest that **student engagement and partnership** is a strength of the Scottish higher education sector, as are the **development and implementation of strategy** and the **provision of student support**.

10 **The postgraduate research (PGR) student experience** arose as a common area for development during both the third<sup>1</sup> and fourth<sup>2</sup> cycles of ELIR. While only two institutions received QESR recommendations relating to this topic in a general sense, aspects of the PGR student experience are highlighted elsewhere: for example, the provision of training for PGR students who teach was the predominant theme under the topic **skills development for students**, and one institution received a recommendation about parity of support for PGR students. It would appear that there is still room for development in relation to this topic.

### Good practice

11 Eight examples of good practice were identified relating to student engagement and partnership. These included: embedded student partnership approaches;<sup>1</sup> the establishment of strategic staff-student alliances to complement student partnership agreements;<sup>2</sup> the provision of a range of opportunities for engagement, including student forums;<sup>3</sup> projects specifically designed to improve student representation;<sup>4</sup> co-created resources such as staff-student charters;<sup>5</sup> and the introduction and development of specific roles such as Student Quality Panel Members<sup>6</sup> and Student Consultants.<sup>7</sup>

12 Six examples of good practice were identified relating to delivering an effective and inclusive digital and blended offering. These included: strategic commitment to high quality digital education;<sup>8</sup> providing resources and activities to support students and staff in order to ensure accessibility and inclusivity;<sup>9</sup> a network of Digital Champions;<sup>10</sup> and tackling the challenges posed by generative AI.<sup>11</sup>

13 Six examples of good practice were identified relating to the development and implementation of strategy. These included: placing student engagement at the centre of strategy development and implementation;<sup>12</sup> the engagement of staff, their understanding and sense of ownership of strategy;<sup>13</sup> alignment between strategic planning and the priorities of schools and

<sup>1</sup> See [www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaas/reviewing-he-in-scotland/elir-postgraduate-student-experience.pdf](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaas/reviewing-he-in-scotland/elir-postgraduate-student-experience.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> See [www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaas/reviewing-he-in-scotland/elir-4-the-postgraduate-student-experience.pdf](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaas/reviewing-he-in-scotland/elir-4-the-postgraduate-student-experience.pdf)

professional services;<sup>14</sup> integration of, and collaboration across, workstreams to enable delivery;<sup>15</sup> and effective monitoring and evaluation.<sup>16</sup>

14 Six examples of good practice were identified relating to student support. These included: supporting belonging;<sup>17</sup> support for mental health and wellbeing;<sup>18</sup> using microcredentials to support transitions;<sup>19</sup> providing equitable support across a federated institution;<sup>20</sup> and the establishment of a one-stop shop.<sup>21</sup>

15 Four examples of good practice were identified relating to the use of data and evidence. These included: investment to develop skills, capacity and infrastructure;<sup>22</sup> an attendance and engagement app which enables early intervention to support students;<sup>23</sup> use of student journey data to inform enhancement of the student experience;<sup>24</sup> and collaborative approaches to developing the use of data.<sup>25</sup>

16 Three examples of good practice were identified relating to institutional approaches to enhancement. These included: the coordination and alignment of key institutional strategies;<sup>26</sup> and the effective translation of institutional strategy into local action;<sup>27</sup> and the use of a Learning and Teaching Panel to support institutional enhancement.<sup>28</sup>

17 Two examples of good practice were identified relating to annual programme monitoring. These involved a strong data-informed and explicit enhancement-focused approach<sup>29</sup> and the role of annual dialogue meetings.<sup>30</sup>

18 Single examples of good practice were identified relating to: curriculum review and management;<sup>31</sup> development of learning and teaching;<sup>32</sup> development of quality processes;<sup>33</sup> engagement with the Enhancement Themes;<sup>34</sup> global strategy;<sup>35</sup> a data-driven approach to improving retention;<sup>36</sup> a robust, enhancement-focused approach to institution-led review;<sup>37</sup> the PGR student experience (with specific reference to the learning environment and support for supervisors);<sup>38</sup> skills development for students (with specific reference to professional learning and employability);<sup>39</sup> and a strategic approach to widening participation.<sup>40</sup>

## **Recommendations for action**

19 Six recommendations were made relating to skills development for students. In most cases, these recommendations related to PGR students who teach<sup>41</sup> (this recommendation could therefore also be considered in relation to paragraph 26). A common theme is that existing policies and frameworks need to be implemented consistently and that PGR students should complete training before embarking on teaching. Other issues include limited opportunities for PGR students who wish to teach and lack of clarity around responsibility for this area of activity.<sup>42</sup> At one institution the recommendation around training for those who teach extended to staff.<sup>43</sup> A further recommendation concerned training for student representatives.<sup>44</sup>

20 Four recommendations were made relating to student voice. These related to staff-student committees (monitoring for consistency and effectiveness;<sup>45</sup> developing an approach to consistent dissemination of information to close the feedback loop<sup>46</sup>) and reviewing approaches to surveys and questionnaires to strengthen engagement.<sup>47</sup>

21 Three recommendations were made relating to digital provision and technology-enhanced learning. All three recommendations centred on ensuring consistency of practice and/or parity of experience.<sup>48</sup> One recommendation concerned the parity of student support and opportunities for blended learning and PGR students (this recommendation could therefore also be considered in relation to paragraph 26).<sup>49</sup> A further recommendation concerned hybrid learning and cautioned against reliance on individual staff approaches, particularly in respect of lecture recording.<sup>50</sup>

22 Three recommendations were made relating to the use of data and evidence. These included: recording data on staff promotion to monitor progress towards parity between teaching

and research;<sup>51</sup> attainment gap monitoring;<sup>52</sup> and staff development to support the use of data in quality processes.<sup>53</sup>

23 Three recommendations were made relating to assessment and feedback. One institution was asked to draw upon existing good practice at programme level to develop an institutional approach,<sup>54</sup> while another was asked to ensure that a set of principles and priorities developed in response to ELIR 4 were fully implemented in schools.<sup>55</sup> A further recommendation concerned the use of curriculum review to ensure greater consistency in the design and delivery of assessment.<sup>56</sup> Consistency is a common theme.

24 Three recommendations were made relating to external examiners. In all cases these related to ensuring that students were made aware of, and had access to, external examiner reports for their programmes of study.<sup>57</sup>

25 Three recommendations were made relating to professional services review. It is worth noting that this also arose as a common area for development during the fourth cycle of ELIR.<sup>3</sup> All three recommendations called for institutions to develop systemic approaches.<sup>58</sup> Two additionally emphasised the importance of engaging staff and students,<sup>59</sup> while the other recommended the production of a timetable of reviews.<sup>60</sup>

26 As suggested at paragraphs 19 and 21, the PGR student experience remains an area for development in some institutions. Two recommendations were made relating to the PGR student experience. These included the development of an institutional approach to reviewing PGR programmes<sup>61</sup> and addressing known issues such as lack of suitable study spaces and inconsistent experiences related to supervisory teams.<sup>62</sup>

27 Two recommendations were made relating to collaborative provision. These involved improvements to risk management<sup>63</sup> and strengthening reporting at senior institutional level.<sup>64</sup>

28 Two recommendations were made relating to implementation and pace of change. These involved the acceleration of actions in response to the recommendations from the previous ELIR<sup>65</sup> and developing an effective approach to the strategic management of change.<sup>66</sup>

29 Two recommendations were made relating to personal tutoring, both calling for greater consistency of practice and the communication of expectations to students.<sup>67</sup>

30 Single recommendations were made relating to: development and implementation of strategy;<sup>68</sup> student support, with regard to clarity about a particular student officer role;<sup>69</sup> curriculum review and management, with regard to the provision of clear and accurate information about the curriculum review process;<sup>70</sup> and a need for thematic analysis of institution-led review.<sup>71</sup>

## Findings relating to the tertiary enhancement topic

31 All 18 institutions reviewed were found to have effective arrangements in place to monitor and review its approach to defining and delivering an effective and inclusive digital/blended offering.

32 As noted in the table and commentary above, areas of good practice were identified at six institutions in relation to this topic, while three institutions received recommendations. This section provides a little more detail about these findings before presenting a more general picture of QESR findings.

33 Available QESR reports were one of the key sources of evidence used in a sector-wide

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<sup>3</sup> See [www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaas/reviewing-he-in-scotland/elir-4-professional-services-review.pdf](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaas/reviewing-he-in-scotland/elir-4-professional-services-review.pdf)

research project on this topic conducted by QAA in partnership with College Development Network (CDN), Education Scotland, sparqs (Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland) and SFC. This research resulted in a report that can be found on SFC's website.<sup>4</sup>

## **Good practice**

34 At Abertay University, the QESR team identified good practice in the form of accessible virtual learning environments (VLEs) and the development of digital skills for both students and staff.

35 Glasgow Caledonian University was found to be 'working rapidly and proactively' to address the challenges posed by the introduction of generative AI. This included the provision of guidance to staff and a (at the time of its QESR) planned holistic approach to digital assessment that would consider the use of generative AI for education and employability as well as its misuse. The institution's approach was praised for its framing of the use of AI as a positive skill, its emphasis on partnership and industry expertise, its positive communications strategy, and accompanying training provision.

36 Good practice identified at the University of Aberdeen centred on its progress towards a vision for blended education, supported by a set of principles and a comprehensive suite of support materials and resources for both students and staff.

37 The use of Digital Champions to embed and enhance high quality digital provision was found to be an example of good practice at the University of Dundee. This represents the retention of a positive change made in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Digital Champions play a key cross-institutional role in advising and guiding enhancements and sharing best practice within and across academic schools and professional services, including support for embedding online learning and peer review of online and blended learning.

38 The University of St Andrews was praised for the commitment in the University Strategy 2022-27 to student-centred, high-quality, research-led digital education that promotes global online learning and emphasises diversity. The Strategy is enabling the University to challenge its traditional approach to teaching and to embrace innovation in technology and pedagogy. This has been supported by substantial investment towards supporting leadership and collaboration.

39 The University of Strathclyde, having been commended on its approach to digital education during the fourth ELIR cycle, was found to have continued to develop and strengthen an effective digital education capacity through a collaborative, deliberate and strategic approach.

## **Recommendations**

40 Scotland's Rural College received a recommendation address issues concerning access to, and communication about, support and opportunities available to both distance-learning and PGR students, representing an intersection between this topic and the theme of the PGR student experience. This recommendation arose from a perceived lack of practical experiences and IT skills assessments for some distance-learning students. Information about career support and professional development opportunities was common to distance-learning and PGR students, illustrating the importance of ensuring that professional and student support services are included in consideration of the quality of digital provision.

41 Consistency of experience was also at the core of the recommendation made to the University of Glasgow, with students reporting variable provision between courses and departments. Students understood that differences in provision were related in some cases to the decentralised nature of departments, but nonetheless had concerns about potential disadvantage. Practice differed across the institution in, for example, lecture recording. Connectivity was also sometimes

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<sup>4</sup> [www.sfc.ac.uk/assurance-accountability/learning-quality/the-future-of-learning-and-teaching](http://www.sfc.ac.uk/assurance-accountability/learning-quality/the-future-of-learning-and-teaching)



inconsistent. It was recommended that the institution review its approach to online and blended delivery to ensure greater equivalence across all provision.

42 Consistency was similarly the basis of the recommendation to the University of Stirling, with the degree of hybridity varying across modules due to differing staff approaches. Digital content was spoken of positively, but there was variability in lecture recording practice.

### **Broader findings**

43 Digital provision is an expected part of the student (and educator) experience, and it may be argued that all learning is now 'blended' to some extent (that is, delivered partially in an in-person context and partially in an online context). QESR findings illustrate that all higher education institutions in Scotland are actively exploring ways to get the blend right. This includes reflection on actions taken during the lockdowns resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant learning about what high quality blended learning looks like.

44 A majority of institutions are committed explicitly to delivering high quality digital provision / blended learning. This is evidenced by high-level strategies supported by frameworks and principles that are communicated throughout the institution. Short- and medium- term projects to advance understanding and change are also common across the sector.

45 Students have a vital role in shaping institutional strategy and policy in this area as well as supporting the development of practical solutions. Student partnership is mentioned explicitly in several QESR reports, along with the introduction of online mechanisms for capturing and responding to student voice.

46 Institutions recognise that online learning is not the preferred mode for all students, and that in-person provision can be more effective for certain kinds of learning as well as building community and a sense of belonging. Institutions are exploring how and when to prioritise in-person learning.

47 Institutions recognise that while blended learning has the potential to enhance accessibility and inclusivity, this will not happen without careful consideration. Lecture recording, which can remove barriers to learning, has been mainstreamed in many institutions, though (as noted in the recommendations above) practice can be inconsistent. Relatedly, institutions consider to address digital inequality through, for example, laptop loan schemes and the use of open source learning materials.

48 There has been substantial investment across the sector in, for example, hybrid-equipped teaching spaces and sophisticated virtual learning environments (VLEs). The integration of learning analytics solutions with VLEs in several institutions is a reminder of the important intersection between this topic and the use of data to enhance the student experience.

49 Efforts are being made to ensure consistency across programmes and modules. Practical solutions include threshold benchmarks or common templates for modules, as well as common module questionnaires, on VLEs.

50 During the course of the QESRs, generative AI emerged as a major area of concern for staff and students across the sector. This is reflected in later reports, and it is fair to expect that it will become a common theme as we transition to TQER. Academic integrity is one dimension of the impact of generative AI, but (as demonstrated at paragraph 35) some institutions are considering this as part of a more holistic and positive approach. Conversely, generative AI is not the only aspect of digital provision where academic integrity needs careful consideration, and this is also evident in the QESR reports.

51 Finally, in relation to all the above, institutions continue to take steps to develop the digital skills of staff and students, drawing on the expertise of Jisc and learning technologists. For staff,

digital provision is increasingly being included explicitly in curricula for PGCerts and Certificates of Academic Practice, while MOOCs and microcredentials are in use for staff and students. The sharing of practice at institutional learning and teaching events is being encouraged.

## Annex 1: Institutions included in this report

- Abertay University
- Edinburgh Napier University
- Glasgow Caledonian University
- Glasgow School of Art
- Heriot-Watt University
- Queen Margaret University
- Robert Gordon University
- Royal Conservatoire of Scotland
- Scotland's Rural College
- University of Aberdeen
- University of Dundee
- University of Edinburgh
- University of Glasgow
- University of St Andrews
- University of Stirling
- University of Strathclyde
- University of the Highlands and Islands
- University of the West of Scotland

## Endnotes (references to institutions)

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- <sup>1</sup> Queen Margaret University, University of Aberdeen
- <sup>2</sup> University of Strathclyde
- <sup>3</sup> Royal Conservatoire of Scotland
- <sup>4</sup> University of St Andrews
- <sup>5</sup> Robert Gordon University
- <sup>6</sup> Edinburgh Napier University
- <sup>7</sup> Glasgow School of Art
- <sup>8</sup> University of St Andrews, University of Strathclyde
- <sup>9</sup> Abertay University, University of Aberdeen
- <sup>10</sup> University of Dundee
- <sup>11</sup> Glasgow Caledonian University
- <sup>12</sup> Queen Margaret University, University of the West of Scotland
- <sup>13</sup> University of Aberdeen, University of St Andrews
- <sup>14</sup> University of Dundee
- <sup>15</sup> University of Glasgow
- <sup>16</sup> University of Aberdeen, University of St Andrews
- <sup>17</sup> University of Stirling
- <sup>18</sup> Edinburgh Napier University, Glasgow Caledonian University
- <sup>19</sup> Abertay University
- <sup>20</sup> University of the Highlands and Islands
- <sup>21</sup> University of the West of Scotland
- <sup>22</sup> Abertay University
- <sup>23</sup> Robert Gordon University
- <sup>24</sup> University of Dundee
- <sup>25</sup> University of Stirling
- <sup>26</sup> Glasgow School of Art
- <sup>27</sup> Glasgow School of Art, University of Strathclyde
- <sup>28</sup> Queen Margaret University
- <sup>29</sup> Queen Margaret University
- <sup>30</sup> Scotland's Rural College
- <sup>31</sup> Edinburgh Napier University
- <sup>32</sup> University of Edinburgh
- <sup>33</sup> Glasgow School of Art
- <sup>34</sup> University of Aberdeen
- <sup>35</sup> Heriot-Watt University
- <sup>36</sup> Abertay University
- <sup>37</sup> Heriot-Watt University
- <sup>38</sup> University of Stirling
- <sup>39</sup> Queen Margaret University
- <sup>40</sup> University of the West of Scotland
- <sup>41</sup> Scotland's Rural College, University of Edinburgh, University of Strathclyde, University of the Highlands and Islands, University of the West of Scotland
- <sup>42</sup> University of the Highlands and Islands
- <sup>43</sup> University of the West of Scotland
- <sup>44</sup> University of the West of Scotland
- <sup>45</sup> Glasgow School of Art
- <sup>46</sup> University of Stirling
- <sup>47</sup> Queen Margaret University, University of St Andrews
- <sup>48</sup> Scotland's Rural College, University of Glasgow, University of Stirling
- <sup>49</sup> Scotland's Rural College

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- 50 University of Stirling
  - 51 University of Edinburgh
  - 52 University of Edinburgh
  - 53 University of the West of Scotland
  - 54 Queen Margaret University
  - 55 University of Edinburgh
  - 56 Royal Conservatoire of Scotland
  - 57 Heriot-Watt University, University of Aberdeen, University of Stirling
  - 58 Queen Margaret University, University of Dundee, University of Strathclyde
  - 59 Queen Margaret University, University of Dundee
  - 60 University of Strathclyde
  - 61 Edinburgh Napier University
  - 62 Glasgow Caledonian University
  - 63 Heriot-Watt University
  - 64 University of Stirling
  - 65 University of Edinburgh
  - 66 University of the West of Scotland
  - 67 Robert Gordon University, University of Aberdeen
  - 68 University of Edinburgh
  - 69 University of Glasgow
  - 70 Royal Conservatoire of Scotland
  - 71 Abertay University