University of Glasgow

Academic Standards Committee – Thursday 9 April 2009

Indicators of Enhancement: A Contribution to the Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework

Section 1: Introduction and purpose

1 This publication on indicators of enhancement is a contribution to the overall environment which supports the enhancement of higher education in Scotland. It sets out a framework which comprises the indicators of enhancement and an accompanying set of questions. This combination of the questions and the indicators themselves is designed to facilitate the use of the indicators as a catalyst for discussion at a variety of different levels: by individual practitioners; by the course or module team; by institutional, faculty or school committees; and at the level of the sector as a whole.

2 The primary purpose of the indicators is to act as a vehicle for evaluating progress in the enhancement of the student learning experience. The act of evaluation is characterised as a series of informed discussions between internal colleagues and, where appropriate, with external peers which contribute to an understanding of both the current position and future aspirations in relation to the student learning experience, and the nature of the journey from one to the other.

3 The indicators are deliberately brief and few in number. They have been designed to recognise the diversity of institutions in Scotland and the very different populations of students which they serve, both national and international, full-time and part-time, home-based and at a distance. The indicators are also designed to be applicable in relatively formal contexts within quality enhancement structures, but also to be useful in informal settings as an aid to individual and group reflection. They are intended for all staff who contribute to the learning experience of students, including importantly, professional and support staff.

4 The location of these indicators within the overall Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework is seen as crucial to their use and relevance. For this reason, they employ the definition of enhancement which is current within the ELIR process, that is, "*taking deliberate steps to bring about improvement in the effectiveness of the learning experiences of students"*. The questions which accompany the indicators, and which are designed to 'activate' the indicators in the context of discussions, are also taken from ELIR. The intention has not been to create any artificial links between ELIR and the indicators, nor to suggest that they should assume some enshrined role in that process. More simply, it is a contribution to a cohesive approach to the elements of the Quality Enhancement Framework, and an acknowledgement that ELIR represents the most significant formal manifestation of peer discussion and review of quality enhancement in the sector. Both QAA Scotland and SFC have confirmed that, while the indicators should provide a potentially valuable reference points within ELIR discussions, they will certainly not be used by QAA or SFC as any kind of checklist or reporting framework.

5 The indicators are not quantitative. They have been phrased and presented to avoid any sense of compliance with a checklist. They have also been developed in a context which recognises that supporting and enhancing learning in the twenty-first century is a difficult and challenging process. They recognise that the very nature of enhancing the student learning experience is extremely complex and unlikely to be able to be reflected in simplistic statistics or metrics which would be meaningful across a very diverse sector and student population. However, the areas which they cover might all respond to quantitative indicators should institutions (as some currently do) wish to develop key measures which are particularly appropriate to their own context, mission, and strategic aims and objectives.

6 As noted above, the work of designing the indicators has been informed by the need to locate them in the specific context of the Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework. Equally, there has been a wish to be aware of other related initiatives which create the more general span of quality enhancement activities in Scotland. To give some indication of this background, and the ways in which the indicators have been derived from it, Section 3 of this paper addresses and discusses the influence of that general context.

7 Fundamentally, the indicators are intended to support the quality culture within each of the higher education institutions in Scotland, and across the Scottish higher education sector. They endorse the view that quality is not a management function but a professional – and often personal – responsibility.

Section 2: Indicators of enhancement

The indicators are not been listed in any particular order of importance or priority.

Using the following framework of questions:

- *where are we now?*
- *where do we want to be in the future?*
- *how are we going to get there?*
- *how will we know when we get there?*

what progress can be demonstrated in the enhancement of the student learning experience in respect of:

1 Alignment of activities
Promoting a learner-centred and cohesive approach which is aligned with policy and practice and is informed by a systematic understanding of learner expectations, needs and aspirations.

2 Student engagement in learning
Being active in supporting students to become purposeful partners in their learning and providing them with appropriate opportunities for effective engagement.

3 Student engagement in processes
Ensuring that all policy, strategy and practice relating to the student learning experience is informed by a continuous engagement and dialogue - both formal and informal - with students.

4 Quality cultures
Enabling a reflective quality culture to be supported and developed through a framework of staff and student support structures, and by the promotion of approaches to learning and teaching which are aligned with a shared vision of student-centred learning.

5 Reference points
Maintaining and developing structures which create the opportunity for reflection on experience by drawing on appropriate ranges of evidence including national and international benchmarks.

6 Structures for managing quality
Establishing and developing systems and structures for the management of quality which promote and sustain shared values, beliefs and aims and support an effective internal quality culture.

7 Quality processes
Operating processes related to quality which are both designed to enhance the academic standards of students' awards and to contribute significantly to the enhancement of the student experience.

8 Enhancement themes
Establishing a creative, reflective and productive relationship with the QEF Enhancement Themes based on an engagement which is the most appropriate for an institution and for each level within an institution.

9 Staff development and reward

Providing continuing development opportunities for all staff that contribute to the student learning experience which is informed by and aligned with a culture of enhancement and with the identified needs and aspirations of students; and providing institutional recognition for staff achievements in this context.

10 Graduate attributes and lifelong learning

Ensuring that the learning experience enables learners to develop appropriate graduate attributes, skills and the capacity for active lifelong learning.

Section 3: Context and background

1 The Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF), a radical approach to quality assurance and enhancement, was introduced in 2003. The external evaluation of the QEF[1] undertaken in 2007 noted *inter alia* that the Framework was:

> 'based on the pooling of expertise and knowledge of literatures on teaching, learning, change and quality from a wide range of sources, all shot through with a commitment to enhancing students' experiences as learners'

and that the Framework represented a commitment to:

> 'a culture shift – away from top-down compliance-inducing processes to participative and critical supported self-evaluation; away from audit and towards improvement; away from ruffling the surface of higher education practices and towards permeating the system with practices compatible with the QEF; away from mechanistic models based solely on inputs and outcomes and towards more sensitive other forms of evidence of cultural change, while maintaining rigour and challenge'.

2 The concepts that these two observations represent have offered a powerful focus for the development of the indicators of enhancement.

3 The indicators nest within the QEF and share the same terminology and concepts that are, for example, being promoted through the revised ELIR philosophy, process and methodology. Thus, enhancement is defined as:

> '*taking deliberate steps to bring about continuous improvement in the effectiveness of the learning experience of students'.*
>
> In order to take deliberate steps, an institution (and its constituent departments, faculties, schools, etc) will ask itself:
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> *Where are we now?* For example: Who are our students? What are the characteristics and learning needs of our students? How effective is the current learning experience of our students? Are some groups of students more successful learners than others? Are some groups of students better prepared for post-graduation life than others? What evidence can we draw on? How robust is the evidence? What is the evidence telling us?
>
> *Where do we want to be in the future?* For example: What are the patterns and mechanisms of supporting learning which the institution wishes to develop in order to support student engagement and high quality learning?
>
> *How are we going to get there?* For example: How are we as an institution going strategically to manage the processes of

[1] *Enhancing the quality of teaching and learning in Scottish Universities 2007. Final report of the external evaluation quoted in SFC circular SFC/11/2007 'Evaluation of the higher education quality enhancement framework: final report'.*

enhancement that will allow us to move towards meeting our aspirations?

How will we know when we get there? For example: What monitoring and evaluation processes do we have in place? How will the outcomes be analysed? How, and to whom, will the outcomes be disseminated?'

3 These are the same fundamental questions that modules, programmes, and units ask themselves in the various processes of institution-led reviews. They are also the same questions that are addressed in the external Enhancement-Led Institutional Reviews (ELIR) and it is intended that the indicators will be useful in these various contexts.

4 Similarly, the role of the Enhancement Themes is to support the sector generally in undertaking collective enhancement explorations and activities in defined areas. The outcomes from applying the indicators should provide guidance on the continuing direction and operation of the Themes. The same is also true in relation to the wide range of quality enhancement support activities aimed at individual staff, discipline communities and institutions provided through the Higher Education Academy.

5 Fundamental to the creation of the indicators has been the concept of student-centred learning which is a central strand of the whole QEF. This has been taken forward in two senses. Firstly, in relation to student involvement in quality processes and the provision of, and response to, student feedback. Secondly, student-centred in the fundamental aspect of being partners in their own learning. As elsewhere in the QEF, the indicators view students neither as consumers nor as passive recipients, but rather as active partners directly involved in the creation of their own learning.

6 A further explicit element of the QEF which provides an important context for the indicators of enhancement is the definition of a high quality sector developed by SHEEC for the sector in Scotland. This defines a high quality sector as:

- 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 personal and intellectual development and 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.

7 Fundamental to the QEF is the creation of quality cultures at all levels within institutions, and in the sector as a whole. In this context, indicators of enhancement must be able to be used and contextualised in a wide range of diverse circumstances. The indicators need to be a useful tool that can inform decision making and action for the individual practitioner as well as for institutions, and for the sector as a whole. It is recognised that enhancement processes do not lend themselves to simple use of metrics and numerical

indicators to evaluate progress. Sustainable and effective enhancement requires effective synergy and the weaving together of a complex mix of management structures, quality systems and cultures, and the work and contribution of the individual.

8 The indicators in this paper recognise these key points and are designed to be of value when they are taken and contextualised by each institution, faculty, department, programme, professional or support service, or individual member of staff for intelligent and informed application in that particular context. The indicators can be used within formal systems and structures for the management of quality and, equally, within more informal contexts as a tool to support discussions about the continuing enhancement of the student learning experience.

Characteristics of Quality Cultures

9 The European Universities Association (EUA) has undertaken a programme of work in relation to the support of quality cultures which has been useful in informing the generation of these indicators of enhancement. The EUA define quality culture in the following terms:

> *'Quality culture refers to an organizational culture that intends to enhance quality permanently and is characterised by two distinct elements: on the one hand, a cultural/psychological element of shared values, beliefs, expectations and commitment towards quality and, on the other hand, a structural/managerial element with defined processes that enhance quality and aim at coordinating individual efforts.'* (Sursock, A, 2006)

10 The indicators of enhancement have been designed to relate to the key characteristics of quality cultures as defined by the EUA set in the context defined by the Scottish QEF. The key characteristics identified are: creative synergy and alignment; openness to ideas and change; leadership and quality cultures; student focus; and, human resource development (staff and student).

Creative synergy and alignment

11 As indicated above, a sustained capacity for enhancement involves formal systems and structures that are concerned with, and congruent with, external environments. These systems and structures need to sustain a supportive internal environment. By this is meant a shared culture and set of beliefs and attitudes in which faculties and departments, individual teams and individual staff members regularly reflect self-critically on their activities and achievements and act imaginatively to make improvements. The creation of sufficient and appropriate space for these reflections and conversations to occur and for actions to be promulgated, followed through and evaluated is identified as a key prerequisite for enhancement. How this is done will vary widely in different settings. However it is done, those structures and systems need to engage with the whole community (including students and all relevant staff) and support diversity and 'grass-root' innovation aligned with an overall common purpose and aim.

Openness to ideas and change

12 Successful self-critical reflection and informed subsequent action requires openness. The process of reflection needs to be open in a variety of ways: to

new ideas; to learning from others; to a willingness and ability to engage in free and open discussion; to a concern to hear external insights and evidence, including those from other countries. Above all, it requires openness to change and innovation.

13 The QEF embraces opportunities for learning from a wide range of national and international practice. In addition there are many national, European and wider international networks which provide useful reference points and a rich source of reference for new and developing ideas and practice in enhancing the student learning experience.

Leadership and quality cultures

14 The EUA definition of a quality culture stresses the role of ownership of quality rather than compliance with rules and regulations. This embodies key messages for the management of quality which is required to create a context within which quality enhancement is owned throughout the institution: quality is never 'someone else's job' and staff and students recognise their shared responsibility for excellence. How this is achieved will vary significantly in different contexts, but will almost inevitably involve a creative blend of bottom-up and top-down approaches.

Student focus

15 The centrality of the student focus in the QEF clearly has significant implications for the interpretation of quality cultures. Implicit in the approach to enhancement is that the culture and systems focus on the student learning experience in its entirety: from pre-entrance to leaving higher education into employment or further learning. In this context, it is important that all staff are conscious of their impact on students' experience and strive to provide a high quality professional service. It is self evident that, at the level of the individual, students themselves take responsibility for their own learning and in doing so are given appropriate advice, guidance and support which allows them to make informed choices before, during and after undertaking their course**.**

16 In general, the importance of the student learning experience being considered in the whole is frequently emphasised, and that there should be an alignment of policies and practices across the many facets of that learning experience. Institutions address the needs of an increasingly diverse range of learners who bring with them different backgrounds, strengths, needs and expectations. Whether they are young school leavers, mature part-time learners, or international students, all learners are encouraged and stimulated to engage actively with their learning and to achieve their full potential, in an environment which celebrates, supports and promotes equality and diversity.

17 The QEF stresses the importance of students as partners in their own learning. In this context, students are central to approaches to quality and quality enhancement and are involved in decision-making about their curricula, teaching and learning, and all aspects of the their experience. Similarly, students feel themselves to be valued individually and collectively and, should they raise concerns about the quality of their experience, can be assured that they will be taken seriously and addressed.

Human resource development (staff and students)

18 Human resource development in an enhancement context should be aligned with and informed by institutional strategies and cultures. It also needs to consider the range of characteristics referred to above: it should be designed

to support all staff to fulfil their responsibilities for openness, sharing, and promoting enhancement. In parallel, with the involvement of student support services and others, students will be supported in engaging effectively with the enhancement of their learning experience.

Sources: to be added