

# Enhancement-led Institutional Review of University of Stirling

Technical Report

April 2021



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## About the Enhancement-led Institutional Review method

The QAA website explains the method for [Enhancement-led Institutional Review \(ELIR\)](#) and has links to the ELIR handbook and other informative documents.<sup>1</sup> You can also find out more about the [Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education \(QAA\)](#).<sup>2</sup>

Further details about ELIR can be found in an accompanying [brief guide](#),<sup>3</sup> including an overview of the review method, information about review teams, and explanations of follow-up action.

## About this review

This is the Technical Report of the ELIR conducted by QAA at the University of Stirling. The review took place as follows: Planning Visit on 3 March 2021 and Review Visit on 19-23 April 2021. The review was conducted by a team of five reviewers:

- Professor Jeremy Bradshaw (Academic Reviewer)
- Emeritus Professor Hilary Grainger (Academic Reviewer)
- Mr Brian Green (Academic Reviewer)
- Ms Alice Foulis (Student Reviewer)
- Mr Paul Probyn (Coordinating Reviewer).

In advance of the review visits, the University submitted a self-evaluative document (the Reflective Analysis) and an advance information set (AIS), comprising a range of materials about the institution's arrangements for managing quality and academic standards.

## The impact of COVID-19

The ELIR was originally scheduled to take place during autumn 2020. This was after the start of the national lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in the ELIR cycle being delayed and a number of ELIRs from spring 2020 being rescheduled to autumn. In discussion with the University of Stirling and the Scottish Funding Council, the University of Stirling ELIR was rescheduled to March and April 2021 as detailed above. QAA made some amendments to the ELIR process to accommodate the ongoing pandemic, most notable of which was that the ELIR was conducted entirely online.

The ELIR was undertaken while the pandemic, and the institution's response to it, was a key part of the context. Although this was part of the context of the review, the team considered the institution's approach to quality and standards from the time of the last ELIR in 2015. It is acknowledged that the review took place at what was a very challenging time, and the ELIR team and QAA Scotland are grateful to staff and students for their engagement in the review.

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<sup>1</sup> About ELIR:

[www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/en/reviewing-higher-education-in-scotland/enhancement-led-institutional-review](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/en/reviewing-higher-education-in-scotland/enhancement-led-institutional-review)

<sup>2</sup> About QAA: [www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland)

<sup>3</sup> Brief Guide to ELIR: [www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/reports/brief-guide-to-elir-method.pdf](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/reports/brief-guide-to-elir-method.pdf)

## About this report

In this report, the ELIR team:

- delivers a threshold judgement on the current and likely future effectiveness of the institution's arrangements for managing academic standards and enhancing the quality of the student learning experience.

The threshold judgement can be found on page 3, followed by the detailed findings of the review given in numbered paragraphs.

Technical Reports set out the ELIR team's view under each of the report headings. Shorter Outcome Reports are provided that set out the main findings of the ELIR for a wider audience. The [Outcome Report](#) for this review is on the QAA website.<sup>4</sup>

ELIR Technical Reports are intended primarily for the institution reviewed, and to provide an information base for the production of thematic reports that identify findings across several institutions.

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<sup>4</sup> Outcome Report: [www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/quality-assurance-reports/University-of-Stirling](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/quality-assurance-reports/University-of-Stirling)

## Threshold judgement about the University of Stirling

The University of Stirling has **effective** arrangements for managing academic standards and the student learning experience.

This is a positive judgement, which means that the University meets sector expectations in securing the academic standards of its awards and enhancing the quality of the student learning experience it provides, currently and into the future. This judgement confirms there can be public confidence in the University's awards and in the quality of the learning experience it provides for its students.

### 1 Contextual information about the institution, student population and the review

#### 1.1 Summary information about the institution

1 The University of Stirling was established by Royal Charter in 1967, admitting its first students in that year. It is accommodated on a distinctive 330-acre campus on the edge of the city of Stirling. The campus includes the 18th century Airthrey Castle, Airthrey Loch, the Grade A listed Pathfoot Building, the Macrobert Arts Centre, and Stirling Court Hotel. Since the last ELIR (2015), the University has developed its campus environment and facilities for teaching and research through a number of major capital projects. In its Reflective Analysis (RA), the University states that it is committed to environmental sustainability in the development of the campus.

2 The campus is also home to a dedicated on-campus study centre housing INTO University of Stirling, a joint venture with INTO University Partnerships which provides international students with pre-sessional English and pathway programmes as academic preparation for progression to a degree programme in the University of Stirling or at another higher education institution (HEI) (paragraphs 59 and 60). In 2018, the University of Stirling's Ras Al Khaimah (RAK) campus opened in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), in partnership with Planet CORE International Education.

3 The University is designated Scotland's 'University for Sporting Excellence' and encourages all members of the University community to 'engage with fitness and wellbeing as a part of their daily life'. Facilities to support sport and exercise include an 'iconic' new sports complex, which opened in November 2020. The University's International Sports Scholarship Programme offers modern facilities, and financial and coaching support to talented students across a number of sports.

4 The University's vision is to be recognised across the world as 'a university that addresses the needs of society through innovative interdisciplinary research, learning and teaching of the highest quality and by sharing knowledge with the world'. Its values are defined as excellence, openness, and ambition.

5 The University's current Strategic Plan was originally intended to run from 2016 to 2021. Within the Plan there are three overarching institutional ambitions: to be one of the top 25 universities in the UK; to increase annual income by £50 million; and to enhance the research profile by 100%, 'whilst ensuring that internationalisation is at the heart of everything the University does'. In light of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, in September 2020, the University Court agreed to extend the current Plan by two years to 2023.

6 The University is led by the Principal and Vice-Chancellor, supported by the Senior Management Team (SMT) which comprises the University Secretary, Deputy Principals, Executive Directors, Faculty Deans and Institutional Deans. Within the SMT there is what the University describes as a 'distinct strategic forum' called the University Strategy and Policy Group (USPG), which advises on key areas of strategy and policy. The University also appoints institutional deans who provide 'focused academic and/or institution-wide leadership of particular areas of strategic priority'. At the time of this ELIR, there were five Institutional Deans with the following remits: Equality, Diversity and Inclusion; Research Engagement and Performance; Student Experience; Teaching Quality Enhancement; and the Institute for Advanced Studies (IAS).

7 At the time of this ELIR, the academic structure of the University comprised five faculties: Arts & Humanities; Health Sciences & Sport; Natural Sciences; Social Sciences; and the Stirling Management School. Each faculty is led by a Dean and includes a number of divisions in defined disciplinary areas. Professional services are organised in 10 directorates, each led by an Executive Director.

## 1.2 Composition and key trends in the student population

8 According to 2020-21 figures, the University had a total of approximately 10,900 full-time equivalent (FTE) students based at its Stirling campus. Of these students, 79.3% were undergraduate, 17.4% were postgraduate taught, and 3.2% were postgraduate research. 65% of students were classified as Scottish, with 11% from the rest of the UK (rUK); 12% from the European Union (EU); and 12% stated to be non-EU international. Over 120 nationalities were represented in the student body.

9 There has been a 14.4% increase in overall FTE student numbers since 2016-17. Within this increase, the overall numbers of full-time students from outside the UK have increased considerably, by 52%. Although the ELIR team noted that some cohorts of students from outside the UK fell in 2020-21 which the University believed to have been exacerbated by the impact of the pandemic on its study abroad programmes. The University confirmed that any future growth in student numbers will depend upon increases in unregulated numbers. Within this category, the University has a target of doubling postgraduate research (PGR) student numbers in the next four years, and further increases in the numbers of students studying with partners overseas.

10 The University's RA states that 64% of students identify as female and 36% as male, and at the time of this ELIR the University offered several subject areas that did not currently meet the SFC target that, by 2030, no discipline in a Scottish HEI should have an overall gender imbalance greater than 75:25. The University confirmed that it has a Gender Action Plan in place which includes actions to address the imbalances in the gender profile of identified subject areas (paragraph 39).

11 According to the latest Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data, the percentage of new full-time undergraduates who did not continue their studies into second year was 8.7% in 2019-20, compared with the HESA benchmark of 5% and the Scottish average of 7%. The University's analysis had identified that commuting students, particularly young males from SIMD 20/40 postcodes, were most likely to discontinue their studies.

12 Since the last ELIR in 2015, the proportion of undergraduates awarded First or Upper Second Class degrees declined from 81% in 2015-16 to 74% in 2019-20. According to the most recent Graduate Outcomes Survey, over 95% of the University's undergraduate leavers and 96% of postgraduate leavers in 2017-18 were in employment or further study fifteen months after graduation.

13 The University's approach to managing student numbers is the responsibility of the Joint Policy, Planning and Resources Committee (JPPRC) of the University Court. Details are considered by a student number planning group which meets several times a year, advised by the University Strategy and Policy Group (USPG) (paragraph 6), which is responsible for ensuring that the necessary resources are provided to areas of growth. The ELIR team concluded that the University has effective arrangements in place for the planning and management of its student population.

### **1.3 Commentary on the preparation for the ELIR, including contextualisation**

14 Preparations for the ELIR were led by a steering group chaired by the Deputy Principal (Education and Students) and included a range of staff and student representatives. The steering group met approximately monthly since June 2019, and its remit included overseeing the development of the Reflective Analysis (RA).

15 The RA was prepared with input from a number of groups across the University. The initial draft was refined through engagement with staff, the Students' Union, the Education and Student Experience Committee (ESEC), the University Strategy and Planning Group, and Academic Council. The final version of the RA was approved by the University Court in December 2020. The University had planned to engage its student and staff more broadly in preparations, but these plans had been disrupted by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

16 In considering appropriate contextualised themes for this ELIR, the University's approach was informed by its values of excellence, openness and ambition, and by the importance it attaches to 'place, people and communities'. The themes were therefore designed to be 'broad and overarching', with a range of specific activities within each theme. Four contextualised themes were therefore developed which the University judged would provide a framework for a range of cross-university priorities:

- working with students
- campus environment
- health and wellbeing
- collaborations and partnerships.

17 The ELIR team concluded that the University's preparations for the review had been very thorough, and that the RA accurately reflected the University's strategic priorities. The team considered that the contextualised themes represented essential aspects of the University's context, capturing topics which were central to the staff and student experience. The themes informed the team's overall judgement, and its identification of areas of good practice and recommendations for further development.

### **1.4 Summary of the follow-up to the previous ELIR**

18 The 2015 ELIR identified five areas of positive practice, with the RA describing developments undertaken by the University since the review to build upon these strengths. The last ELIR also identified nine areas for development. In response the University agreed a set of actions in early 2016 to initiate developments in these areas. These formed the basis of detailed plans set out in the University's ELIR 3 Follow-up Report, published in February 2017. The RA also describes further actions taken since then to follow up on the outcomes of the ELIR, which were overseen by the Dean for Teaching Quality Enhancement and the Academic Registrar. In some areas, notably the postgraduate research (PGR) student experience and management of collaborative activity, the RA described continuing activity to enhance quality and assure standards.

## 1.5 Impact of engaging students in ELIR preparations

19 Student representatives were full members of the steering group that managed the University's preparations for this ELIR. The Students' Union President and Vice President Education confirmed that they had contributed to the writing of the Reflective Analysis, through content input and overall review and feedback, and the ELIR team was assured that the RA acknowledged the student perspective throughout. However, the University's intention to involve students more widely in its ELIR preparations had not progressed as planned due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While the team accept that the University had completed some of its ELIR preparations during the exceptional circumstances associated with the pandemic, it concluded that the engagement of the broader student population in the University's ELIR preparations had been relatively limited.

## 2 Enhancing the student learning experience

### 2.1 Student representation and engagement

20 The University has effective arrangements in place to support the engagement and representation of students, including responding to student feedback. There is a positive and collaborative working relationship between the Students' Union and the University. The Student Partnership Agreement (now in its second iteration) details four key areas of joint working: Engagement; Learning and Teaching; Equality; and Mental Health and Wellbeing. Consultative events were undertaken during the development of the new agreement, although from its meetings with students the ELIR team were unclear as to how aware the general student population is of the existence of this partnership agreement.

#### Student representation

21 The Students' Union President is supported by two Vice Presidents, a Sports President and a team of 16 part-time Executive Officers who have specific remits and collectively sit on the Union's Executive Council. The Vice President Education leads on student engagement and representation.

22 There is a three-tier student representation system comprising Sabbatical Officers, Faculty Officers (both undergraduate and postgraduate) and module or programme representatives. The ELIR team were able to confirm that students are represented on key University committees and groups at all levels, for example Students' Union representatives, have membership of the project boards overseeing the Sports and the Campus Central major capital projects. The recruitment of module and programme representatives is supported through the University's virtual learning environment (VLE), with the Students' Union working with University staff to promote the recruitment of representatives.

23 There is a robust system of training in place for student officers and representatives. The Students' Union leads on the development and delivery of training for student representatives and is supported by staff from the University. Sabbatical officers complete a month-long induction. Training is a priority for module and programme representatives, of which there are several hundred. The RA confirms that there is a system of accreditation available for student representatives with recognition of their representative work noted on their academic transcripts.

24 In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the ELIR team were able to confirm that many aspects of the student representation system, including Student Staff Feedback Committees (SSFCs), have been successfully moved online. In meetings with the ELIR team, students commented positively about this development stating that it had made it easier for a broader range of students to become involved as student representatives.

Students believed there would be benefits to both the University and the Students' Union in reflecting on the lessons learned from changes made during the pandemic and how these might be used in future to support further enhancements to student representation structures and to support increased engagement with the wider student population. Students spoke specifically about the fact that holding committee meetings online during the pandemic had supported students with caring responsibilities to become more involved. The team believe there would be benefits to both the University and the Students' Union from reflecting on lessons learned during the pandemic to further strengthen its approach to student representation.

25 Generally, students who met the ELIR team spoke positively about the contribution made by Faculty Officers within student representative structures. These Officers are student members of key faculty forums including Faculty Learning and Teaching Committees and are remunerated for the work they do. However, during the review, the ELIR team learned that the process used to recruit these Officers appears to be implemented inconsistently across the faculties. The team understands that currently only two faculties have postgraduate research (PGR) Faculty Officers in post.

26 Student representatives confirmed that, overall, representation systems were effective in gathering student views and their feedback with listened to and acted upon. However, both the University and the student representatives expressed the view that work still needs to be done to improve the engagement of the broader student body. Undergraduate students who met the ELIR team suggested this could perhaps be achieved by the University adopting a wider range of communication channels, with information being prioritised and targeted more at specific student groups.

27 Undergraduate students who met the ELIR team were clear about who their module representatives are and while they confirmed there are appropriate opportunities to provide feedback, did state these varied between faculties and that more could be done to ensure students are aware of links between Faculty Officers and module representatives. These challenges were also reiterated by the postgraduate taught (PGT) students, who were generally aware of their module representatives but not their Faculty Officers. PGR students commented on the variation that exists between faculties in terms of student representation and while they accepted that systems are in place, they voiced concerns that their existence is not well known or well used by the wider student population. Postgraduate Taught students acknowledged the volume of centralised communication to be problematic at times and was often too focused on sport and the undergraduate experience. Students encouraged the University to talk directly with individual cohorts about how to tailor communications more appropriately.

28 On balance, the ELIR team believes there would be benefit to both the University and the Students' Union in further enhancing the process used for the appointment of Faculty Officers and module representatives, ensuring it is effectively communicated and promoted to staff and students (particularly PGR students) in order to maximise the number of student representatives in post. The University is encouraged to continue its work with the Students' Union to enhance its student representative systems to provide further opportunities for engagement from the wider student population.

### **Listening and responding to the student voice**

29 The University uses a range of approaches for gathering student views which it uses effectively to ensure it is able to listen and respond to the student voice. Examples include student representative structures (paragraph 22), Student Staff Feedback Committees (SSFC) (paragraph 30), module feedback questionnaires, national surveys (including the National Student Survey (NSS), the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey

(PTES), and the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES)) and the internal Student Experience Survey (SES).

30 SSFCs are an effective mechanism for module and programme representatives to share feedback to staff in their division/faculty. SSFCs are a key forum for monitoring module delivery and are attended by module coordinators, who are expected to feedback to module representatives. Minutes of SSFC meetings are published for all students.

31 In 2015, the University was in the early stages of implementing a software package to support the operation of its end of semester module evaluation process. Following a successful fully online pilot in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities in 2019, the University made a number of enhancements including standardisation of the use of electronic questionnaires across the institution, the adoption of a standard question set, and standardised operational and feedback timelines. In 2020, the University extended the use of this online system to support the introduction of an 'In Semester Check In' process which gathers student feedback on all modules during week 3 or 4 of the semester so more immediate, in-session improvements can be made. The University believes this system will support staff to close the feedback loop more effectively and in a timelier manner. However, senior staff acknowledged that further staff development and training in the use of the software was required in order to get maximum benefit. This development has been well received by students and the Students' Union.

32 Overall, students were happy with the range of approaches available to them to provide feedback and confirmed that the University did report back to them on actions taken. Staff who met the ELIR team stated that SSFC meetings are an effective mechanism for communicating to students how any problems raised had been addressed, with the introduction of the 'In Semester Check In' process positively supporting this.

33 Over the last five years, the University has, on the whole, achieved consistent or improving student satisfaction scores across each of the sections of the NSS, with strong improvements in its scores for assessment and feedback (69% in 2015, compared with 77% in 2020) and student voice (64% in 2015, compared to 74% in 2020). However, in 2019 the University experienced a dip in its overall satisfaction score to 83% that took its performance below UK and Scottish sector averages. In response, following a review of the effectiveness of its strategies to respond to student feedback from the NSS, a 'road map' was developed and endorsed by the Education and Student Experience Committee (ESEC) and the University Strategy and Policy Group which focused on building on existing strategic developments, addressing systems issues, and working specifically with the Faculty of Health and Sport. NSS actions plans are monitored through reports presented to ESEC and Academic Council.

34 During the review, the ELIR team heard positive support from academic staff about the use of an 'ongoing action tracker' which is used by the faculties/divisions to monitor the responses being taken forward following student feedback received across the range of external and internal surveys used by the University. The team understands these trackers are part of the University's Student Survey Feedback Action Planning process, with staff confirming these are considered regularly through the academic committee structures. Staff talked specifically about the effectiveness of the action plans and tracker developed within the Faculty of Health and Sport. The 2020 NSS scores recorded an overall satisfaction score rise to 87%, exceeding UK and Scottish sector averages - with a 13.9% improvement in the satisfaction score for the Faculty of Health and Sport. The ELIR team viewed the University's response to tackling this decline in its NSS scores positively.

## 2.2 Recognising and responding to equality and diversity in the student population

35 The University has made good progress in embedding inclusion across the institution and has a range of effective strategies and initiatives in place which recognise and respond to equality and diversity matters across its whole student population. This includes the development and implementation of a range of initiatives to support equality and diversity including the recent publication of a revised set of equality outcomes, the appointment of a Dean for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, a long-standing Equality Forum with Equality Champions, a Gender Action Plan, and an Anti-Racism and Race Equality Strategy.

### Equality, diversity and inclusion

36 Building on progress made against its 2017 equality outcomes, the University Court in March 2021 approved a new set of outcomes for 2021-25: gender equality; mental health and wellbeing; student success; anti-racism, race equality and interculturalism; and inclusion and accessibility. Reporting via the Joint Policy, Planning and Resources Committee (JPPRC), the University Court delegates responsibility for equality, diversity and inclusion to the Equality Steering Group (ESG). ESG ensures the effective delivery of the University's equality outcomes and supporting strategies, and oversees compliance with statutory equality duties.

37 To support operational delivery, ESG has established six action groups to take forward the University's strategic objectives linked to EDI. These are: Health and Wellbeing Group; Tackling Gender-Based Violence Steering Group; Anti-Racism and Race Equality Group; Digital Accessibility Working Group; Accessibility in Learning and Teaching Group; and the Athena Swan Institutional Self-Assessment Team. Each group is taking forward a series of projects and activities. In 2017, the University appointed an institutional Dean for Equality and Diversity, providing strategic leadership for EDI and who works with staff and students to create a culture where EDI is embedded across all of the University's activities. There is also an Equality Forum with Equality Champions which was being refreshed at the time of the review.

38 Student disclosure of equality characteristics leads to tailored support from student services. In addition, NSS, PTES and PRES feedback is analysed by equality characteristics, with these demographic breakdowns reviewed by ESG. The University runs additional surveys of staff and students to seek feedback on specific EDI matters. The ELIR team also learned that student societies have introduced equality officers, which students believe helps puts EDI 'out in the open'.

39 The University recognises a number of disciplines including Computing Sciences and Mathematics; Health Sciences; Psychology; Social Work, Social Policy and Sociology; and Education do not currently meet the SFC target that, by 2030, no discipline in a Scottish university should have an overall gender imbalance greater than 75:25. The University's Gender Action Plan details the University's goals and activities (including outreach work and partnerships with schools and colleges) to achieve a better balance in these disciplines. With a range of activities being taken forward by the University in the area of gender equality including: further progress in Athena Swan accreditation where students have been involved in focus groups at faculty level; continued staff involvement in Aurora (Advance HE's leadership development initiative for women); training on EDI as part of the academic promotions process, and in unconscious bias; enhancements to data collection and analysis; the introduction of inclusive and flexible working options; the development and delivery of the 'Stepping Stones' personal/professional development training for female staff; and a gender equality forum - 'Stirling Women'.

40 Working in partnership with the Students' Union, the University has made significant progress with its commitment to tackle gender-based violence. Its Preventing and Tackling Sexual Violence and Misconduct Strategy is award winning and has been recognised nationally. An updated version of the strategy is due to be launched in 2021, which will be in line with the Scottish Government's Equally Safe Strategy. The University Principal and Vice Chancellor is a member of the Universities UK Advisory Group on Sexual Misconduct. A number of successful initiatives have been created through this work including the establishment of a team of trained Sexual Violence and Misconduct Officers, who provide information and support to students or staff affected by sexual violence. Student representatives spoke positively about the partnership working between the Students' Union and the University on gender-based violence and valued the opportunities that had been open to all students to contribute to focus groups in this area. The postgraduate research students who met with the ELIR team praised its Athena Swan work and felt that the culture in the University was transparent, open and accepting.

41 The University's approach to EDI is also effectively embedded within its arrangements for developing and managing its transnational education (TNE) partnerships (paragraphs 234-241). The ELIR team heard that as part of the process for approving new partner institutions, the University takes appropriate measures to ensure that the new potential partner shares their values around inclusivity and diversity - whilst recognising the existence of different cultural contexts. Students from a range of the University's TNE partnerships showed good awareness of the University's EDI policies and activities, receiving information through emails, blog posts, specific classes and in module content.

42 During 2020, the University progressed development of an Anti-Racism and Race Equality Strategy and the University Principal also signed the Public Declaration of Anti-Racism as part of a collaborative approach taken by Scottish University Principals. In response to the Black Lives Matters movement in 2020, the University invited staff, students and stakeholders to share concerns about racism or the University's approach to tackling race inequality through two engagement sessions with senior staff, with the outcomes fed into the Equality Steering Group and discussed as part of the development of the University's Anti-Racism and Race Equality Strategy.

43 The University is leading a collaborative cluster project as part of the current QAA Enhancement Theme 'Resilient Learning Communities' on expanding and deepening sector-wide understanding of what decolonising the curriculum means in practice. As part of this work, the University is piloting using students to audit the curriculum, which the ELIR team understands will adopt a similar approach to the Students Partners in Learning Scheme used during the COVID-19 pandemic (paragraph 68). During Black History Month, the University offered a series of events, seminars and activities, and had a dedicated webpage. Student representatives commented positively on their involvement with the decolonising the curriculum work.

44 Student representatives spoke positively about the support and information provided by the Students' Union on a range of EDI matters, acknowledging University support was improving. Positive comment was made on the operation of the University's no tolerance policy to racial discrimination, where action by the University was described as both 'detailed and swift'.

45 The ELIR team commend the University's strong institutional commitment which has ensured that equality, diversity and inclusion is embedded in the culture of the University and its collaborative partners. Its strategic approach to equality, diversity and inclusion has been developed, and is being delivered, in partnership between the University and the Students' Union and is also underpinned by a comprehensive range of initiatives involving both staff and students.

## **Disability and additional needs support**

46 The University has been undertaking a number of projects in this area, using an evidence-based approach, to develop its support for students. Examples include: investment in providing a digital library catalogue and electronic reading lists; the introduction of a development module for staff on embedding accessibility and inclusion practise in the curriculum and learning and teaching approaches; developing the digital learning environment to ensure it continues to meet legislative requirements; ensuring all materials are digitally accessible; and the use of lecture recording and captioning which has been particularly popular and welcomed across the student population (paragraph 135).

47 Student representatives commented positively on the University's progress over the past four years in supporting students with disabilities and additional needs. Particular mention was made of activities to support greater student engagement, including focus groups with specific student groups, and an increase in the range and type of support available from Student Learning Services (paragraphs 87-89). However, these representatives also expressed the view that the University still has more work to do to support part-time and distance learning students. They also acknowledged the complexity of the challenges facing the University in accommodating the needs of an increasingly diverse student body, for example, event times that work for part-time students can be difficult for those with caring responsibilities.

## **Student wellbeing and mental health**

48 The University states in the RA that it places particular importance on the mental health, and physical health and wellbeing of students believing it has a direct impact on their success and experience of the University. Mental health and wellbeing is one of the University's four published equality outcomes (paragraph 36). The new Mental Health Strategy developed collaboratively between faculty and professional services staff, and Students' Union staff and sabbatical officers, was approved in Spring 2021 and will be jointly owned with the Students' Union.

49 The University has continued to develop effective approaches to mental health and wellbeing support including: investing in the Mental Health, Wellbeing and Counselling team; the introduction of the 'One at a Time' counselling model (which allocates counselling time on a session-by-session basis, rather than blocks of sessions) to reduce waiting times; and a Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) programme. The University also offers online support for staff and students including the 'TogetherAll' programme for students and an Employee Assistance programme for staff, and uses spaces across the campus to support the promotion of wellbeing. Staff spoke positively that both staff and students are benefitting from work currently underway across the University looking at measures to mitigate the stress caused by some aspects of teaching and learning and the teaching environment, for example the bunching of assessment submission dates (paragraph 78-83).

50 The University also launched, as part of its response to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 'Be Connected' initiative in partnership with the Students' Union, which was a programme of social, health and wellbeing, learning and cultural activities and resources to support wellbeing and allow individuals to connect. The 'Be Connected' initiative will continue beyond the immediacy of the pandemic becoming the University Student & Residential Life Programme, with a steering group liaising with key areas in order to develop and coordinate the content of the programme. The University has in place a series of support mechanisms including campus activities such as a Gardening Club, a campus wellbeing map and access to a free online service offering 24/7 free mental health support for students.

51 The University concedes that the resources available have not always matched demands from staff and students but remains committed to further developing its support

including further investment in resources and embedding materials related to mental health and wellbeing into the curriculum. This view was also shared by students who stated that they had seen a reduction in the waiting times to get appointments with counsellors, which they had experienced as 'under-resourced and under-staffed'. However, a number did express concerns that while understandable, this position had deteriorated again during the pandemic. The ELIR team encourages the University to take forward its plans to support the effective implementation of its recently launched Mental Health Strategy.

### **Widening access and articulation**

52 Overall, the University has effective arrangements in place to support widening access which continues to be an area of focus for the University. A new Widening Access Strategy was being developed at the time of this ELIR to be published during 2021-22. The RA states the University exceeds its 2021 Commission on Widening Access targets. Contextual admissions were introduced in 2019-20 (paragraph 71).

53 The University's outreach activity is delivered across Scotland in partnership with a range of organisations including schools, colleges, community groups and local Councils. The University works with local schools to raise pupil aspirations, offering a range of activities including presentations and the 'Realise Your Potential Board Game'. The University contributes to the Schools for Higher Education Programme (SHEP) and the Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP). In the RA the University recognises that its evaluation of these initiatives would benefit from further development and is do so using resources shared by the Scottish Community of Access and Participation Practitioners (SCAPP). As well as specific outreach initiatives, the University also provides support to students from widening access backgrounds who wish to undertake study abroad opportunities, it offers 'Learning Strategies' modules and hosts an Access to Degree Studies course.

54 The RA states that 20% of the University's undergraduate students come from colleges and it plans to expand articulation opportunities and pathways. The University has a long-standing and successful partnership with Forth Valley College (paragraphs 55-57) and formally developed a joint venture - INTO University of Stirling - to support international students to transition into undergraduate and postgraduate programmes at the University and other Scottish providers (paragraphs 59 and 60).

55 The articulation arrangement with Forth Valley College comprises four 2+2 integrated degree programmes that allow direct entry to year 3 of the programme following successful completion of an appropriate HND, either at Forth Valley College or another college. Admission to a fourth year at Stirling is subject to the number of places available on the BA (Hons) in Art & Design programme. These programmes are designed to support the development of employability skills and offer work-based learning experiences.

56 Each programme is supported by a dedicated Programme Director at both the University and the College. Students enrol in both the College and the University from the beginning of their studies, and have access to a personal tutor and other student support and learning support from the University. Student Learning Services (SLS) (paragraphs 87-89) also provides support for articulating students, including workshops for students on entry and the provision of a suite of generic workshops for students new to second and third years. Members of SLS who have direct experience of access and further education speak regularly to college staff to discuss ways to bridge the gap between further education and higher education. Students with experience of widening access reported that attending open days has been very helpful and they had valued sessions delivered at local schools on higher education.

57 Students with experience of these articulation arrangements generally reported a very positive experience, with some indicating that there had been disruption to their transition because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Staff talked positively about the work undertaken with students both during their studies at Forth Valley College and also to support student induction into the University. However, both student representatives and the University recognise that the integration and support of college students is an area where there would be benefits from further enhancement.

58 The University has recently approved a set of Higher National entry requirements which will be used during 2021-22 in considering applications from articulating students. The University also plans to review its articulation agreements and credit arrangements aiming to offer full credit recognition where possible and also offer more 'tailored' transition and induction support to articulating students. The ELIR team would encourage the University to take forward these plans.

59 The INTO University of Stirling (INTO UoS) joint venture operates in a purpose-built building on the Stirling campus. INTO UoS was the subject of a QAA Review for Educational Oversight - Exceptional Arrangements in May 2019. The report included judgements that confidence can be placed in INTO Stirling's management of its responsibilities for academic standards, as set out in its contractual arrangements with its academic partner; that confidence can be placed in INTO Stirling's management and enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities; and that reliance can be placed on the information that INTO Stirling produces for its intended audiences about the learning opportunities it offers. There were two recommendations, that the provider should develop arrangements with the University to review how good practice approaches undertaken by Link Tutors can be applied consistently, and should ensure students are fully informed of the external examiner system and make all external examiner reports available to students. This second point is also a recommendation from the current ELIR (paragraphs 208 and 225).

60 Each faculty has a Link Tutor who liaises with the INTO UoS team and supports students transitioning from INTO to the University. The University provides the quality assurance framework and regulations within which the centre operates and assures the setting and maintaining of threshold academic standards. All programmes are approved as University of Stirling programmes.

### **2.3 Supporting students in their learning at each stage of the learner journey**

61 The University provides a holistic and inclusive approach to supporting students at each stage of their learner journey, providing a variety of services and activities to support the learner journey from application to graduation. Students articulated a good understanding of the services available, confirming they were well informed and could easily access the services on offer. The University continues to implement plans to develop its support services in response to feedback from students.

#### **Student Experience Framework**

62 The University has developed a Student Experience Framework (SEF), which was described by senior staff as a 'living framework' bringing together all aspects of the broader student experience to support a holistic approach to its enhancement. The SEF helps to ensure that all faculty teams are connected effectively with the University's professional services teams. The Framework has five strategic aims which were identified in consultation with the Students' Union, directed at making students feel 'prepared, connected, supported, evolved and organised'. These themes influence and shape resource allocation and complement those of the Learning and Teaching Quality Enhancement Strategy (LTQES).

Both the SEF and the LTQES are led by the Deputy Principal (Education and Students), with oversight of the delivery and future direction of the SEF being the responsibility of the Student Experience Committee (SEC) (paragraph 149).

63 The ELIR team established that the work contained within the SEF is on the whole progressing well in terms of enabling the professional service areas to work together efficiently and effectively in supporting students. They also noted that some of the work associated with this Framework had understandably been delayed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Students reported that involvement with the development of the SEF was limited to sabbaticals and student representatives, and while the wider student body might not be aware of the Framework, students would recognise 'Be Connected' (a programme of social, health and wellbeing, learning and cultural activities and resources designed to help and support both staff and students), which had evolved from the SEF themes. Students who met the team spoke positively about the value of this programme. The team established that communications with students throughout their learner journey were effective and that staff had a good understanding of the purpose of the SEF.

### **Response to COVID-19**

64 During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Associate Deans Learning and Teaching (ADLTs) (paragraphs 152 and 153), the Deputy Principal (Education and Students) and the University Chief Examiner met on a regular basis to drive the implementation of necessary changes to the management of learning, teaching and associated policy. A range of other colleagues including the Vice President for Education of the Students' Union, Academic Development, SLS and the Learning Technologists also contributed to these changes.

65 During the remainder of session 2019-20, after the first UK national lockdown in March 2020, the University put in place a range of specific arrangements to help assure the quality of its provision and ensure academic standards for teaching, learning and assessment were maintained. These included a no-detriment approach to student attainment and progress; no physical examinations during the spring 2020 semester; lectures were divided into short videos which could be viewed asynchronously allowing students to organise their studies around life in lockdown; staff introduced 'office hours' and made themselves more available to support students; and video tutorials using a 'flipped classroom' approach to affording students greater autonomy with their learning. The University accepts that while provision had not always been consistent across the faculties during this initial emergency period, the establishment of faculty-level web-based collaboration sites for staff had allowed the effective sharing of good practice. The online environment had also prompted careful consideration of assessment practices (paragraph 80).

66 Staff described how the management of teaching and learning, and in particular technology enhanced learning, has been 'revolutionised' at the University as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This view was also supported by students, including those studying at the University's partner institutions. The transition to online learning has been very effective, with the ADLTs playing an important role in ensuring the quality of provision across faculties. The University's virtual learning environment (VLE) was quickly adapted to facilitate better delivery, and a new online module template introduced. The University offered training for staff, delivered jointly by Academic Development (paragraph 167) and the team of Learning Technologists, on the effective use of online technologies, to support staff with their preparations for online teaching during autumn 2020. The University worked in partnership with students to ensure that communications during the pandemic were both effective and timely. Students confirmed that during the pandemic they had found staff to be accessible and helpful, and welcomed the range of resources made available to them.

67 Although some students stated they missed the seminar experience and interaction, the majority view was that the online learning, teaching and assessment experience had exceeded their expectations. Undergraduate students commented on the smooth transition to online learning and the flexibility associated with this which allowed them to work around caring responsibilities and time zones. They spoke very positively about the range and breadth of new resources available on the VLE. All students recognised the innovative thinking and support they had received from staff. Undergraduate students also confirmed that communications from the University had been effective during the pandemic with information provided in a timely and accessible manner. Postgraduate taught students also praised the University's signposting, travel updates and support for those self-isolating. While postgraduate research students were generally positive about the University's approach to the pandemic, a number commented that on occasion they had felt overwhelmed by the volume of communications and range of media used, believing the University could perhaps have done more to streamline things.

68 One of the key examples of positive practice which the ELIR team heard about was work where students are involved in 'road testing' the development of online content for modules. Twenty student volunteers drawn from across the University form the Students as Partners in Learning Group and provide feedback to staff developing online content before the modules 'go live'. Both staff and students talked very positively about the value of this approach to all parties involved. Students were provided with training by the Academic Development team and staff confirmed that student feedback had been valued and acted upon.

69 Both staff and students agreed that there would be benefit to the University from reflecting on the lessons learned from its response to the COVID-19 pandemic, in order to build on the successes. The ELIR team were informed that the University is already planning to take this forward into future sessions, with staff in Academic Development working closely with Learning Technologists, Student Learning Services, the Faculty Partners Group (paragraph 162) and in partnership with students to identify which aspects of the provision have worked well and should therefore be embedded. An evaluation report on the University's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has also been completed by an external consultant. The University is planning to look at the future of technology enhanced learning over the next three to four years.

70 From the evidence presented and recognising the strong support from staff and students, the ELIR team commends the University's response to the COVID-19 pandemic which has been tailored, well-planned and agile in supporting the shift to the online delivery of learning, teaching and assessment, and continued to provide comprehensive student-facing support services. This has been effectively achieved through close partnership working with staff and students, underpinned by a coordinated approach to communications. Examples include the range of support available to both staff and students including training in the use of online technologies and the 'Students as Partners in Learning' approach which involved students 'road testing' newly developed online module content.

### **Admissions, student transition and induction**

71 The University's approaches and processes to support student admissions have been further developed since the 2015 ELIR. The University implemented a contextualised admissions approach in the 2019-20 admissions cycle, with adjusted offers now made to applicants at the point of offer rather than at the point of confirmation. The University offers individually focused information, advice and guidance for widening access students coming from school or college, mature students, care experienced students and estranged students, as well as those with caring responsibilities accessed through the 'Release your Potential' contacts.

72 In 2018, the University embarked on a review of its recruitment and admissions processes for postgraduate research students. A new online PGR application process was launched in February 2020. Both UK and international students, drawn from a range of constituencies, spoke positively about their experiences of the admissions processes and commented on their efficiency.

73 Student induction and support for transition has been a long-term strategic focus for the University, and it has drawn on learning from its engagement with the QAA Scotland Enhancement Theme: Student Transitions. The University's transition and induction arrangements are managed by both central student support services staff and colleagues within the faculties and divisions, with the University committed to the regular review and enhancement of its activities. Positive developments at University level include the re-organisation and enhancement of the 'Welcome Website'; an increase in the number of university-level induction events; a two-day induction event for disabled students; and the 'Stirling Essentials' online module with access to supporting resources - created to orientate students about the expectations of higher education pre-entry orientation programmes.

74 Supporting transitions at other points in the student journey is normally managed at faculty level. Initiatives include the Faculty of Arts and Humanities' Module Fair to help second-year students to transition into third year and the Stirling Management School 'Flying Start Programme' which supports transition to master's level study. Students studying on the University's integrated degrees programmes confirmed to the ELIR team that inductions were provided by both subject areas involved in the programme delivery. Students also commented positively that the support for students moving from year to year of their programmes had improved, with good communication and support from the University and from Personal Tutors.

75 Further enhancements to the University's transition and induction arrangements took place during 2020, partially influenced by the University's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This resulted in much of the University's induction and transition activities for session 2020-21 being delivered online. Positive developments included online enrolment with early access for students to the University's VLE and the online mobile campus app which was aligned to the student enrolment process and allowed student ID cards to be accessible through the app. The University also further developed the 'Stirling Essentials' module to more effectively support new and returning students to address issues that might face them arising from the impact on study during the pandemic, for example, the need to develop digital skills to support a greater reliance on online teaching and activities to counteract social isolation. Students spoke positively about the content of the 'Stirling Essentials' module, which is available to all students. Overall, students spoke positively about outreach activities, induction and the welcome to the University, and postgraduate students were positive about induction and the opportunities for community building despite these being more limited because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

76 A range of support exists for students undertaking the transition from INTO University of Stirling into the University, with one of the key aspects being the provision of a Link Tutor in each faculty (paragraphs 59 and 60). The University's approach prepares international students for transition into the University by addressing not only subject knowledge, study skills and employability skills, but also the broader cultural aspects of engaging in higher education. The ELIR team learned that INTO students have opportunities to meet future faculty staff and students to help them feel part of the wider university community, and they also have the opportunity to engage with modes of assessments similar to those they will experience on entering higher education.

77 Retention rates across different student groups at different levels of study are monitored by the faculties. Support for care experienced students and those with caring

responsibilities forms part of the University's Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) Framework. A single point of support for care experienced students has just been launched by the University and there is a pre-entry orientation programme for disabled students and the estranged student 'Stand Alone Pledge' has been introduced.

### **Assessment and feedback**

78 Since the 2015 ELIR, the University has undertaken a range of activities to enhance its approach to assessment practices and providing feedback on assessments to students. There has been an improvement in its NSS Assessment and Feedback scores from 69% satisfaction in 2015 to 77% in 2020. The principles, standards and responsibilities expected of staff, faculties and students are set out clearly in the University's Feedback Policy which is supported by the 'Student Guide to Feedback' developed by the Students' Union, and information contained in every VLE module template. Student assessments are submitted electronically through the VLE. The 'Stirling Essentials' module (paragraph 75) contains information for students on how to submit assessments using the VLE and the University also provides a series of video guides on submitting assessments and receiving feedback. Students receive feedback on their assessments electronically, with feedback turnaround times monitored by the faculties.

79 The University's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the move to online delivery has acted as a catalyst to reduce its reliance on summative assessments where appropriate, consider opportunities for more formative assessments, and the use of more 'authentic and accessible assessment methods'. Staff confirmed that responding to the pandemic had unlocked the potential to use new forms of feedback and is providing them with opportunities to reflect on what constitutes effective feedback and how to best communicate this to students.

80 The ELIR team learned that the University plans to implement an 'end-to-end digital examination and assessment platform' during spring 2021, and also about the use of Transforming the Student Experience through Assessment (TESTA) style reviews of assessment which have been piloted in six subject areas. The TESTA approach aims to present a picture of how students experience assessment across a programme, so the programme team can discuss patterns of over assessment and assessment bunching, varieties of assessment, and the amount, quality and timeliness of feedback. The University plans to build the TESTA approach into its Learning and Teaching Review process (paragraphs 187-193) but recognises resources are currently constrained because of the ongoing support of students and staff during the pandemic. The ELIR team are supportive of the University's plans to incorporate the TESTA approach into its Learning and Teaching Review process.

81 The ELIR team noted from its consideration of the AIS, including the 2019-20 analysis of external examiners' comments and a number of Learning and Teaching Reviews, that the consistency of feedback on student assessments would benefit from further development. There seems to be varying practice and guidance across the faculties around the structure of student feedback and the use of the VLE in supporting the communication of feedback to students. The ELIR team established that there is no institution-wide template for staff to use to provide feedback to students on assessed work, but that rubrics are now deployed in most subject areas to provide students with consistent feedback against marking criteria in addition to open comments.

82 From the perspective of students who met the ELIR team, the lack of a feedback template doesn't appear to be an issue with students generally confirming they were very satisfied with the quality and the timeliness of the feedback they received. The ELIR team heard the issue of providing effective feedback to students continues to be actively

discussed across the University, with staff specifically commenting on the fact that feedback is regularly considered by ADLTs in order to share good practice across the faculties, that work had been undertaken to determine an institutional view of 'what good feedback looks like', and staff are increasingly making use of 'feed forward' approaches in assessment setting in undergraduate and PGT programmes.

83 Overall, the ELIR team confirm that the University has made good progress with a range of activities to improve the timeliness, quality and consistency of assessment feedback, and would encourage it to continue with work to enhance the consistency of its approach to providing feedback on assessments across the faculties.

### **Student support**

84 Recognising the diversity of its student population, the University has developed an extensive range of high-quality and accessible student services that meet the needs of all students. The University's approach to student support draws on input from academic, faculty, professional services teams and the Students' Union. These include advice and guidance on study skills, employability, mental health and wellbeing, counselling, and financial support. Workshops on a wide range of topics are offered to students and publicised on the VLE. The Students' Union offers advocacy support, including the student-run Nightline and the STEER peer-mentoring programme linking returning students (Captains) with new undergraduates or taught postgraduates (Crew), with the numbers of participants in the scheme continuing to grow.

85 Staff and students spoke positively about the range and quality of student support in place, describing a very positive culture which is responsive to changing student needs and feedback. The Student Hub (paragraph 126) was seen as playing an important role, acting as one point of access for students to the wide range of services offered and the 'Supporting Staff to Support Students' website is highly valued by staff. Postgraduate students made special mention of the value of careers and counselling services and the learning disability support provided.

86 The ELIR team was able to confirm the University's student support services were successfully moved online as part of its response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Students spoke very positively about these online services, with some stating they had improved because of the pandemic. Perhaps understandably given the unique circumstances associate with the pandemic, some students raised concerns that in their view the Student Finance service had been overwhelmed with applications for hardship funding. Other wellbeing initiatives initiated at this time include: the Students' Union Pandemic Pals Scheme (a mutually supportive peer-to-peer initiative using a similar approach to the STEER programme (paragraph 84)); access for staff and students to an online service offering support with mental health issues; and a new Employee Assistance programme for staff, offering free counselling and mental health support.

### **Student Learning Services**

87 The University's Student Learning Services (SLS) team works with staff from across the faculties and other professional services to offer a range of activities to support study skills development. Services include appointments for individual students; and workshops, tutorials and online guidance on study skills and supporting student success. A new suite of virtual 'Prepare@Stirling study skills workshops (linked to the Stirling Essentials module) was offered to new and continuing students throughout August and September 2020 to ease the transition into University recognising the possible impact of the pandemic. Staff reported that student engagement with workshops has increased significantly, particularly during the pandemic, and that elements of this provision will be retained and built upon in future academic sessions.

88 SLS staff have developed a suite of study skills podcasts to help to support staff to deliver study skills in the curriculum and work directly with the academic disciplines, the Dean for Teaching Quality Enhancement and the Associate Deans for Learning and Teaching to support the implementation of activities and to review the effectiveness of this service. Each faculty has recently funded the appointment of an Academic Skills Tutor who will be supported by SLS staff to work with staff and students. These posts are operated on a one-year pilot basis and will be evaluated to inform the nature of the future provision.

89 The SLS team is represented on both the ESEC and SEC, allowing the Service to inform University policy and academic practice. The ELIR team understands that the University is currently moving forward with plans to explore how study skills can be more effectively delivered through the curriculum, with SLS piloting a 'hub and spoke' module with the faculties during 2021.

90 Based on the evidence, the ELIR team commends the University for having developed an extensive range of high quality and accessible student services that meets the needs of all students. Examples include the 'Supporting Staff to Support Students' website, the support provided by the Student Learning Services and the library - tailored to the needs of specific groups and individuals, and the 'Stirling Essentials' module including the student-facing 'Prepare@Stirling' skills workshops.

### **Employability, enterprise and entrepreneurship**

91 The University's Employability Strategy (2017-2021) sets out strategic objectives, key performance indicators (KPIs) and an implementation plan for developing employable students. The University has appropriate systems in place to allow it to evaluate the success of the Employability Strategy. Faculty reporting on employability is in place and the ELIR team understands that progress is reported against KPIs. In October 2019, a review of faculty and institutional progress against the Employability Strategy was considered by the University Learning & Teaching Committee (ULTC). The review reported progress against all strategic objectives, however it was noted that faculties were progressing at different rates.

92 In response to the outcomes of this review, the University is taking forward a number of enhancements. The Work Placement and Project Policy was approved by the Education and Student Experience Committee in September 2020 and in 2020-21 a range of activities have been taken forward including upskilling staff to embed employability in the curriculum, increasing targeted business engagement, and support for the development of new Graduate Apprenticeship bids.

93 The University has invested in an online placement system which matches students to employers both in the UK and overseas. The University is also investing in technological solutions to support its data gathering linked to employability and is using online software packages to allow it to more effectively identify, monitor and support work-based learning opportunities. An online site has been set up to share good practice. Staff reported that work-related learning has grown 'hugely', providing the ELIR team with a good range of examples of different approaches being adopted.

94 One of the objectives of the University's Employability Strategy is to ensure that all programmes include work-based and/or work-related learning by 2021. The ELIR team noted that progress towards this ambitious objective is being made at different rates across the faculties, and that concerns over the effectiveness of the arrangements surrounding the securing of placements was a theme running through the Learning and Teaching Review reports they were provided with. Senior staff reported that good progress had been made and links with employers have developed but recognised that there is more work to be done across the University to deliver this objective. A position that the ELIR team would concur with.

95 In 2020, the University welcomed its first cohort of graduate apprentices. The COVID-19 restrictions prompted a change from the planned block-release model to online delivery, which may be maintained in the future. The University plans to extend the range of graduate apprentice programmes on offer.

96 Following a recent review and refresh, the 'My Stirling Award' was relaunched in September 2020 with a target of recruiting 100 students. Completion and progression rates have improved, although the impact of the pandemic has reduced opportunities for students. Feedback indicates that students value the opportunity the award gives them to build their confidence and develop their skills, that it supports them to more effectively articulate these to a future employer, and they appreciated having the award on their academic transcript. The award is also available to undergraduate students including those studying with TNE partners and the University hopes to extend the award to postgraduate students.

97 The University offers a range of initiatives to support staff, students and recent graduates to develop business ideas, start-up companies and build entrepreneurial skills. These include the Enterprise Programme which has been running since 2016, one-to-one support, and the Student Enterprise Enhanced Development (SEED) accelerator scheme which supports a cohort of 10 early-stage entrepreneurs each year. The RA states that the Careers and Employability Service and the Enterprise Programme work together collaboratively, with regular meetings and planned joint events to ensure that enterprise links closely with employability.

98 The ELIR team believe the University is making appropriate progress with its ambition to embed work-based/work-related learning across the entirety of its provision and has plans for enhanced data gathering to support the management of work-related learning opportunities for students. Students are well prepared, through the range of services and support offered to take advantage of employment opportunities on graduation.

### **Graduate attributes**

99 The University's most recent set of Graduate Attributes was approved by ESEC in September 2020, following a review which involved close working with students to understand the attributes most important to themselves and employers, and are valuable in life. Sustainability, inclusion and wellbeing were identified as important aspects in the development of the revised attributes. Student representatives spoke very positively about their involvement in this review process and confirmed that the Students' Union Vice President Education had made a significant contribution to this work.

100 The University recognises that further work needs to be undertaken to make these graduate attributes more accessible for students and for them to be made explicit within the curriculum, developing a matrix to help support students to understand how to build their graduate attributes. Academic staff are also now required to demonstrate how graduate attributes are embedded in module learning outcomes. The 'Springboard to Success' events organised by the Careers and Employability Service emphasise the importance of students being able to articulate their graduate attributes to employers.

### **Student mobility**

101 The University has appropriate arrangements in place for promoting, managing and supporting students who engage with Erasmus, study abroad and international exchanges, which are managed by the Directorate of Internationalisation and Partnerships. The University has over 70 partnerships for placements and study abroad arrangements and has comprehensive processes for the approval of new partnerships for work-based learning and review of existing programmes. The University offers a range of grants and scholarships so students can access funding to undertake international opportunities.

102 The University confirmed that while progress has been made in promoting and encouraging students to avail themselves of the opportunities for 'international experiences', the COVID-19 pandemic and the UK's decision to exit the European Union have had an understandable negative impact on its work. The University confirmed that it plans to work with ERASMUS+ until 2023 and engage with the new UK Government Turing scheme but acknowledges that this will involve a reform of mobility work, opening up options for broadening out global possibilities and offering a wider variety of lengths of placements.

## **2.4 Postgraduate taught and research student experience**

103 Overall, the ELIR team considers the University's arrangements for managing and enhancing the postgraduate student experience are effective, with the support provided meeting sector expectations.

### **Postgraduate taught students**

104 The ELIR team considered the learning, teaching and assessment, student support, and student representation arrangements for postgraduate taught students (PGT) to be comparable with those offered to undergraduates. Responsibility for the quality of the learning experience of PGT students lies with each of the academic areas, with senior staff confirming that each faculty has a Postgraduate Director, who oversees PGT provision and reports to the faculty ADLT. The ELIR team also understands that PGT student Faculty Officers (paragraphs 22 and 25) are active in supporting community building within their faculties. The ELIR team learned that some activities and support had been developed specifically for PGT students, for example, targeted induction activities, the development of a PGT version of the 'Stirling Essentials' module (paragraph 75) and some tailored provision from Student Support Services.

105 PGT students who met the ELIR team identify with their programme of study, viewing it as a close community. They considered communications from the University were generally good and spoke positively about their experiences of induction - having the opportunity to feel part of a community early in their studies despite the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. They also described a range of activities provided to enhance the PGT experience including social media 'link-ups', wellbeing events and workshops. Students were particularly positive about the 'Flying Start' programme offered by the Stirling Management School; the 'Stirling Essentials' module (paragraph 75) and the online mobile campus app (paragraph 133). PGT students welcomed having access to a dedicated suite of physical spaces for study on campus, recognising this change had been made by the University in response to student feedback, although the use of these had understandably been limited by the pandemic.

106 Some students and student representatives reported that they found it difficult to interact with PGT students from other subject areas and that there are challenges associated with feeling part of the PGT community, with this seen as even more challenging for students who were not physically on campus. Students did accept that experiences varied between faculties and there have been some successful attempts to organise community-building events. Students spoke positively about staff, who were recognised as being supportive and responsive. For example, staff in Social Work have taken steps to make the induction process more inclusive for PGT students who are not able to attend in person, by providing podcast recordings and online resources on the VLE.

107 PGT students were clear about how their assessments were aligned to the curriculum, recognised the relationships of assessments to the module learning outcomes, and confirmed there was a very good mix of written and practical assignments. They confirmed there were appropriate opportunities to elicit feedback on ideas and drafts from

academic staff and were provided with grading criteria and timely feedback. PGT students confirmed that the University provided them with a range of mechanisms to provide feedback and provided a number of examples of actions taken by the institution in response - for example, the University had developed a single-entry portal for student questions.

### **Postgraduate research students**

108 Following the recommendation in the 2015 ELIR, enhancement of the postgraduate research (PGR) student experience has remained a strategic priority. The RA outlines a range of activity and change which has taken place to address the recommendation. The ELIR team were able to confirm that good progress has been made. The University's ambition is to increase PGR numbers, with the ELIR team understanding that its intention is to double PGR numbers over the next cycle.

### **Governance arrangements**

109 The University has taken forward a number of developments linked to the governance and management of its arrangements for PGR students. In 2018, the University took the decision to split taught postgraduate provision from doctoral research, with faculties and divisions being responsible for the management of the PGT student experience (paragraph 104). In spring 2019, a new Institute for Advanced Studies (IAS) was established replacing the Stirling Graduate School and led by a newly appointed Dean.

110 The IAS model has been established to provide a focal point for 'postgraduate, postdoctoral and interdisciplinary researchers, supporting postgraduate research and whole career researcher development'. It also aims to provide dedicated support, training and development for PGR students supplementing activities offered by academic disciplines, divisions and faculties.

111 The IAS Development Plan (2019-22) was produced in consultation with staff and students and approved in January 2020. It outlines the vision, mission, principles, structure and governance arrangements for the IAS. The implementation of this plan has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, with activities reprioritised as the University moved provision and support for PGR students online.

112 A number of committees support the operation of the IAS. The Executive Committee has responsibility for the overall strategy and management of the Institute; the Doctoral Committee is responsible for all aspects of PGR regulation and administration and reports to the SFC and UKRI; and the External Engagement Committee (suspended during the Covid-19 pandemic) is responsible for the Institute's relationships with collaborating universities and other stakeholders including funders of PGR students.

113 From information provided by the University during the review, the ELIR team understands that following the adoption of the IAS Development Plan, reporting arrangements for the new IAS Committees were refined and agreed in May 2020. This information confirms that to 'maintain parity between the IAS and other equivalent committees of the University, the IAS Executive would not be established as a Committee of Academic Council'. However, the IAS has reporting lines into both the Education and Student Experience Committee (ESEC) and the Research Committee, with the Dean for the Institute for Advanced Studies being a member within the composition of these committees and Academic Council. The information provided also notes that 'there would therefore be no requirement for the Group to 'statutorily' report to every meeting of the Council, but it would brief Council on business as is useful/required'. This is in addition to IAS business brought routinely to ESEC and the Research Committee being statutorily submitted to Council via the reports from both of these committees, which are standing items of business at every meeting of Academic Council. The information further sets out that, 'the IAS

therefore can decide when and how it would be beneficial or necessary for matters of the Institute's business to be shared with Academic Council. As the IAS Executive Group need not formally report into any Committee, it can operate similarly to a Faculty Executive Group. Its minutes and action tracker are for the purposes of maintaining effective operations and not as a formal record of University decisions'.

114 Senior staff informed the ELIR team that decision-making by the IAS Executive Committee has become faster and that the Doctoral Committee brings together all the PGR Directors from the faculties. Their discussions are minuted and 'distilled' to Academic Council, with the Dean for the IAS working closely with the Deputy Principal (Education and Students).

115 It was not clear to the ELIR team where the IAS and its committees sit in the wider University's governance and committee structures. With no existing formal requirement for the IAS to report to Academic Council, the team recommend that the University review the current governance and reporting arrangements for the Institute for Advanced Studies, to ensure these provide the University, and in particular Academic Council, with appropriate and effective oversight of the totality of the postgraduate research student experience including student progression and awards, student feedback, and student engagement with training and research skills provision.

### **PGR student experience**

116 PGR completion rates are monitored at faculty level. A new management information system for PGR admissions introduced in February 2020 is now used by the IAS Doctoral Committee to track student applications, and the University is seeking to expand the availability of further management information including student progression data from 2021-22. The Code of Practice for PGR was adopted in 2020-21. Annual reporting is to the Education and Student Experience Committee and the first report providing data and reflection on PGR activity will be submitted during the 2020-21 academic year.

117 Postgraduate research students were clear about requirements and regulations relating to their studies and about the responsibilities of their supervisors. Overall, they were satisfied with the quality of the supervision and support they received. Students were also clear about the existence of formal mechanisms should they wish to raise a complaint about a supervisor or change supervisory arrangements. During their studies, students use 'Research Compass' (a framework of support, formal and informal progress monitoring, and interactive skills and training system) but there was a mixed response from students about the consistency of its use across faculties, with concerns raised about ease of use of the system which was viewed as time-consuming to engage with.

118 The RA confirms that in response to the COVID-19 pandemic the priority for IAS was to move induction, start dates and support sessions for PGR students online. Student representatives confirmed to the ELIR team that the IAS had provided particularly good support for PGR students during the initial UK lockdown, including organising a range of support and online seminars. However, their perception was that the level of support offered by the IAS had been more difficult to sustain during session 2020-21. Students were appreciative of the efforts made by the University to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on their studies including improved communications via a regular newsletter, additional resources available on the VLE and direct email communication from the Dean of the IAS.

119 The Students' Union representatives reported good relationships with IAS staff and regarded its establishment as a real advance for PGR students. However, PGR students stated that they had not really experienced the level of change that they had anticipated following the establishment of the IAS but acknowledged that the COVID-19 pandemic had had a limiting effect. These students also recognised that the IAS is making 'every effort to

foster a more effective cross-University PGR community', with training events providing the opportunity, through the use of online breakout rooms, for students to network. Students also welcomed the introduction of the new dedicated facilities for postgraduate students on campus, despite their use being limited by the pandemic. PGR students also stated that the Students' Union has been excellent in communicating changes during the pandemic.

### **Research supervisor training**

120 The 2015 ELIR asked the University to pursue its intention to reintroduce research supervisor training at institutional level and put in place a mechanism for identifying and monitoring supervisor training and support needs across the University, including ensuring that all existing supervisors are provided with update training. The ELIR team were able to confirm that some progress has been made, although this has been limited.

121 A University-wide 'Supervising Doctoral Studies' programme was first introduced in 2016. The IAS has recently reviewed and revised the programme content, taking onboard participant feedback and information from external reference points including the UKCGE 'Good Supervisory Practice' Framework. The RA indicates that the development of this programme remains ongoing. The new Supervising Doctoral Studies programme consists of masterclasses, interactive workshops and a set of supporting resources. The programme runs throughout the academic year and allows staff to engage with the sessions 'most relevant' to them. The RA states that the 'New to Supervision/New to UoS' sessions are 'recommended' rather than compulsory for individuals new to doctoral supervision. In addition, the 'Supervisors of Doctoral Studies Module', delivered via an online 'third-party' provider, is recommended by the University to all staff supervising PhDs.

122 During the review, the ELIR team further explored the University's expectations of research supervisors in terms of the requirement to complete the training on offer. Senior staff explained that the expectation is that all supervisors undertake training appropriate to their needs, career stage and requirements of (potential) funders as outlined in the Code of Practice for Research Degrees. They also confirmed it remains a priority to train members of staff who are new to PGR supervision, acknowledging it may take time to work back through existing PGR supervisors and 'retrofit' the five-year cycle across the supervisor cohort. The ELIR team also understands that currently there is a mechanism via the researcher induction programme to direct all academic staff joining the University to undertake supervisor training and a substantially updated staff development programme is being put in place for 2021-22. The ELIR team were less clear about the mechanisms employed by the University to record the completion of research supervisor training or identify those who are required to attend refresher training.

123 The ELIR team understands there are currently 253 PGR supervisors in the University and the University's ambition is to double its PGR student numbers in the next cycle. The ELIR team therefore recommends as a matter of priority that the University review and clarify its requirements for the training and ongoing development of postgraduate research supervisors, ensuring these are clearly communicated to staff.

124 In addition, the University should ensure that all supervisors (new and more established) have the opportunity to undertake training and development, and appropriate mechanisms are in place to ensure completion is recorded and monitored.

## **2.5 Learning environment**

125 The University has effective arrangements in place to systematically review and enhance the learning environment offered to students. The learning environment is aligned with one of the University's contextualised themes for this ELIR. The Learning and Teaching Quality Enhancement Strategy (paragraph 148) sets out the University's strategic objectives

for the learning environment as 'Our students will be taught in interesting dynamic, physical and virtual learning spaces which support different ways and locations of learning'. Since the 2015 ELIR, the University has made significant investment in its physical and technological infrastructure and its pedagogical approach to teaching and learning to support the increasingly diverse needs of its student population.

126 In 2018, the University published its Campus Transformation Plans. Developments include the new 'Campus Central' which is a 'one stop' hub for students to access the library, student services, social learning spaces, dedicated spaces for research activities, and houses the Institute for Advanced Studies (IAS) (paragraphs 109 and 110). Work has also been undertaken to improve the accessibility of learning spaces, the introduction of technology to support group working, the development of collaborative learning spaces, study pods in courtyards, and connecting learning with the benefits of outdoor learning and nature. A particularly popular scheme with students has been the 'Empty Space=Study Space' campaign where the University, supported by the Students' Union, has encouraged students to claim unused spaces during the day for study spaces.

127 Academic staff spoke positively and shared a range of examples from across the faculties which demonstrated how the enhancements to learning environment contribute positively to the delivery of learning and teaching. These include the Health Sciences and Sport Nursing degree integrating the campus into teaching through a project focused on promoting wellbeing using the campus facilities, and Biology and Environment Sciences courses using the campus as a live laboratory - with this approach being particularly valued during the pandemic as an alternative to field trips.

128 Embedding sustainability is part of the University's Strategic Plan. The Corporate Sustainability Steering Group chaired by the Senior Deputy Principal, and with appropriate student representation, manages this work. Across the institution there is a network of 'Green Champions' who raise awareness of sustainability with staff. Students from all stages of study showed good awareness of, and spoke positively about, the range of sustainability initiatives available on campus including recycling, electric car charging, the bike rental scheme, the Green and Blue Space shop, and a range of events to promote sustainability. They felt there was an ethos of 'contributing without realising'. They did however express concerns that, on occasion, from their perspective, sustainability initiatives did feel driven more by the Students' Union and that the University could do more to recognise barriers to sustainability, for example, a lack of access to public transport.

129 Health, wellbeing and active lifestyles are a core part of the University's ethos. The University is designated Scotland's 'University for Sporting Excellence' (paragraph 3), has invested significantly in its sports facilities and became Sports University of the Year in 2020. The University strongly believes there are positive links between wellbeing and success in learning and teaching, and encourages all areas of the University community to engage with fitness and wellbeing. It provides a significant number and range of activities linked to promoting and supporting wellbeing throughout the academic year, from large groups of students taking part in yoga together as part of induction to a 'Lockdown Fitness Programme' which offered free virtual weekly classes to students, staff and the wider University community.

130 The University's continued commitment to sporting excellence and the focus on the connection between wellbeing and learning, particularly throughout the pandemic, was praised by student representatives. While some student representatives pointed out that the new sports complex may not appeal to all students, they were generally positive about the focus on wellness and the expert help available in the gym. Students value the focus on wellbeing to support learning and appreciate having access to highly qualified and knowledgeable staff and excellent facilities, the encouraging and positive atmosphere

created, the sense of community, and the support for both recreational and performance sport. They were also positive about the links the sports facilities created with the local community, and the networking opportunities this provided for them.

131 The COVID-19 pandemic has understandably disrupted the University's ongoing plans for further development of the campus, which were predicated on face-to-face teaching. The University fully recognises the need, and has already started developing its approach to supporting blended learning in the future, aiming to retain the best of practice developed during the pandemic. The ELIR team encourages the University to continue to progress with these plans.

132 The University has invested in a broad range of technologies and digital tools which it uses effectively to support the delivery of both learning and teaching and the wider student experience. The University has made effective use of feedback gathered from staff and students, including information from the Jisc Digital Skills Survey (in 2016-17 and 2019-20), to establish an evidence-informed approach to developing its digital platforms. The University works actively with the Students' Union to agree priorities and draws upon its support when communicating to students about how services are being enhanced in response to their feedback.

133 The University has implemented a new virtual learning environment (VLE) which supports induction, and learning, teaching and assessment activities, and allows students to access a range of services including careers, Student Learning Services (SLS) and the Careers and Employability Service. All students, regardless of location and mode of delivery, have access to the VLE. Other developments include the use of an online mobile campus app, which provides remote access to University services and core information including the VLE, email, student identity cards, a laptop lending service and online meeting platforms. An application which supports students to access specialist academic software from any device without having to be on campus received particular praise from student representatives, with this software and the laptop lending service viewed as invaluable to students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

134 The University offers a range of training for staff and students in the use of the VLE and other digital platforms and technologies, with the Academic Development and Learning Technology teams supporting staff in the use of these technologies to enhance their pedagogical practice. Co-curricular workshops on digital skills are available for both new and returning students. The ELIR team also noted that the University is planning to procure a personalised timetabling system.

135 As part of its commitment to mainstreaming inclusive practice, the University's policy on audio visual materials to support learning outlines that all lectures should be recorded and are automatically captioned, with all designated teaching rooms equipped with the necessary software. Known as the 'Listen Again' initiative, this practice is widely adopted across the faculties, allowing students to listen back to lecture materials. However, the ELIR team noted from the AIS that there are concerns from staff that this initiative leads to a drop in lecture attendance and disengagement from some students.

136 Students commented very positively about the accessibility of online resources, particularly the functionality of the online mobile campus app which allows them to book library seats and access the library catalogue. Students also highlighted that the University provided them with access to a range of software which, while unrelated to their course, is useful for their professional development. Students welcomed support from the University in supplying much-needed hardware, including laptops and screens during the pandemic.

137 The University makes use of a range of digital user metrics related to the use of its library resources and electronic reading lists to support its decisions on further investment in

the digital catalogue and to ensure students have appropriate access to the resources they need to support their learning and teaching. Most of the University's programmes adopt electronic reading lists, with the University planning to launch a new reading list system and further enhancement to its library management systems in Summer 2021. Student representatives spoke extremely positively about the support they received from library staff who were viewed as being responsive to student feedback, using it to enhance the services. The continued expansion of digital resources in the library, particularly during the pandemic, has been well received by students. Student representatives had more mixed views on the online availability of some books and resources prescribed as recommended/essential reading on module reading lists.

138 From the evidence presented, the ELIR team commends the University for the significant progress it has made with its vision for the student learning environment, undertaking a significant re-design and re-development of its facilities which effectively meets the diverse needs of students and staff and which also supports engagement with local communities, through access to sports and other facilities and the physical campus itself. The University proactively promotes and uses the campus as a learning environment within its programmes of studies. It has also effectively used its status as Scotland's University for Sporting Excellence to benefit the wider University population, positively supporting the development of the University's ethos of health and wellbeing and the benefits of adopting an active lifestyle as components of the wider student experience.

## **2.6 Effectiveness of the approach to enhancing the student learning experience**

139 Overall, the University has an effective approach to enhancing the student learning experience. This is evidenced by a well-managed student representation system and effective collaborative partnership working between the Students' Union and the University, with the University working to further enhance the engagement of the broader student population. Students are provided with a variety of formal and informal feedback opportunities which it uses effectively to enable it to listen and effectively respond to the student voice.

140 Strong institutional commitment has ensured that equality, diversity and inclusion is embedded in the culture of the University and its collaborative partners. The University's strategic approach to equality, diversity and inclusion has been developed, and is being delivered, in partnership with the Students' Union and is also underpinned by a comprehensive range of initiatives involving both staff and students.

141 Recognising the diversity of its student population, the University has developed an extensive range of high quality and accessible student services that support the needs of all students. Examples include the 'Supporting Staff to Support Students' website; the support provided by Student Learning Services and the Library - tailored to the needs of specific groups and individuals, and the 'Stirling Essentials' module including the student-facing 'Prepare at Stirling' skills workshops.

142 The University's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been tailored, well-planned and agile in supporting the shift to the online delivery of learning, teaching and assessment, and continued to provide comprehensive student-facing support services. This has been effectively achieved through close partnership working with staff and students, underpinned by a coordinated approach to communications. Examples include the range of support available to both staff and students including training in the use of online technologies and the 'Students as Partners in Learning' approach which involved students 'road testing' newly developed online module content.

143 The University has made significant progress with its vision for the student learning environment, undertaking a significant re-design and re-development of its facilities which effectively meets the diverse needs of students and staff and which also supports engagement with local communities, through access to sports and other facilities, and the physical campus itself. The University proactively promotes and uses the campus as a learning environment within its programmes of studies. It has also effectively used its status as Scotland's University for Sporting Excellence to benefit the wider University population, positively supporting the development of the University's ethos of health and wellbeing and the benefits of adopting an active lifestyle as components of the wider student experience.

144 Overall, the University's arrangements for managing and enhancing the postgraduate experience are effective. It is recommended that the University review the current governance and reporting arrangements for the Institute for Advanced Studies, to ensure these provide the University and in particular Academic Council, with appropriate and effective oversight of the totality of the postgraduate research student experience including student progression and awards, student feedback, and student engagement with training and research skills provision.

145 In the context of its ambition to grow postgraduate research student numbers, as a matter of priority, the University is asked to review and clarify its requirements for the training and ongoing development of postgraduate research supervisors, ensuring these are clearly communicated to staff and that all supervisors (new and more established) have the opportunity to undertake these training and development requirements and appropriate mechanisms are in place to ensure completion is recorded and monitored.

### **3 Strategy and practice for enhancing learning and teaching**

#### **3.1 Strategic approach to enhancement**

146 The University has an effective strategic approach for enhancing learning and teaching and the wider student experience, managed through its governance, management and committee structures, and supported by the faculties and a range of central support services.

147 Ultimate authority for academic decision-making within the University is the responsibility of the Academic Council. Academic Council delegates responsibility for strategic oversight and leadership of education and the student experience to the Education and Student Experience Committee (ESEC). In turn, ESEC is supported by the University Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee (ULTQC) which is responsible for assuring quality and standards in learning and teaching; and the Student Experience Committee (SEC) which promotes development and enhancement of the student experience. Research degrees are overseen by the Doctoral Committee, which is part of the governance structure of the IAS (paragraph 112).

148 Supporting the delivery of the University's Strategic Plan, the Learning and Teaching Quality Enhancement Strategy (LTQES), approved by ESEC in 2018, seeks to deliver a distinctive, high-quality learning experience for students. This Strategy also supports, and is supported by, other strategies including the Digital Learning Strategy and the Research Strategy. Implementation of LTQES has been accompanied by significant investment in the learning and teaching environment (paragraphs 125-138) and the configuration of student support services (paragraphs 84-86). Academic staff and staff who support learning and teaching commented positively about having appropriate opportunities to contribute to the development and implementation of institutional strategy. They also believed that current committee and working group structures support the effective communication and cascading of 'key messages' to the wider University community.

149 The University Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee, convened by the Dean for Teaching Quality Enhancement, oversees the implementation of the Learning and Teaching Quality Enhancement Strategy (LTQES) and reports annually to the Education and Student Experience Committee (ESEC) on its implementation and progress. The University has also developed a Student Experience Framework (SEF) (paragraphs 62 and 63). The themes within the SEF complement those of the LTQES. Both the SEF and LTQES are led by the Deputy Principal (Education and Students), with oversight of the delivery and future direction of the SEF the responsibility of the Student Experience Committee (SEC).

150 Since the last ELIR in 2015, there has been significant change in the University's leadership for learning and teaching including changes to posts, roles, portfolios and the staff involved. Strategic leadership for learning and teaching and the wider student experience is provided by the Deputy Principal (Education and Students) supported by the Academic Registrar, the Dean for Student Experience and the Dean for Teaching Quality Enhancement. This team has been in place since 2018 and has been core to the current ELIR preparations and to the University's response during the COVID-19 pandemic (paragraphs 64-70).

151 In addition to working closely with the Students' Union, these academic leaders work in close partnership with an expanded (since ELIR 3) team of professional service leads which includes new Directors of Information Services; Estates and Campus Services; and International and Partnership activity. Within faculties and divisions, academic leadership is provided through deans and heads of division.

152 The 2015 ELIR report commended the role of divisional Directors of Learning and Teaching. More recently these roles have evolved into the post of Associate Deans Learning and Teaching (ADLT), who work as part of their Faculty Executive in overseeing and leading learning and teaching quality and contribute at an institutional level as a community of practice. The ADLTs chair faculty Learning and Teaching Committees (LTCs) and are members of ESEC. In respect of ESEC's sub-committees, all ADLTs are members of the University Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee (ULTQC), and two are appointed as members of the SEC.

153 The ADLTs play a pivotal role, acting as a highly effective conduit to progressing key developments linked to learning and teaching and curriculum development, and support the sharing of practice across the University. During the pandemic, the ADLTs were part of a group chaired by the Deputy Principal (Education and Students) which included the University Chief Examiner and the Vice President for Education of the Students' Union which met on a weekly basis to drive the development of policy and management of quality, learning and teaching (paragraph 64).

### **3.2 Impact of the national Enhancement Themes and related activity**

154 The national Enhancement Themes are a key external reference point for the University and have been used effectively, making a demonstrable contribution to policy and practice aimed at enhancing learning and teaching. The University has an effective approach to engaging students and staff with its Enhancement Themes work. Students and staff were familiar with the activities being undertaken and spoke positively about opportunities to engage with particular pieces of work. The University's work in relation to the Enhancement Themes is overseen by an institutional steering group, chaired by the Dean for Teaching Quality Enhancement and with student representation. Enhancement Themes work is effectively aligned to institutional strategic priorities. The ELIR team viewed the University's partnership working with the Students' Union and the level of student engagement achieved in the University's Themes work positively.

155 The University has demonstrated sustained and positive engagement in the national Theme activity. The Students' Union Vice President Education (between 2016-18), was the student lead on the Theme Leaders' Group during the final year of the Student Transitions Theme and the first year of the Evidence for Enhancement Theme. They also chaired the steering group for the student-led project, 'Students using Evidence', which was delivered as part of the Evidence for Enhancement Theme. The University is leading the Decolonising the Curriculum collaborative cluster in the current Resilient Learning Communities Theme. It also made a significant contribution to the Learning Analytics collaborative cluster which ran as part of the Evidence for Enhancement Theme including supporting a number of student interns over the duration of this work. Staff and students have also contributed to sector events including Focus On and QAA Scotland's Enhancement Conferences.

156 During the review, the ELIR team saw evidence that work undertaken by the University linked to the previous Enhancement Themes on Student Transitions and Evidence for Enhancement had a positive impact on the development of policy and practice that extended beyond the lifetime of that Theme. Examples include work to support student transitions into first year from college to university and work to define the roles of programme directors and module coordinators.

157 The University has identified a plan of work for the first year of the new Resilient Learning Communities Theme, which strategically aligns with the LTQES. Its activity will build on the institution's COVID-19 response and aims to strengthen its learning communities.

### **3.3 Approaches to identifying and sharing good practice**

158 The University has systematic mechanisms in place for identifying and sharing good practice, using a comprehensive range of formal and informal mechanisms to achieve this. The University's governance and committee structures and quality processes support the identification and sharing of good practice. The University's monitoring and review processes, including module reviews, annual programme reviews and Learning and Teaching Reviews, all specifically support the requirement to reflect on and identify innovative and/or good practice linked to learning and teaching, with the documentation supplied providing evidence to support the ELIR team's view that this approach is becoming increasingly well embedded in the operation of these processes. The team would encourage the University to continue with its plans to further disseminate this practice.

159 The Academic Development team (paragraph 167) play a key role in identifying and sharing good learning and teaching practice from across the University. The work of the Academic Development Partners to support staff on the PGCLTHE (paragraphs 170 and 171) and to progress towards Advance HE fellowship has resulted in the formation of a number of informal participant networks, for example, the Teacher Support Network. Both the PGCLTHE and the Stirling Framework for Evidencing Learning and Teaching Enhancement (SFELTE) (paragraph 169) provide staff with a range of opportunities to share innovations and best practice in their learning and teaching. Academic Development has also developed a series of workshops, events and podcasts, and have produced and collated resources and guides for staff.

160 The ELIR team heard from staff that they valued the work undertaken by the Academic Development team. They spoke very positively about the support the team provided during the initial move to online delivery in March 2020. In particular they valued the development sessions and good practice resources which had effectively supported them in planning the delivery of learning and teaching during the current academic session (2020-21).

161 The ELIR team recognise the role played by the ADLTs in facilitating the sharing of institutional and sector learning and teaching innovation through the Faculty Learning and Teaching Committees and by acting as an effective conduit for sharing best practice from programme teams within the divisions and faculties, through their membership of, and contribution to, university-level committees where appropriate. Staff confirmed these structures had developed and proved particularly invaluable during the COVID-19 pandemic.

162 The ELIR team also heard from staff about the early success of the University's drive to build 'Communities of Practice' (introduced in 2019), commenting on how this approach has already increased the number of staff preparing Advance HE fellowship applications. The Faculty Champions network is a positive example of this approach and was core to the institution's learning and teaching response to the pandemic and the move to Technology Enabled Education. Two champions, who are members of academic staff from each faculty, worked with representatives from Academic Development, Learning Technology, SLS and the Students' Union to support staff and share practice as staff redesigned modules for the autumn of 2020. The group has been renamed the Faculty Partners Group and will continue to work with Academic Development on supporting the enhancement of learning and teaching practice in the faculties. Staff spoke particularly positively about the impact of this network.

### **3.4 Engaging, developing and supporting staff**

163 The University has appropriate arrangements in place for engaging and supporting staff in the development of their learning, teaching and academic practice, providing a range of formal and informal staff development opportunities.

164 The 2015 ELIR recommended that the University ensure there is a coordinated approach for identifying and addressing the development needs of staff across the University in order to support the implementation of institutional strategy, as well as promoting staff engagement with advances in learning and teaching practice. From this review, the ELIR team concluded that the University had made good progress in addressing this recommendation through its annually-produced University Development Plan and annual staff review process (Achieving Success) which influence the production of a comprehensive staff development plan.

165 The Human Resources and Organisation Development (HR&OD) Directorate is responsible for delivering an approach to people recruitment and development that ensures that skills and capability requirements are identified and available across the University. The People Strategy is an enabling strategy to the University Strategic Plan and supporting the development of academic staff is central to the LTQES. The University uses an annually-based Development Plan, linked to its annual performance and professional development framework - 'Achieving Success' to help plan both academic and professional service staff development needs. Staff spoke very positively about Stirling's People Strategy and the 'Achieving Success' annual review process, highlighting the positive link between the conversations held during their annual review and their resultant workload and ability to identify personal development opportunities.

166 The University has a stated commitment to enhancing recognition and reward for excellent teaching, which is stated in role descriptors and part of its promotion process. Academic staff on Teaching and Scholarship contracts had a positive experience of this commitment and were satisfied that they have appropriate opportunities for career progression, reward and promotion. The RA states that the University plans further enhancements including more structured induction for all academic staff and further support for programme leaders.

167 The Academic Development team has primary responsibility for academic staff development, supporting the development of learning and teaching practice across the University and supporting staff to gain professional recognition of their teaching. During the review, the ELIR team learned of a very recent decision (March 2021) to relocate the Academic Development team from within the HR&OD Directorate to become part of Information Services. The University believes this re-structuring will allow it to continue to capitalise on the benefits it has gained from the close working of the Academic Development team with Learning Technology and Student Learning Services (SLS) during the COVID-19 pandemic. The team viewed this development positively.

168 The Academic Development team offer a range of activities to support the development of academic staff including workshops, events, online modules, a range of online resources, and the annual teaching and learning conference. It supports academic induction and a range of staff networks including the Teacher Support Network and the Scholarship Network. It also leads the development and delivery of the University's continuing professional development framework for learning and teaching - The Stirling Framework for Evidencing Learning and Teaching Enhancement (SFELTE) and organises the annual Teaching Impact Awards, which are based on the National Teaching Fellowship and Collaborative Award for Teaching Excellence (CATE) awards scheme.

169 The SFELTE is mapped against the UK Professional Development Framework (UKPSF) and accredited by AdvanceHE. The SFELTE offers a number of routes for staff to gain fellowship and the RA confirms that a Senior Fellow Network has been created to allow these colleagues to share practice and support other staff who are developing their applications. Since the last ELIR, the University has seen growth in the number of staff engaging with the SFELTE and gaining recognition, with this increase continuing during the pandemic. The ELIR team viewed the increased engagement of staff with the SFELTE positively and encourage the University to continue to promote the scheme to staff.

170 The University also offers a Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (PGCLTHE) which aligns with the UKPSF, is accredited by Advance HE, and is a credit-bearing pathway for the SFELTE. The PGCLTHE is available to both new and more experienced staff, with the first module of the programme being a mandatory aspect of probation for new members of staff in teaching and supporting learning roles.

171 Staff spoke enthusiastically about the fact that one of the real positives associated with both the SFELTE and PGCLTHE has been the establishment of participant networks which have proved invaluable in sharing learning and teaching practice and provided additional support for colleagues as they were taking forward enhancements to their online practice during the pandemic. Staff were also positive about having opportunities to engage with the broader suite of activities delivered by the Academic Development team, particularly valuing the annual Teaching and Learning Conference. The ELIR team viewed the strengthened role for faculty level teams, including the network of Faculty Champions (paragraph 162) working in partnership with the institution's learning and teaching leadership and Academic Development team, as effective and a positive approach.

172 The 2015 ELIR recommended that all students and staff who teach receive adequate training in advance and are supported to carry out this role. In response, the University undertook a substantial review of its Teaching Assistant processes in consultation with the faculties and key stakeholders. The review broadly concluded that 'over time, the lack of central ownership and regular review had led to many inconsistencies evolving in relation to teaching assistant engagement terms, activity and payrates'. The RA outlines a number of substantive changes that were approved and implemented in 2019-20 including standardised job descriptions and targeted training for staff delivered both centrally and in the faculties. The University considers that these changes will ensure a much more

consistent and supportive approach to the appointment and development of all students and staff who teach. From session 2020-21, the Academic Development team will receive regular updates from the faculties on new appointments, so their training and development needs can be managed. During the review visit, the ELIR team learned that the University's Teaching Assistant scheme had been temporarily suspended due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

173 PGR students who had recent experience of delivering teaching said they had been largely supported by module coordinators, and that support and development from elsewhere in the University was variable and the process for their recruitment was unclear and should be more transparent. The ELIR team heard from staff that the scheme is to be reinstated after progress was hampered by the pandemic and is being considered as part of University budgetary planning. The ELIR team encourages the University to re-introduce the Teaching Assistant scheme (including the training aspect of this scheme) and ensure the planned changes are fully implemented to support consistency of application across the institution.

### **3.5 Effectiveness of the approach to implementing institutional strategies and enhancing learning and teaching**

174 The University has an effective strategic approach for enhancing learning and teaching and the wider student experience, managed through its governance, management and committee structures, and supported by the faculties and a range of central support services. The national Enhancement Themes are a key external reference point for the University and have made a demonstrable contribution to policy and practice aimed at enhancing learning and teaching. The University has also made good progress in developing a coordinated approach for identifying and addressing the development needs of staff across the University and has appropriate systems in place to train, develop and support staff who teach.

175 The University has systematic mechanisms in place for identifying and sharing good practice, using a comprehensive range of both formal and informal mechanisms to achieve this. The University's governance and committee structures and quality processes support the identification and sharing of good practice. The Associate Deans Learning and Teaching (ADLTs) play a key role in facilitating the sharing of institutional and sector learning and teaching innovation through the Faculty Learning and Teaching Committees and by acting as effective conduits for sharing best practice from programme teams within the divisions and faculties, through their membership of, and contribution to, university-level committees.

176 The University has appropriate arrangements in place for engaging and supporting staff in the development of their learning, teaching and academic practice, providing a range of formal and informal staff development opportunities. The Academic Development team play a key role in the development and support of academic staff.

## **4 Academic standards and quality processes**

### **4.1 Key features of the institution's approach to managing quality and academic standards**

177 The University has effective and systematic arrangements in place for managing quality and securing academic standards. The University's approach to managing quality and setting, maintaining, reviewing and assessing standards is described in its Quality Assurance and Enhancement Framework. This Framework applies to all credit-bearing provision at the University, including collaborative programmes delivered in partnership with other institutions. The Framework aligns with the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF) in

Scotland, the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, and the Scottish Funding Council Guidance to Higher Education.

178 Ultimate responsibility for setting and maintaining academic standards lies with Academic Council. Responsibility for the strategic oversight and regulation of the University's activity relevant to education and students is delegated to the Education and Student Experience Committee (ESEC). The University Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee (ULTQC) is chaired by the Dean for Teaching Quality Enhancement, reports to ESEC, and is responsible for the standards and effectiveness of learning and teaching. Both committees have formal student representation. The ELIR team understands that, following a delay caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the University plans to further enhance its approach to reporting on and disseminating the key findings from the monitoring and evaluation activities of its main academic committees and reflect on how discussions from these committees can be more effectively disseminated across the institution. This work is now scheduled for summer 2021.

179 There is a comprehensive set of self-evaluation processes for the University's learning and teaching provision including module reviews, annual programme reviews, and a rolling programme of Learning and Teaching Reviews.

### **Programme approval**

180 The 2015 ELIR recommended that the University should 'involve academic expertise from outside the institution in its programme approval arrangements, and make explicit where and how external reference points have been used in the programme development process, in line with the UK Quality Code for Higher Education'. Following this recommendation, a review of module and programme approval processes was undertaken.

181 There is now a five-stage process for the approval of new modules and programmes, detailed in the Quality Handbook. The approval process is overseen by the ESEC, through its Programme Business Sub-committee which is chaired by the Deputy Principal (Education and Students). The ELIR team understands that this committee membership consists of internal University representatives and it may call on external advisors as required when approving new modules and programmes, however the team did not see any evidence to confirm their use.

182 The University's programme proposal form requires details of engagement with external advisors (for example, employers, advisory board, alumni, external examiners) in the development of the proposal. The University has also established a Programme Development Resource Hub. This webpage describes the co-production model of programme development and encourages consultation with a wide range of internal stakeholders, known as co-producers, and external advice in the construction of the proposal. Co-producers are defined as individuals and teams that can support the development of a proposal, such as Academic Development, Accessibility and Inclusion, and Careers and Employability, who are all internal to the University.

183 The ELIR team concluded, based on the documentation provided and from discussions with staff, that currently there is no systematic use of external academic expertise in the module and programme approval process. While the team accepts that the module and programme approval process meets the requirements of the UK Quality Code, the University is encouraged to reflect on the current Guiding Principles for the use of External Expertise and consider whether its current arrangements do indeed allow for the use of 'one or more external experts as advisors to provide impartial and independent scrutiny on the approval and review of all provision that leads to the award of credit or a qualification' and also ensures independence of decision-making, where those involved with the developments of a proposal should not be the same as those who approve it.

## Annual monitoring

184 Annual Programme Monitoring operates at faculty level. Programme Directors are responsible for monitoring their honours programmes, their component of combined honours programmes, and postgraduate taught programmes of study. Programme reports are considered at Faculty Learning and Teaching Committees and any action required taken forward by the divisional committee and SSFCs. Summary reports are submitted to the Academic Registry, Academic Quality and Governance team, and considered by the University Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee. The faculty is responsible for any follow-up on action points.

185 A review of the Annual Programme Monitoring process was approved by ESEC in December 2019. An implementation plan was due to be presented to ESEC in May 2020 detailing the actions and timelines for the introduction of the new process, but this was delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic. While monitoring will continue to take place at programme level, the ELIR team understands that the new process will include more explicit reflection at a subject level and strengthening of the support for critical reflection on learning, teaching and the student experience. There will also be a more explicit link between Annual Programme Monitoring and the Learning and Teaching Review processes.

186 Annual Programme Monitoring reports and committee minutes considered by the ELIR team confirm the current process is effective with detailed discussion of programmes, consideration of good practice, and areas for development and clear action setting and monitoring. There is also evidence of detailed discussion of the reports at University Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee.

## Institution-led review

187 Learning and Teaching Reviews are conducted on a four to six-year cycle and overseen by ESEC. A full cycle of Learning and Teaching Reviews has taken place since the 2015 ELIR. Explicit in the Learning and Teaching Review process is consideration of the academic area's use of relevant external and internal benchmarks in the design and delivery of its programmes, including the University's Learning and Teaching Quality and Enhancement Strategy, the UK Quality Code, Subject Benchmark Statements, and the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework

188 Each review is undertaken by a panel comprising a deputy principal, an external adviser, a head of faculty/division or associate dean of learning and teaching from another faculty, and a student representative (normally a faculty officer). A subject area under review prepares a self-evaluation document, which must provide evidence of benchmarking to appropriate internal and external points of reference.

189 Students contribute to Learning and Teaching Reviews, as members of the review panels, and in the meetings with representative groups of students during the review visit. The process also includes provision for a Student Submission containing any points, issues or items of good practice that students from the subject discipline wish to bring to the attention of the review panel. Preparation of the submission is facilitated by the Students' Union Vice President Education, with contributions from the Faculty Officers. Student representatives spoke positively about their engagement with the Learning and Teaching Reviews. The students confirmed that the University provided thorough training to support their effective engagement in the review process.

190 Learning and Teaching Reviews in 'professional' subjects have sought advice from and involve local employers and placement providers. The documentation available to review panels includes any relevant professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) accreditation reports associated with the provision under review. Where possible, the review

cycle is aligned with any relevant PSRB approval or accreditation events, for example the review of Housing Studies, although the ELIR team understands this expectation is not explicit in the guidance documentation currently.

191 The resulting Learning and Teaching Review report includes a detailed commentary on all aspects of the area under review, including commendations and recommendations for action. In the report, the panel are required to make explicit comment on whether they had confidence in the quality and standards of the provision and also comment on the equality and diversity arrangements. The documentation considered by the ELIR team demonstrated a robust approach to making enhancement-orientated recommendations, which are subsequently monitored assiduously through the University's academic committee structures.

192 The University has adopted a very proactive approach in continuing to operate its Learning and Teaching Reviews to schedule during the pandemic. The transition to an online format for the reviews was generally received positively, and increased engagement from staff, students and external advisors was reported. The University is now considering its future approach to conducting these reviews and how virtual participation could add greatest value in the long term.

193 Based on the evidence presented, the ELIR team commends the operation of the University's institution-led review process which supports self-evaluation and enhancement. Learning and Teaching Review is systematic, robust and results in demonstrable actions with timelines that are rigorously monitored until completion. The review process has a number of positive features including the development of a 'student contribution', within a subject area's self-evaluation document, prepared by the Students' Union and Faculty Officers. The University proactively pivoted to an online process during the pandemic resulting in the seamless transition of the Learning and Teaching Review.

### **Professional services**

194 The University has undertaken thematic reviews of cross-institutional activities such as induction, orientation and transition. For example, a review in May 2016 considered the international student lifecycle and the overall coherence of support and contribution to the student experience across different professional services. The University's Learning and Teaching Review process is currently only used for academic subject discipline areas.

195 As part of the planning and resourcing cycle, the University conducts an annual monitoring and planning process that results in the annual Professional Services Leadership Plan. While the process may fulfil the functions of annual monitoring and strengthen the planning cycle, the ELIR team's view is that this process is limited in scope, it lacks appropriate input from internal stakeholders and the externality and rigour of a formal institution-led review, and as a result fails to provide the University with an effective and holistic picture of how its professional services are operating and contributing to the enhancement of the student experience. The team's view is that currently the University's arrangements do not fully meet the expectations set out in the SFC guidance to higher education institutions on quality.

196 The ELIR team therefore recommends that the University introduces a process for reviewing student-facing professional services that complements the current process of annual review, drawing on existing good practice in its approach to institution-led review of its academic provision. The review process should ensure input from internal stakeholders - including students and external expertise, be enhancement-led, and provide appropriate oversight to support the University to evaluate the contribution of these services to the quality of the student experience.

## Assessment practices

197 Overall, the University has effective arrangements in place for the management of assessment. The University's Assessment Policy was reviewed in 2020, resulting in a number of changes including new arrangements which allow students to resubmit reworked failed coursework assessments after feedback, rather than having to submit a new assessment. The University continues to reflect and consider further aspects of its Assessment Policy, particularly in the light of experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. The widespread use of online assessment during the pandemic has generally been positively received by staff and students, with the University fully recognising the need to consider the policy implications, together with digital poverty and connectivity issues.

198 The University makes effective use of a system of Subject Chief Examiners, who provide oversight of the examining process within each programme. There are also Faculty Chief Examiners who oversee the examination process across a whole faculty. In addition, a University Chief Examiner is responsible for oversight of examining across the whole University and chairs the University Faculty Chief Examiners Committee. This committee reports to ESEC via ULTC and provides detailed scrutiny of examinations and the boards that report to it, which include the Extenuating Circumstances Sub-boards, Module Boards, Award Boards and Faculty Boards.

199 There is comprehensive guidance for students on how to make an appeal or lodge a complaint. The Complaints Handling Procedure has recently been reviewed to ensure it continues to meet the guidance published by the Scottish Public Sector Ombudsman (SPSO). The new procedure was approved by University Court in March 2021 and is available on the University's website.

200 The University undertakes annual reviews of appeals and complaints that consider the number of submissions, any patterns or trends, and seek to identify any lessons that can be learnt. The ELIR team understands that these reports are used by senior management but, up to now, have not been formally considered by committee. The team were informed that the process for consideration of the reports is under review, together with their format to make them more reflective, and from session 2021-22 will be considered by ESEC. The team are supportive of this development.

201 All coursework submission, marking and feedback is conducted electronically, using the University's virtual learning environment (VLE) (paragraph 78). The University's Feedback Policy stipulates a turnaround time of 15 working days or fewer, and that the return date is clearly stated within the module template which students can access on the VLE. Adherence to the policy is monitored by the faculties. Although there were a few isolated examples of slow feedback from some faculties, the majority of students, including TNE students studying at partner institutions, who spoke to the ELIR team were positive about the quality and timeliness of feedback. They found the assessment to be useful, with a good mix of different types. Marking was closely linked to the grading criteria, and feedback and feed forward was helpful.

## 4.2 Use of external reference points in quality processes

202 Overall, 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. The University's Quality Assurance and Enhancement Framework aligns with the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, the Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework and the guidance for institutions provided by the Scottish Funding Council. The University has undertaken a thorough mapping to the UK Quality Code, which also has numerous references to the use of external frameworks, benchmarks and advisors.

203 There is evidence of appropriate external involvement in module and programme design through a range of mechanisms including Business Advisory Groups and Graduate Apprenticeship requirements, and proposals are required to make appropriate reference to relevant external reference points. However, as noted in paragraphs 181-183, while there is external input into module and programme design, the ELIR team have concluded that there is no systematic use of external academic advisors in the approval process itself.

204 There is appropriate use of external expertise in the University's Learning and Teaching Review process, in the form of the external member of the review panel. The self-evaluation document prepared by each subject area must demonstrate due consideration of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, QAA Subject Benchmark Statements, and other publications by professional, accrediting or funding bodies as appropriate. As described in paragraph 190, employers and placement providers are consulted whenever possible, as are any PSRB reports.

### **External examiners**

205 The University expects its external examiners to comment on the academic standard of the components they review, and the performance of the students compared to that of students on similar programmes at other UK higher education institutions, together with any areas of good practice or recommendations for enhancement and to specifically confirm that any issues raised in previous reports have been addressed.

206 The University's Quality Assurance and Enhancement Framework details the procedures for the appointment of external examiners. Each appointment is formally made by Academic Council on the recommendation of faculties, with submissions approved by the Deputy Principal (Education and Students) on behalf of Academic Council.

207 Faculty Chief Examiners (paragraph 198) are responsible for oversight of the responses that programme leaders make to their external examiner reports. A summary report of all external examiner reports received by the faculty, together with action taken, is submitted to Academic Registry each year but there is no equivalent university-wide analysis of the issues arising from these reports. The ELIR team was informed that the University had started to review its arrangements for the consideration of external examiner reports at both faculty and institutional level, along with the mechanisms used by the University to make these reports available to students, but this work was halted because of the pandemic. The team would encourage the University to re-commence this review as soon as possible, so it can continue to enhance institutional oversight of themes arising from its external examiner reports and use these to continue to develop the student experience.

208 The University's Quality Assurance and Enhancement Framework states that student representatives should be given the opportunity to be fully involved in the consideration of external examiner reports, and that external examiner reports should be made available to students on request. However, the University accepts that the sharing of these reports and the feedback provided by the University in response to them could be more effectively shared with students and greater access to reports should be provided to students. Students who spoke with the ELIR team generally did not understand the role of external examiners and were unaware of their reports. The ELIR team therefore recommends that the University ensures that all students have clear information about the work of external examiners including their role and have easy access to the external examiner reports for their programmes of study and are also clear about how these can be accessed.

### 4.3 Commentary on action taken since ELIR 3

209 The 2015 ELIR identified nine areas for development and the current ELIR team agreed with the University that it has made significant progress in the majority of these areas and has worked to address them all. Oversight for the progress of the ELIR recommendations was provided by ESEC, with the Dean of Teaching Quality Enhancement and the Academic Registrar ensuring actions were progressed in an appropriate and timely manner. Information on how these recommendations have been progressed is detailed throughout this report and summarised below.

210 The evidence presented during the review allowed the ELIR team to conclude that the University had also continued to further enhance and embed the commendations made during the 2015 ELIR. A good example of this is the work that has been done to strengthen and evolve the role of what have now become known as the Associate Deans for Learning and Teaching (ADLT) (formerly Directors of Teaching and Learning) (paragraphs 152 and 153).

211 To further develop critical academic dialogue in the committee structure, the University has taken forward a number of actions including amendments to these committee remits and reporting structures at university and faculty level (paragraphs 149-151) and has also refreshed learning and teaching leadership portfolios. The enhancement of the ADLT roles has been effective in ensuring effective faculty-level representation; supports better communication, particularly in defining where flexibility can and cannot be permitted when institutional policy is implemented in different disciplines and contexts; and supports the sharing of policy and practice across the key committees with responsibility for quality and education matters at university and faculty level (paragraphs 152 and 153).

212 Through its People Strategy, the annual Staff Development Plan and the University's 'Achieving Success' performance monitoring and staff development approach, the University now operates a more coordinated approach to identifying and addressing the development needs of all staff. The Academic Development team have primary responsibility for delivering training and development sessions for academic staff and provide appropriate opportunities for staff to engage with advances in learning and teaching practice (paragraph 167).

213 To ensure that all students and staff who teach receive adequate training, the University undertook significant revisions to its processes and procedures including the introduction of standardised job descriptions and the use of targeted training for staff, delivered both centrally and in the faculties (paragraphs 172 and 173).

214 The University has made important progress with its development of the postgraduate research student experience and continues to work on the development of a research community across the divisions/faculties. This included a range of activities such as the development of the Supervising Doctoral Students' training programme, the establishment of the IAS, and new learning and study spaces specifically for postgraduate students. In terms of its arrangements for research supervisor training, the University enhanced its institution-wide 'Supervising Doctoral Studies' (SDS) programme implemented in late 2016. The establishment of the IAS will further support staff with their ongoing development needs (paragraphs 120-124).

215 The ELIR team is content that the University's programme approval arrangements do qualify the use of external reference points and academic expertise from outside the University in the programme development phase. However, the team remains concerned that current arrangements do not support the use of external academic expertise in the final approval process (paragraph 183).

216 The ELIR team was able to confirm that the University has taken forward its plans to implement a revised approach to managing collaborative activity which includes formal and systematic arrangements for approving and reapproving collaborative provision. These allow for appropriate institutional oversight of the activity through the University's committee structures.

#### **4.4 Approach to using data to inform decision-making and evaluation**

217 Overall, the University has an effective approach to using data to inform its decision-making. The University employs a range of technology-based systems which support the generation of education-focused information. These systems provide data which underpins the reporting to inform policy development, a range of committees and its quality-related processes, for example Learning and Teaching Reviews and annual monitoring processes. The University is currently implementing an ambitious programme of new or ongoing systems and data development projects which are running in parallel. These include work on learning analytics, curriculum management software, the recently updated and refreshed VLE, student placement software, a new online mobile campus app, digital examination and assessment software, and updates to the existing module evaluation system.

218 Individually these developments will support the activity and processes they are designed to enhance. The ELIR team noted that a number of these projects, once implemented, have significant potential to generate and provide further information for staff, particularly at programme and module level, to support and better understand the student experience, engagement and attainment. Indeed, the timing of their introduction was viewed very positively by students and staff who spoke specifically about the fact that these systems and software had greatly supported the transition to off-campus learning, teaching and assessment in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many also highlighted the significant potential to support blended learning and assessment innovation in the post-COVID environment, both on and off campus.

219 Discussions with staff from across the University indicate that data is often fragmented, is not always sufficiently consistent or accessible, or doesn't provide the level of granularity necessary to reflect the diversity of student needs and experience. Feedback from staff who met with the ELIR team emphasised the importance of systems being tailored to ensure all stakeholders, across all levels, have appropriate and timely access to the data they require for operational, planning, decision-making and reporting purposes, in order to support the University's ambitions to enhance the student experience.

220 During the review, the ELIR team learned that the University is currently undertaking a fundamental review of its approach to information and data management and its related software and systems. The University recognises this review provides an opportunity for it to adopt an approach which will support the development of, and maximise the benefits to be gained from, exploring opportunities to integrate systems. This position is also supported by the team, who would encourage the University to ensure that staff have access to integrated reports, which support them to undertake their respective roles.

221 The ELIR team recommends that the University complete the fundamental review of its approach to data management which is currently underway and use this opportunity to explore and maximise the benefits to be realised from the integration of key University information systems. In addition, there would be benefit to the University in ensuring that its approach to data management and reporting ensures all stakeholders, across all levels, have timely and tailored access to the information they require for operational, planning, decision-making and reporting purposes, in order to support its ambitions to enhance the student experience.

#### **4.5 Effectiveness of the arrangements for securing academic standards**

222 The University has effective and systematic arrangements in place for setting and securing academic standards which meet the expectations set out in the UK Quality Code and SFC guidance to institutions on quality, making appropriate reference to the use of external reference points. Students are appropriately engaged in quality processes. The University has appropriate systems which enable the identification of good practice for wider dissemination.

#### **4.6 Effectiveness of the institution's approach to self-evaluation, including the effective use of data to inform decision-making**

223 Overall, the University has an effective approach to self-evaluation, through self-reflection, including its use of data to inform decision making. The operation of the University's institution-led review process effectively supports self-evaluation and enhancement. Learning and Teaching Review is systematic, robust and results in demonstrable actions with timelines that are rigorously monitored until completion. The review process has a number of positive features including the development of a 'student contribution' within a subject area's self-evaluation document, prepared by the Students' Union and Faculty Officers. The University proactively pivoted to an online process during the COVID-19 pandemic resulting in a seamless transition of the Learning and Teaching Review process.

224 The University is recommended to introduce a process for reviewing student-facing professional services that complements the current process of annual review, drawing on existing good practice in its approach to institution-led review of its academic provision. The review process should ensure input from internal stakeholders - including students - and external specialist expertise, be enhancement-led, and provide appropriate oversight to support the University to evaluate the contribution of these services to the quality of student experience.

225 The University is asked to ensure that all students have clear information about the work of external examiners including their role and have easy access to the external examiner reports for their programme of study and are also clear about how these can be accessed.

226 The University is asked to complete the fundamental review of its approach to data management which is currently underway and use this opportunity to explore and maximise the benefits to be realised from the integration of key University information systems. There would be benefit to the University in ensuring that its approach to data management and reporting ensures all stakeholders, across all levels, have timely and tailored access to the information they require for operational, planning, decision-making and reporting purposes, in order to support its ambitions to enhance the student experience.

## **5 Collaborative provision**

### **5.1 Key features of the institution's strategic approach**

227 The University has an effective approach to managing its collaborative provision including arrangements for securing academic standards and enhancing the student experience.

228 The University identified 'Collaborations and Partnerships' as one of its contextualised themes for this review. Management of collaborative activity was noted as an area for development during the 2015 ELIR. This ELIR team was able to confirm that, as

recommended, the University had taken forward its plans to revise its approach to managing collaborative activity. The institution has developed formal, systematic arrangements for approving and reapproving collaborative partners and collaborative provision. These also support the University to routinely review the provision and allow it to have explicit institutional oversight of its activities, through its committee structure, supporting the ongoing enhancement of the student learning experience.

229 The University has a range of partnerships including: UK collaborations with other education providers and organisations, with a long-established partnership with Forth Valley College (paragraphs 55-57); the INTO University of Stirling joint venture (paragraphs 59 and 60); a range of international collaborations, networks and partnerships including nine transnational education partnerships, 11 international articulations and progressions, six international research partnerships and one international school partnership; partnerships with employers and professional bodies and study abroad and work placement opportunities. The transnational education (TNE) partnerships include joint doctorates and a variety of double degrees, flying faculty provision and local delivery programmes. In evaluating the University's overall arrangements for the management of collaborative provision, the ELIR team focused on the following partnerships: Singapore Institute of Management; Muscat College, Oman; Planet Core, Ras Al Khaimah (RAK), UAE; and Hebei Normal University (HNU), China. During the review visit the ELIR team met with staff and students from these partners, as well as University staff with operational responsibility for these partnerships.

### **Strategic leadership and governance**

230 In the RA, the University recognises the management of its collaborative activity would benefit from more strategic direction and management and has undertaken some reorganisation of leadership roles to support this. It views itself as being in the 'comparatively early steps of transformation' of its approach to collaborative provision, with this activity remaining an ongoing priority.

231 The University Strategic Plan (2016-2021) (paragraph 5) states its intention to be a 'globally-connected university', and to continue to build and strengthen its international links. A review of the University's Internationalisation Strategy (2014-19) was initiated in 2017. Preparation of a new Strategy began in 2019, but work was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic and resumed in December 2020. The ELIR team was informed that work has continued into spring 2021, with the aim of bringing what will be named the Global Engagement Strategy to the University Strategy and Policy Group (USPG) (paragraph 6) for approval in summer 2021.

232 Leadership of collaborative provision is provided jointly by the Deputy Principal (International) and the Deputy Principal (Education and Students). The Directorate of Internationalisation and Partnerships (DIP), created in 2018, has overall responsibility for the management and delivery of the University's collaborative provision, working with colleagues within the faculties and key professional services to achieve this. The Directorate also maintains a register of all the University agreements which the ELIR team confirmed is up to date. Oversight of collaborative programmes is shared between the relevant faculty and the DIP. Each faculty has an associate dean with responsibility for day-to-day management of provision, and the faculty manager oversees the resourcing necessary.

233 Strategic oversight of the quality and enhancement of learning opportunities is the responsibility of the Education and Student Experience Committee (ESEC). This responsibility includes all collaborative provision. The Executive Director of DIP is a member of ESEC and the Curriculum Lifecycle Approval Sub-committee, providing the opportunity to contribute to module and programme development and management.

## **TNE - arrangements for managing quality and academic standards**

234 The DIP reviewed the portfolio of transnational education partnerships in 2019, resulting in a number of revisions to the University's arrangements for the management of collaborative provision and the maintenance of standards including revision of the University's due diligence processes for initial partnership approval, its delivery arrangements for any new TNE partnership developed, and the routine undertaking of a formal review for each TNE partner to coincide with contract renewal.

235 At the same time, a formal Partnership Management Team approach was introduced for each partnership, led by a Partnership Director who acts as the key point of contact with the partner, ensuring effective communications, undertakes visits to the partner, and ensures the partner satisfies the University's quality and standards requirements set out in the International Partnership Handbook. A Partnership Committee chaired by the Partnership Director was also established for each partnership and includes members from the University and the partner.

236 The International Partnerships Handbook was approved by ESEC in February 2021 and aligns with the QAA guidance on managing international collaborations and the UK Quality Code. The Handbook outlines the University's policy and processes for managing its TNE and articulation arrangements, setting out separate processes for the enquiry, approval, operation and monitoring, and termination stages. The Handbook introduced a strengthened due diligence process, with the Partnership Management Team required to maintain the risk assessment.

237 Any new partnership is considered in terms of supporting the University to meet its strategic objectives, with proposals considered against four key questions set out in the International Partnership Handbook. The ELIR team noted that the mode of interaction between the University and a potential partner is not included in this list of questions. During discussions with staff, it was clear that the University is willing to consider a range of modes of interaction, as confirmed by the variety of existing partnerships. While this approach presents challenges with scalability, sharing of best practice and standardisation of processes, it does facilitate the negotiation of agreements with institutions of considerable international reputation.

238 Programmes delivered through collaborative partnerships are subject to institution-led review as part of the University's Learning and Teaching Review process (paragraphs 187-193). The arrangements for the annual monitoring of TNE provision are set out in the International Partnership Handbook, with Annual Partnership Reports produced. The ELIR team understands that these arrangements for annual monitoring were recently introduced by ESEC but because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the process did not start until autumn 2020, with the first reports available at the end of the 2020-21 academic year. No reports were available at the time of this ELIR.

239 External examiners are normally appointed to cover both the collaborative and home campus provision of a module. The ELIR team were content that the University's policy of appointing Subject and Faculty Chief Examiners (paragraph 198), together with its processes for the management of module and award boards, ensures effective scrutiny and comparison of module results across all of the delivery partners involved.

240 At the time of this review, the ELIR team learned the University has recently decided to end its long-term partnership with Muscat College. The International Partnerships Handbook describes the procedures for terminating a collaborative partnership. It details the requirement for transitional arrangements to be put in place to ensure any students on the programme can complete their award, including consideration of any existing students who have been granted a leave of absence or have re-assessment opportunities remaining.

Guidance and support must be put in place for any remaining students on the terminating programme, and it is a requirement that existing monitoring and reporting of the partnership will be in place during 'teach-out' arrangements for students and any transfer of provision is completed.

241 It was evident to the ELIR team that the University has appropriate mechanisms in place to evaluate and monitor the quality of the learning and teaching and broader student experience at each of its partnerships. While seeking to work with a partner to rectify any concerns that the University may have, it is ultimately willing to terminate partnerships where these no longer meet its strategic intentions.

### **Student representation and support**

242 Responsibility for the strategic enhancement of the student learning experience, both on and off the home campus, lies with the Deputy Principal (Education and Students) who is supported in this area by the Dean for Student Experience and the Dean for Teaching Quality Enhancement. The University considers it to be of central importance that students at its collaborative partners consider themselves as University of Stirling students and aims to offer an equivalent experience to students, wherever they study. To achieve this, the University uses a number of approaches including regular communications, prioritising direct contact between the students and Stirling staff, teaching the same curriculum at both the Stirling campus and at the partner, students being able to enrol in the My Stirling award scheme, which recognises extra-curricular activities and achievements, and ensuring student feedback, gathered through surveys and SSFCs, is considered by the University. Students from a range of the University's TNE partners confirmed they felt connected with the University of Stirling and considered themselves to be students of the University.

243 The University confirmed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the DIP worked with the University's TNE partners to employ a number of measures to ensure students could continue with their teaching and learning. These included adjustments to assessments, moving teaching that would normally have been delivered face-to-face by flying faculty online, and supporting the provision of appropriate software to support learning.

244 Each TNE partnership is required to use a number of processes that collectively enable the University to assure and enhance the student experience. These include module feedback questionnaires, annual monitoring and reporting, and Learning and Teaching Review. This information is reviewed by the Partnership Management Team and the Associate Dean for Internationalisation, who are members of the Faculty Executive and Faculty Learning and Teaching Committee.

245 Stirling Students' Union does not generally represent students studying at TNE partners or provide training for student representatives. However, these partners are expected to operate equivalent student representation arrangements to those operated by the University of Stirling. The Vice President for Education from the Students' Union acknowledges this is an area that the Students' Union need to progress, but plans had been impacted by the pandemic. The ELIR team learned that opportunities exist for student representatives from TNE partners to have their contribution recognised, appearing on their academic transcripts. Most TNE partners operate a system of class/module representatives who attendance Student Staff Feedback Committees.

246 Student feedback is reviewed at Partnership Management Team Meetings and interim mid-agreement review. TNE students met by the team confirmed that appropriate systems were in place to gather and respond to their feedback including Student Staff Feedback Committees, module surveys conducted by the University and/or the partner, and less formal meetings with staff. They also gave examples of changes that had been made in response to their feedback.

247 All students studying with collaborative partners have access to University of Stirling support services, to complement those at their local institution. Faculties work with the Director of Student Support Services to ensure similar services are available at the TNE partners. The VLE also provides information to staff and students about the resources and support available and how these can be accessed remotely. TNE students reported that, while the nature and extent of local provision varied, they all had remote access to the professional support services at Stirling. Professional services staff reported that employability was very popular with students at the collaborative partners. Employability is embedded in modules for TNE partners and faculties have employability officers who deliver direct support for TNE students.

248 TNE partnerships students confirmed that they felt equipped to access online resources, commenting specifically on the accessibility of the VLE and library online resources and lecture recordings of sessions delivered on the Stirling campus. A number also appreciated the efforts that are made by staff to ensure students can access learning resources in other formats if these are unavailable due to government restrictions in some countries.

### **Support for staff**

249 The International Partnerships Handbook sets out the University's expectations around the appointment of staff to support the delivery of TNE provision. The ELIR team understands that all academic development opportunities offered by the University are available to TNE staff, including attendance at the Learning and Teaching Conference and nomination for the Teaching Impact Awards (paragraph 168). The University has promoted the availability of its Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education to staff in TNE partners, but it was subsequently decided that the SFELTE was a more appropriate qualification route, as it is more contextualised, focuses on an individual's experience and is also available via online resources (paragraph 169).

## **5.2 Effectiveness of the approach to managing collaborative provision including arrangements for securing academic standards and enhancing the student learning experience**

250 The University has made considerable progress since ELIR 3 and has introduced an effective approach for managing collaborative provision including arrangements for securing and maintaining academic standards and enhancing the student learning experience.

**QAA2624 - R10971 - Aug 21**

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