# Trends in Leadership of Quality Enhancement in the Scottish University Sector

**Summary report**

August 2019

# Background

This is a summary of the outcomes of work that was commissioned by The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education Scotland (QAAS) on behalf of the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC).

The remit and scope of the work was to evaluate institutional leadership of enhancement across the Scottish higher education (HE) sector from the inception of the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF) in 2003 to date. The full report on the work is available on the Enhancement Themes website.[1]

The work focused on three areas:

- changes in institutional leadership of learning and teaching enhancement
- the range of models and approaches currently in place
- key external and internal drivers.

A review of documentation, primarily Enhancement–Led Institutional Review (ELIR) reports from all cycles, and discussions with key sector staff have informed this report.

# Findings

Key findings from the work are:

- There continues to be strong institutional support for the enhancement–led approach to quality in the Scottish sector, with identifiable and visible senior leadership at Vice-Principal level (or equivalent).

- There has been a shift in institutional leadership with most institutions moving from having a single identified senior manager with responsibility for learning, teaching and enhancement towards the introduction of additional posts aimed at strengthening cross–institutional management and supporting the institution's enhancement priorities.

- Structures within faculties/schools often mirror the senior institutional roles, with a member of staff being identified as responsible for learning, teaching and enhancement in each academic unit.

- Professional support departments/units increasingly contribute to shaping the strategic direction of learning and teaching and, while there has been a significant amount of change in the way professional services are organised, there is a strong trend towards delivering more integrated services as a consequence of the services becoming more explicitly student–focused.

- Across the ELIR 3 cycle especially, there has been an increased focus on the holistic student experience, with much closer integration of the various elements comprising that experience.

- Student associations play a critical role at the interface between institutions and their students, and the close liaison that now exists is recognised as a significant strength across the sector.

- As the enhancement approach has become more established, the balance of emphasis between assurance and enhancement has shifted – with institutional and sectoral confidence in assurance mechanisms more firmly established, there is increased strategic focus on enhancement.

- Standalone enhancement strategies are less common and there is a trend towards aligning learning and teaching enhancement strategies with institutional strategic plans.

- ELIR has had a significant impact on shaping the enhancement agenda and developing an evaluation system that is embraced by institutions as a significant developmental process.

Further detail is provided in the following sections.

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[1] www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/en/about–enhancement–themes/how–the–themes–are–managed

# Changes in institutional leadership of learning and teaching enhancement

Over time, for some institutions, there has been variation in title and role of senior personnel with a more stable pattern for others.

Across the first two ELIR cycles, almost all institutions had a single identified senior manager with responsibility for the learning, teaching and enhancement agenda. While there is some variation in title (Assistant Principal, Academic, Enhancement being used by some institutions), most were identified as Vice Principal or Deputy Principal, and had learning and teaching included in their titles. These most senior posts tend to be full-time, permanent appointments.

Across the ELIR 3 cycle and up to the present time, there has been a pattern of putting additional posts in place to strengthen the cross-institutional management structure to support institutional enhancement activity. This was noted for three institutions over the ELIR 3 cycle and nine institutions over the ELIR 4 cycle (to date). As with Vice Principal/Deputy Principal level, there is some variation in title (for example, Assistant Principal, Assistant Vice Principal, Assistant Deputy Principal/Vice Principal, Assistant/Pro Dean, Institutional Dean, Deputy Associate Principal), and in the tenure of the post (full-time, part-time (ranging from 0.2 to 0.8 FTE), permanent, time-limited). There is no discernible pattern to variation of title and tenure, but the role is generally cross-institutional and enhancement-focused.

At the interface between senior/executive management and academic units, there is considerable variation in scale and organisation across institutions, with significant changes noted for most at some point across the period from 2003. These include both fundamental structural changes (establishment or removal of faculty, college or school structures) and retention of academic units with some adjustment (for example, schools, with adjustment in size, subject mix and title). Structural change has often been accompanied by change to the roles and remits for senior staff involved in managing enhancement.

The collective impact of changes at sectoral level has helped to support the enhancement agenda through shared practice and expertise, and through inter and intra-institutional staff movement at senior management level.
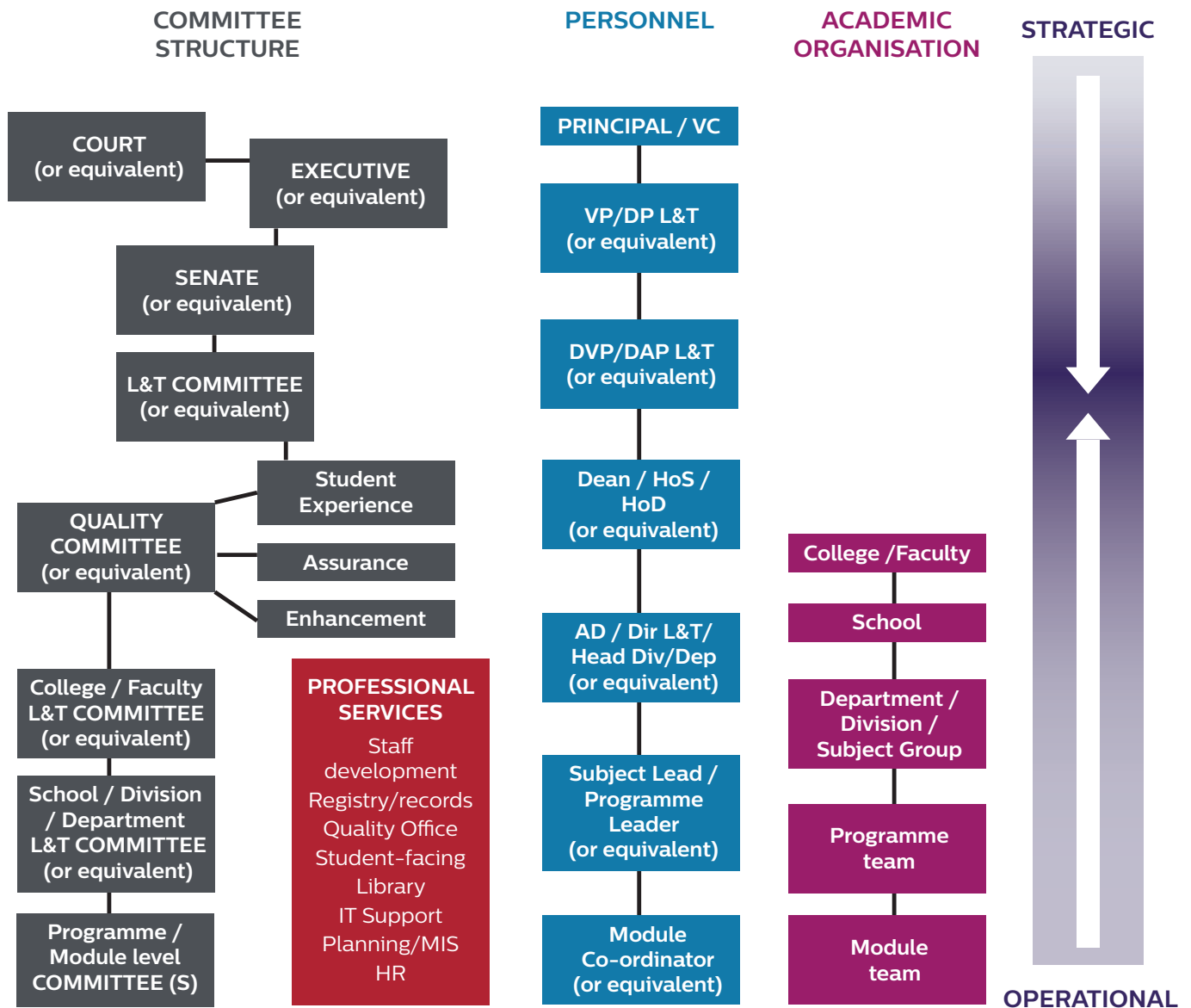
**COMMITTEE STRUCTURE**

- COURT (or equivalent)
- EXECUTIVE (or equivalent)
- SENATE (or equivalent)
- L&T COMMITTEE (or equivalent)
- QUALITY COMMITTEE (or equivalent)
  - Student Experience
  - Assurance
  - Enhancement
- College / Faculty L&T COMMITTEE (or equivalent)
- School / Division / Department L&T COMMITTEE (or equivalent)
- Programme / Module level COMMITTEE (S)

**PROFESSIONAL SERVICES**
Staff development
Registry/records
Quality Office
Student-facing
Library
IT Support
Planning/MIS
HR

**PERSONNEL**

- PRINCIPAL / VC
- VP/DP L&T (or equivalent)
- DVP/DAP L&T (or equivalent)
- Dean / HoS / HoD (or equivalent)
- AD / Dir L&T/ Head Div/Dep (or equivalent)
- Subject Lead / Programme Leader (or equivalent)
- Module Co-ordinator (or equivalent)

**ACADEMIC ORGANISATION**

- College /Faculty
- School
- Department / Division / Subject Group
- Programme team
- Module team

**STRATEGIC**

**OPERATIONAL**

**Figure 1: The institutional landscape for managing enhancement**

Three of the key elements are (i) personnel and their roles/remits, (ii) academic organisation and (iii) committee structure. Professional services also provide essential support for staff and students and may contribute to strategic planning related to the learning and teaching enhancement agendas.

The shaded column on the right indicates the broad balance between strategic and operational planning/delivery. In general, there is a shift in emphasis through the various levels of organisation – the darker area shows the organisational level at which cross-institutional communication and collaboration is critical in managing enhancement.

# Range of models and approaches currently in place

While there is institutional diversity across the sector, there are certain key elements that are required to enable institutions to function effectively and meet sector and government expectations. In the context of managing the learning and teaching agenda, the structural organisation of an institution's academic units and committees has a direct and significant impact on vertical and horizontal communication within the institution; key personnel are critical in this context. In addition, professional support departments/units provide essential operational input, and increasingly contribute to shaping the strategic direction of learning and teaching. A generic outline of the potential organisation of these elements is shown in Figure 1. Although institutions are independent and autonomous in terms of how they organise their academic units, committees and professional services, all institutions considered in this work can be mapped onto this generic outline to some degree. This generic outline is used as the basis for comparison of the various models currently in place across the sector.

Comparison of structures shows there is little consistency in the use of terminology across the sector, with institutions using similar terms for committees, academic units and key posts that might be broadly equivalent yet differ considerably in detail around organisational level, remit and scope. While there can be wide variation in the range, scope and organisation of these elements within institutions, this diversity reflects each institution's circumstances and requirements.

Compared with personnel role titles, academic structures tend to show less variation in title, with college/faculty, school and department/division tending to refer to units that are more consistently defined. However, there is considerable variation in the size of academic units (in terms of discipline mix and staff numbers), reflecting the size and complexity of the institution.

Larger institutions tend to have a college/faculty structure and smaller institutions a single–tier school/department-based system. Although there is some variation across the mid–sized institutions, most tend to operate a school–based system. The University of the Highlands and Islands is more complex than the two faculty/subject network organisation would suggest due to the unique nature of the institution, with 13 partners across a wide geographical area. Scotland's Rural College is also more complex than a single–campus specialist institution, with multiple sites and a strong research/commercial focus.

Committee organisation shows some variation in title, but also a high level of consistency of function that can be mapped on to the generic structure shown in Figure 1. All institutions have a senior academic body (Senate or Academic Council/Board) with overall responsibility for all aspects of academic provision. The learning, teaching and enhancement agenda(s) are usually devolved to a university–wide learning and teaching committee (or similar), with some variation as to how these committees are structured. Some operate on a separated remit for quality assurance and quality enhancement; others have sub-committees covering areas such as academic quality and student experience.

The overall requirement for strategic and operational management of enhancement does not seem necessarily to be related to the size of the institution. There is a clear 'line of sight' between senior management and responsibility at college/faculty/school level, with roles at the subject level determined by organisational structures rather than the size of the units. Current models have largely retained this 'clear line of sight' for both personnel and committee structures, with identified staff at each level holding responsibility for the enhancement agenda.

To support the range of activities that institutions undertake to manage quality assurance and enhancement, most institutions have professional support departments that deal with institutional governance, student administration, management information, planning functions and quality. Detailed organisation is variable and generally linked to the size of the institution. There has been a significant amount of change in the way that support services are organised with the roles of professional support departments, in many institutions, developed to be much more student-focused, with integration of support service functions more evident. This appears to be a consequence of a more holistic approach to managing all aspects of the student experience.

Staff development is an important part of the institutional framework for managing enhancement. Although HR departments have a key role in supporting general organisational and staff development, most institutions have specialist units that deliver programmes of staff development in learning and teaching practice that are based on professional standards frameworks such as the United Kingdom Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) and lead to Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy (now part of Advance HE). The role of specialist support departments in this area, and in strategic planning for enhancement, is often noted in ELIR reports.

A further development in current models is an increased focus on the holistic experience that a student has at an institution, with much closer integration of the various elements of assessing and managing this aspect and positive change noted across the ELIR 3 cycle. Some institutions have a committee structure that includes a 'student experience' committee (SEC) or equivalent and although remits can vary, most are concerned with managing the non-academic aspects of the student experience, to complement the academic developments in provision, delivery and assessment of the subject. This holistic theme is often replicated at subject level with an increased emphasis on the whole programme of study (as opposed to individual discrete elements such as modules). Although SECs are generally seen as a very positive way of involving students, there is some indication that institutions that have operated SECs have found that without a direct executive and resource management function, issues identified often have to be referred to further committees for action. This can sometimes lead to delay and potentially students' frustration; it may be that the role of SECs will be overtaken by other mechanisms such as direct representation on other key committees.

Students' associations play a critical role at the interface between institutions and their students, and the close liaison that now exists is recognised as a significant strength across the sector that is often noted in ELIR reports. One outcome from increased collaboration between institutions, students' associations and sparqs has been the development and spread of Student Partnership Agreements (SPAs).

As the enhancement approach has become more established, the balance of emphasis between assurance and enhancement has shifted, with institutional and sectoral confidence in assurance mechanisms more firmly established, and a concomitant strengthening of the effort to manage the enhancement agenda more pro-actively. This has continued through ELIR 2 and ELIR 3 cycles and is reflected in many institutions having some degree of separation of committee functions for assurance and enhancement, whilst retaining an integrated approach to ensure that the link between the two is not lost.

Standalone enhancement strategies have become less common across the ELIR cycles. Most institutions have moved their 'enhancement strategy' (often this was not separately defined but was/continues to be included in a Learning and Teaching strategy or equivalent) into much closer alignment with their corporate/strategic plan. This appears to be the result of more integrated planning processes and clearer alignment of individual strategies (and their associated action/enabling plans).

# Key external and internal drivers

Institutions work within a complex and ever-changing environment and are affected by many internal and external factors that shape the way they carry out their business. Some of the key elements related to the strategic management of enhancement are highlighted in Figure 2.



**External**

Government policy

SFC and funding

QER

ELIR

Regulatory landscape

NSS and TEF

Recruitment

**SMOE**

**Internal**

Mission

Strategic aims

Priorities

Teaching/research balance
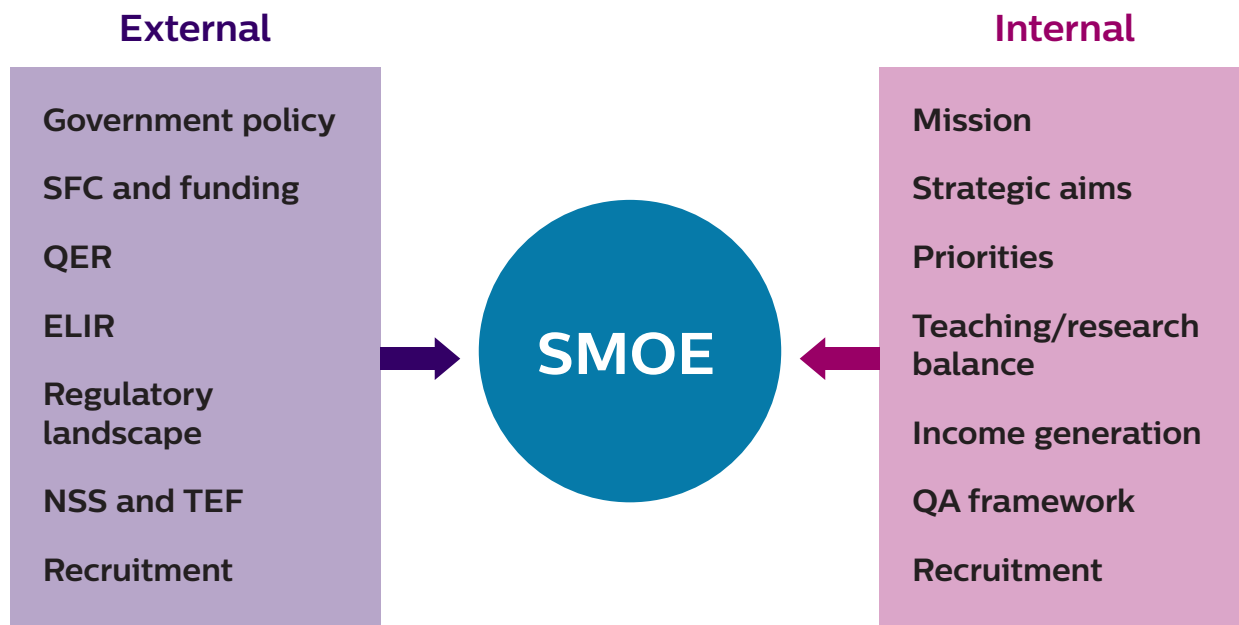
Income generation

QA framework

Recruitment

**Figure 2: Illustration of some key external and internal factors that influence an institution's approach to the strategic management of enhancement (SMOE)**

Institutions generally have the autonomy and flexibility to set their own priorities across all areas of business, and this is reflected in more coherent and integrated strategic plans. The external drivers tend to offer a greater strategic challenge.

Staff and student recruitment shapes institutional strategy in terms of the staff balance (numbers, areas of expertise, experience) and the target student population. Recruitment of international students is a key strategic aim for many institutions and is most often set in the context of a more broadly-based international strategy.

The general government policy landscape is currently dominated by the ongoing issue of Brexit, with the added tensions of the Scottish and Westminster governments' positions being somewhat different.

Institutions work closely with the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) to develop Outcome Agreements that have added a level of consistency of approach across the sector, whilst still accommodating institutions' strategic ambitions. The key pressure in this area is the level of funding available currently and into the future.

The Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF) is well established across the sector. Maturation of use of the QEF has continued to progress since inception, with pro-active use of, for example, the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework and the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, at the early stage of programme design, rather than retrospective compliance checking. This reflects a mature and useful enhancement framework that is appreciated and widely supported across the sector.

The Enhancement Themes and Student Engagement elements of the QEF have had a significant impact across the sector and illustrate the collegiate and collaborative approach between institutions, QAA, students' associations and sparqs that is considered to be a distinctive and valuable feature of the Scottish HEI sector. Enhancement Theme activity is commented on specifically in ELIR reports and in most cases shows an increased level of engagement across ELIR cycles.

The ELIR process itself has had a considerable impact on establishing and embedding the enhancement-led approach across the sector, and in influencing the strategic management of enhancement of the student experience. Institutions generally begin preparing for ELIR around 18 months out, with most evaluative and preparative activity in the year before ELIR. Post-ELIR outcome and year-on response mean that each institution is actively engaged with the ELIR process for a significant part of the ELIR cycle.

The regulatory landscape has changed considerably for English HEIs, with the Higher Education and Research Act (2017) establishing the Office for Students, which was a response to the increasing diversity of provider and consequent fragmented regulatory system. General concerns around metric-driven approaches to evaluation, increased 'marketisation' of HE provision, and possible effects on institutional autonomy were common threads during discussions with sector staff.

Metric-driven approaches have always had a role to play in self and sector-based evaluation, even when data sets, and their manipulation, was a relatively unsophisticated area. Over the past few years there has been an increase in the integration of institutional data sets via more sophisticated IT systems and 'dashboard' interfaces, resulting in more effective use of data for institutional review and planning purposes. The current enhancement theme – Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the Student Experience – is a timely area of exploration. There is a strong appreciation of the importance of 'non-metric' aspects of information and evaluation to provide a narrative in addition to a set of metrics. One strand of the current Theme is considering this aspect.

One largely metric-based influence on management of enhancement has been the National Student Survey (NSS), which was established in 2005. NSS outcomes are important for institutions and the sector more broadly, and most institutions now have detailed consideration of NSS data and commentary built into the annual cycle of quality assurance and enhancement activity.

An external driver that is likely to influence the management of enhancement is around the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) given its potential to influence league tables and wider debates across the UK or even internationally. There is some concern that a Scottish consensus view may not emerge regarding engagement with TEF, and that this could lead to some tensions across the sector. At the time of writing, each institution has come to its own conclusion around TEF engagement, with a variety of reasons for entering or not.

Read the full report at:

[www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/en/about-enhancement-themes/how-the-themes-are-managed](www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/en/about-enhancement-themes/how-the-themes-are-managed)