Enhancement-led Institutional Review of Heriot-Watt University

Outcome Report

November 2020

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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.[1] You can also find out more about the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA).[2] Further details about ELIR can be found in an accompanying brief guide,[3] including an overview of the review method, information about review teams, and explanations of follow-up action.

About this review

This is the Outcome Report of the ELIR conducted by QAA at Heriot-Watt University. The review took place as follows: Planning Visit on 30 January 2020 and Review Visit on 16 March 2020 and 9-13 November 2020. The review was conducted by a team of six reviewers:

- Mr Zachary Davis (Student Reviewer)
- Professor Stephen Doughty (Academic Reviewer)
- Professor Hilary Grainger (Academic Reviewer)
- Professor Douglas Halliday (Academic Reviewer)
- Ms Rhiannon Tinsley (Coordinating Reviewer)
- Professor Alyson Tobin (Academic Reviewer).

This report sets out the threshold judgement formed by the ELIR team 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 for this report can be found on page 3, followed by commendations and recommendations.

A more detailed Technical Report is also available for this review.[4] The Technical Report sets out the team's findings under each heading in the ELIR 4 method.

The impact of COVID- 19

The Review Visit was originally scheduled to take place during March 2020. During the Review Visit, the national lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic was announced, which resulted in the Review Visit being postponed. In discussion with Heriot-Watt University and the Scottish Funding Council, the Review Visit was rescheduled to November 2020. QAA made some amendments to the ELIR process to accommodate the ongoing pandemic, most notable of which was that the review visit 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. Heriot-Watt University was given the opportunity to outline its arrangements in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in an update paper that was made available to the ELIR team prior to the Review Visit. Although this was part of the context of the review, the team considered the institution's approach to quality and standards from the

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[1] About ELIR:
www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/en/reviewing-higher-education-in-scotland/enhancement-led-institutional-review
[2] About QAA: www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland
[3] Brief Guide to ELIR: www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/reports/brief-guide-to-elir-method.pdf
[4] Technical Report: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/quality-assurance-reports/Heriot-Watt-University

time of the last ELIR in 2015. It is acknowledged that the review took place at what was a very challenging time for Heriot-Watt University, and the ELIR team and QAA Scotland is grateful to staff and students for their engagement in the review.

About Heriot-Watt University

With origins in Scotland in 1821 as the world's first Institute of Mechanics, Heriot-Watt University (the University) was awarded university status in 1966; its vision is to be a progressive, connected, global university. It has 27,459 learners studying worldwide, partners in 150 countries and 2,349 staff. Academic provision is undertaken across five campuses: three in Scotland (Edinburgh, Orkney and Borders) and two overseas in Dubai and Malaysia - which were set up in 2005 and 2012 respectively - each with a purpose-built site. The Edinburgh Campus hosts over 40 companies based on the first University Research Park in Europe.

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

In 2018-19, the University had a total population of 23,969 (headcount) including 11,687 undergraduates (UG), 10,315 postgraduate taught students (PGT) and 1,359 postgraduate research students (PGR). Overall, there were 15,570 students at five campuses; and 8,399 students enrolled off-campus, studying as independent distance learners or through an academic partner.

Threshold judgement about Heriot-Watt University

Heriot-Watt University 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.

Commendations

1   The University is commended for the following areas of good practice.

2   **Strategic approach to international and multi-campus provision** - building on progress made in its effective implementation of clear vision and strategy, the University has continued to strengthen its approach to further develop the sense of a shared identity and 'One Heriot-Watt' ethos, engendering a sense of a global community. This has been achieved through strong institutional vision, strategy and leadership and rapid upscaling of the use of technology and working practices for remote working.

3   **Positive partnership working with student representative bodies (SRBs)** - the University effectively engages with its SRBs, involving them in active consultation and decision-making processes. They have built, over a period of time, open and collegial relationships between senior management and student officers which demonstrate mutual respect, leading to increasing effective student representation and, in turn, effective enhancement of the student learning experience.

4   **Global and connected approach to student support** - the University has taken positive steps to strengthen the coherence and integration of student support services to enhance the student experience and sense of community. This is demonstrated through the work of Student Success Advisors and the sharing of good practice and resources among global student support service teams. This is particularly evident in the successful implementation of the Personal Tutor system in Dubai and Malaysia.

5   **Institutional commitment to enhancing learning and teaching** - there is strong commitment and vision from senior leadership to the implementation of the Learning and Teaching Strategy. This is exemplified through clear and accessible policies and procedures, the establishment of the Learning and Teaching Academy and the further development of the role of Directors of Learning and Teaching in Schools. The University has ensured that all staff have the opportunity to contribute to the enhancement of learning and teaching, in particular through the extensive consultative approach taken to develop and implement the Learning and Teaching Strategy, Enhancement Workshops in Academic Review and Learning and Teaching Enhancement Fora in the Dubai and Malaysia campuses.

5   **Institutional quality framework** - the University has a mature and effective institutional quality framework which is well understood by staff across all campuses and is supported by the use of clear and accessible documentation. This has enabled an agile and effective response to the global coronavirus pandemic across all campuses, which was effectively led and coordinated at senior level, working across different national contexts.

Recommendations

6   The University is asked to consider the following recommendations.

7   **Systematic access to and use of data** - implement an institutional approach to the use of data that is systematic and accessible to help improve decision making, enhance the student learning experience and support student attainment. In order to provide appropriate support and guidance, the University should, in the short term, prioritise the development of a more systematic approach to identifying students who may be disengaging from their studies.

8   **Postgraduate research student environment** - engage proactively and work in partnership with postgraduate research students to identify ways to improve their sense of belonging in the university community and develop a consistent institution-wide postgraduate research student environment.

9   **Staff development opportunities** - ensure equity of access to staff development opportunities across all campuses. In addressing this, the University should consider online delivery, the need for local provision and level of resourcing required.

10   **Variation in the implementation of policy and practice across schools** - in pursuing the 'One Heriot-Watt' ethos, reflect on the appropriateness of variations in practice regarding implementation of policy across schools which may lead to inconsistency in the quality of provision.

What happens next?

QAA Scotland will continue to engage with the institution through the annual discussion visits which, among other matters, consider the ways in which institutions respond to the ELIR outcomes.

One year after publication of the ELIR Outcome and Technical Reports, institutions are asked to provide a Follow-up Report to indicate how they are responding to the outcomes of ELIR. The final version of the institution's Follow-up Report is published on the QAA website. Institutions also engage in a range of enhancement and development activities including Focus On projects where institutions work collaboratively to improve policy and practice relating to topics that are frequently occurring in ELIR outcomes.

Further information

A more detailed [Technical Report](#) is also available for this review. The Technical Report sets out the team's findings under each heading in the ELIR 4 method.

This review and its findings relate to the institution as a whole and do not provide information about individual programmes of study or subjects. For further information about those, contact the institution or [visit its website](#).

University sector institutions in Scotland also engage in systematic Enhancement Theme activity. Further information about that work, which has a sector-wide and institutional focus, can be found on the [Enhancement Themes website](#).

Further information about QAA Scotland and the enhancement-led approach, including the ELIR method, can be found on the [QAA website](#).

For further information about the Scottish Funding Council see www.sfc.ac.uk

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