LTSN Centre for Bioscience

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Annual report 2004

Scotland has always maintained its traditions as a separate nation, in legal, political, and other areas.

This can be seen currently in higher education where the external, audit -led review at the subject level no longer operates. Instead all institutions are required by Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC) to review subjects internally and although the nature of these internal subject reviews are to be determined by individual institutions, certain common features will be expected, including trained reviewers and external review panel members.

Over the past two years, SHEFC, Universities Scotland, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education and representatives of the student body have together developed the new approach to quality, the enhancement-led institutional review (ELIR).

The types of information that SHEFC asks for in the institutional review includes:

- Information for prospective students; including admission arrangements and requirements, details of curricula, flexibility of course choice, what awards are offered by the institution and the career options available to students for individual awards.

- Information for current students; including the curriculum coverage of their course and how it is delivered and assessed, complaints procedures and much of what is covered by information for prospective students.

- Employer and employer organisations; including what knowledge and skills graduates with different awards will have achieved; details of industrial links and how institutions ensure curricula are up-to-date.

- Professional and statutory bodies (PSB); including how the institution ensures that programme curricula and assessment are consistent with PSB requirements.

- SHEFC; including the programme and outcomes of internal subject review and the institution's strategy for quality enhancement.

Students will be involved in review teams within the new institutional review process and they will be represented at all levels within institutions.

The strategy has five main elements. Firstly the programme of subject reviews, run by institutions themselves; secondly, institution-level review, which will involve all Scottish HE institutions over a four-year cycle; other strategies are improved public information; more student representatives in institutional quality systems and a national programme of enhancement themes, aimed at developing and sharing good practice in learning and teaching in higher education.

Through a range of activities, the enhancement themes are intended to involve both staff and students. The aim is to identify, share and disseminate good practice in teaching and learning, and to focus on particular aspects, where development is required, leading to continuous enhancement.

The new approach is now in action and it raises a new set of challenges. Foremost, the approach must be seen as relevant by staff and students and put into effect, otherwise it will be just another review, another hurdle to overcome, before continuing on in the same old way.

In March 2003, the first two enhancement steering committees were established, the two chosen themes for 2003-04 being *Assessment* and *Responding to Student Needs.* *"Assessment"* is chaired by Dr Simon van Heyningen (University of Edinburgh) and "*Responding to Student Needs*" by Professor John Harper, Robert Gordon University.

Assessment

Assessment is, of course, necessary; both students and their future employers need to know how they have done in their chosen area. The opinion from the steering committee is that current assessment is not satisfactory, which is why the theme was initiated.

The subtext of the assessment theme this year is efficiency and effectiveness; efficient in the sense of not requiring too much of the time, while being effective in producing informative and valid results. One question posed is to what extent staff have the freedom to try new initiatives or whether they are constrained by tradition. The outcome of the theme is anticipated as reports, suggestions, ideas, and a strategic view on assessment.

Examples of the areas within the theme include honours classification; it is alleged that there is a growing feeling throughout the UK that the old system of 1st, 2.1, 2.2 and 3rd has had its day. A review of the honours classification is due to be undertaken by Universities UK on behalf of the Higher Education Funding Council for England. But what should replace it? Other areas targeted are; improving feedback to students; how to use assessment to motivate learning; how to cope with students with diverse needs; those from unconventional backgrounds, those that have disabilities of different sorts, and international students; consistency and fairness, where, for example there are multiple markers, or in group work and professional placements. To implement the themes the enhancement steering committees are commissioning work from experts, making funding available for particular projects in particular higher education institutions, sharing good practice between disciplines, specific meetings held in different higher education institutions about different issues. Some of these events have already occurred, if you have missed them the presentations can be found at http://www.qaa.ac.uk/scottishenhancement/events/default.htm

Responding to Student Needs

Two main areas have been identified for investigation and development during the current year, Enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of receiving and responding to student feedback and providing holistic support for students with particular emphasis on the phases of pre-entry, entry/induction, first year of study; and preparation for exit.

The intention is to seek out best practice and produce a series of practical proposals that institutions can use to enhance their current practices. Active involvement with staff and students is regarded as essential. This will take place through a variety of mechanisms, including the involvement of student members in review teams within the new institutional review process (ELIR); the systematic representation of students at all levels within institutions; the effective training and support for student representatives through both internal mechanisms, existing external structures and through a new national Student Development Service (SDA). The SDA will be operated by a consortium led by NUS Scotland.

Surveys both of the student experience within institutions and also longitudinal surveys of student and graduate cohorts will complement the process.

All members of the sector are encouraged to participate, not just academic practitioners, but support staff, managers and student representatives. A range of events will provide an opportunity for individual professional development, further complemented and supported by the ongoing development work of the Learning and Teaching Support Networks (LTSNs). For bioscientists there will be generic pressures from institutions and specific bioscience based assistance from the LTSN.

Two new enhancement themes are to be started each year, which leaves little time to embed best practice and could lead to a lack of comparability and continuity from year to year.

The Steering Committees and the Consultative Groups who plan and implement the themes are composed of representatives of the agencies and institutions, most of whom are actively involved in the teaching and learning process, together with student representatives. The style of the output is familiar to non-scientists but will be less convincing to scientists who look for factual input rather than opinion.

Outside the Higher Education Sector

The Advisory Scottish Committee on Education and Training Targets (ASCETT) sets educational attainment targets at different levels. It is clear that Scotland lags very significantly behind other countries in the proportion of the workforce and of young people holding intermediate and basic qualifications - with an excessive number of individuals holding no qualifications at all.

Scotland has a high proportion of graduates, about 17% of the population compared with the UK average of 12%, but has a high proportion of unskilled workers; 10% of jobs, but 34% of the unemployed, and 44% of long-term unemployed people are unskilled. These learning inequalities are part of the thinking behind the enhancement themes and are reflected in other educational areas. More investment in higher levels of qualification attainment could widen the inequalities still further, however, unless special attention is paid to the unskilled and unqualified.

Entrepreneurship

A recent white paper issued by the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) identifies entrepreneurship and innovation as vital to boost the economy and promote growth, increasing productivity and creating jobs.

The total entrepreneurial activity rate is 5.5% for Scotland, 5.6% for Europe, 6.4% for the UK and 8.8% worldwide.

Attitudes to entrepreneurship have improved, with Scotland now in line with UK averages. About 3.1% of Scottish adults are trying to start their own businesses, whereas 4.5% are trying to start a social enterprise, but interestingly, in the light of recent debates about immigration, people who have spent a third or less of their lives in the region where they now reside (in-migrants) are around 60% more likely to start or run their own business than other residents of the region.

Funding is seen as a major obstacle to the would–be entrepreneur, of which there are estimated to be 93,000 or just less than 2% of the population. Scottish men are twice as likely to start up a business as women, though startup rates by gender are equal for social enterprises.

In the higher education sector Scotland performs in line with the UK, Canada and the US in number of spinout businesses created per university per annum.

The most serious issue facing entrepreneurship in Scotland is now regarded as population decline, rather than anti-enterprise attitudes. As bioscientists we should be able to do something about that!

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http://www.entrepreneur.strath.ac.uk/research/gem.
http://www.qaa.ac.uk/scottishenhancement/
http://www.shefc.ac.uk/
http://www.nusonline.co.uk
http://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/