Quality Assurance Committee (QAC) Digest (Autumn 2018)

Welcome to the QAC Digest, a review of QAC activities in Academic Year (AY) 2017-18 and a look forward to AY 2018-19.

Review of QAC initiatives launched in AY 2017-18:

Annual QAC Digest:

Having received such a positive reception to our 2017-18 Digest we plan to continue this activity. If you have any suggestions as to other areas the Digest should cover please email the Clerk to the QAC, Emma Hay, and we will do our best to respond.

Annual QAC School visits:

In AY2017-18 QAC instigated individual meetings with each School to increase the extent of communication between QAC and Schools, to explain the rationale behind QAC activities and to show Schools how QAC might help provide the best possible learning experience for students. Most meetings were meetings, attended by the Head of School, School-selected academic staff (usually programme leads and/or Directors of Teaching), the School Administrative Officer, the School QAC representative, the QAC representative who oversees QA in that School and the Convenor of QAC. Some Schools chose to have the meeting more open as part of their normal teaching committee allowing attendance by a wider group of academic and professional services staff. The meetings were intended to be informal, free flowing discussions of any issues the School were facing in terms of their teaching provision and how QAC may help them to address these. The whole-School meetings enabled a wider group of people to hear what QAC does and the rationale for some of our processes. These meetings were useful and allowed some of the myths surrounding QAC to be dispelled but their nature prevented a more in-depth discussion of pertinent issues facing the School. The more closed meetings allowed a "warts and all" discussion of issues arising from course reviews and external examiner comments and as such were more useful to both the School

and QAC. Topics raised by multiple Schools (and the QAC response thereto) include:

- **The low rate of SCEF returns**: A working group has been set up to identify the cause of this and determine ways to improve student engagement with SCEF. See below for some initial results from the working group activity.

- **The use of multiple systems for classifying honours degrees:** QAC prepared a paper discussing the use of either the grade spectrum (GS) or a grade point average (GPA) to determine final classification. In May 2018, Senate approved the move to a single GPA method of classifying Honours degrees for all students entering into Honours in AY2018-19. Students currently in 4th year and 5th year will still need to be classified using both the GS and GPA and where they are different the student will be awarded the higher classification.

Feedback indicated that the School-QAC meetings added a more "human" interaction to the more formal written reports that iterate between Schools and QAC. As a result of the positive feedback these meetings will continue on an annual basis and be scheduled to allow discussion of the Annual Programme Reviews (APRs) and External Examiner (EE) reports for the preceding AY. Because of this focus the meetings would be better as closed meetings (not whole-School meetings) but any School can request to have a QAC representative attend their School or Discipline Teaching and Learning Committee to explain the workings of QAC or to discuss any QA-related issues. Such requests should be made to the Clerk of the QAC, Emma Hay.

Pilot of the revised Internal Teaching Review (ITR) process:

In AY 2017-18 we piloted a new ITR process in the School of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture (LLMVC). This new process considers all centrally-held Quality Assurance (QA) metrics and analysis prior to a panel visit to the School, allowing School submissions and the ITR panel visit to be more focused (although not solely) on quality enhancement (QE). Schools submit an evidence-based Critical Analysis and a Curriculum Map detailing how programmes address Subject Benchmark Statements (where appropriate) and Aberdeen Graduate Attributes. The review visit follows up on key themes identified by the panel from analysis of QA metrics and the School submission. The visit concludes with a 'Pedagogic Partnership Session' comprising staff and students and focusing on key issues raised and results in the drafting of an enhancement-focused action plan. A report (including commentary on QA aspects) together with the jointly agreed School Action Plan follows the visit with an updated action plan and commentary expected as a one-year follow up exercise.

The consensus of staff, students, external specialists and the ITR Panel was that the new

process delivered what had been hoped for; a less bureaucratic and paper-heavy exercise allowing an enhancement-driven discussion with the School on their teaching provision whilst confirming the academic rigour of the School's programmes. The external subject specialists were universally complimentary; one external stated: *"I thought the event was hugely valuable, and a definite advance on the paperwork-heavy approach taken in (e.g.) my own institution."* Student feedback was also very positive; one student stated: "*The panel was open and friendly, and gave me chances to share my experience and ideas about school and my study*". The School felt that the Panel established "*A very positive and constructive atmosphere" which was "a good shift away from more inquisitorial ITRs of the past."* The Pedagogic Partnership session was deemed to have worked very well with the School noting *"how engaged all the students were, with animated discussion around the table."*

A second pilot of the new ITR process will take place with the School of Biological Sciences in Oct 2018 after which a report will be presented to UCTL with a recommendation to either continue with the new process, make modifications to the process or return to the old process.

Let's talk about annual monitoring:

Annual monitoring of our teaching provision is a requirement of our teaching grant and is monitored by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Scotland. Failure to carry this out effectively could affect the teaching grant with knock-on effects for the University as an entity. Our annual monitoring processes are firmly embedded into all staff's thought processes and are routinely complied with but, perhaps because of recent changes to our procedures, there seem to be some misconceptions about what the purpose of individual tasks are. Here are the things that QAC require course coordinators and programme leaders to do with a brief explanation of what they are used for and for whose benefit.

SCEF – student course evaluation forms. Each course coordinator is required to gather feedback from students on their courses – how else does a course coordinator know how well their course is being received? The SCEF process is, however, only one way in which feedback can be gathered. Other ways of obtaining feedback are from mid-

term surveys, focus groups, formal or informal discussions with the class as a whole, individual students or class reps, and student-staff liaison meetings. We are aware that the online SCEF process has led to a reduction in student participation in some areas of the University and a working group was formed to look into this in AY2017-18. A student intern held focus groups with students, academic and administrative staff and a common theme emerging from all groups was a lack of understanding of the SCEF process, both in terms of what it is used for and in terms of what leeway course organisers have in the actual process to be followed. The SCEF working group will continue in AY 2018-19 by reviewing and updating the information that goes out to students, academics and administrative staff on the purpose and implementation of the SCEF process and we will showcase good practice in closing the feedback loop on our good practice website. A communication campaign will be formulated and launched prior to the main SCEF process in the first half session of 2018-19.

ACR – Annual course reviews. Each course coordinator is required to complete an ACR for each of their courses but who is this actually for? Prior to the introduction of Annual Programme Reviews (APR) the ACRs were the only means for QAC to have oversight of the University's teaching provision and so QAC reviewed each ACR to identify areas of good practice for wider dissemination and to identify areas for development within a course, perhaps identifying common themes across the university. With the advent of the APR process such granular scrutiny by QAC is no longer required with in-depth scrutiny of courses devolved to Schools' own QA processes. Nevertheless, the ACR remains the formal mechanism which enables a course organiser to reflect on how well their course has gone and to think about what changes might need to be made for the next AY. They are also important for a programme leader, Head of Discipline, and Head of School to get an overview of the courses making up particular programmes allowing them to assess the programme as a whole and whether there are any outlier courses, perhaps in terms of student attainment levels which may then signal that programme adjustments need to be made. QAC continues to sample-check ACRs, to ensure consistent reflection and analysis within and across Schools and to ensure that areas for enhancement are identified and acted upon appropriately. Whilst sampling to date has been random, from 2018-19 sampling will target 'critical courses' that QAC have a particular interest in, for example, courses that are delivered by a delivery partner (such as in Qatar, or our online courses), new courses that have been developed to support a new programme or courses where issues of concern have been noted. We continue to require that all ACRs are uploaded by Schools onto their School QAC-Planning SharePoint site by the requisite deadline so the QAC member with oversight of that School can, at any time, review a particular course.

APR – Annual Programme Review. The introduction of APRs was made initially as a result of recommendations from ELIR. Although we had resisted their introduction, as we felt that the ACR process gave us sufficient oversight, addressing the ELIR recommendation offered an opportunity to review all our internal review processes and develop a more streamlined, enhancement focused ITR as described above. The APR is required, not for every individual programme but for cognate groups of programmes. For example, biochemistry, genetics and molecular biology share so many courses that it is not necessary to complete individual APRs for each degree and it is more effective to combine them. The APR is the opportunity for the programme lead and programme teaching team to look holistically at the programme and how the constituent courses fit together, whether it remains fit for purpose, meets subject benchmark statements and remains academically robust. The APR may identify outlier courses, for example where attainment is not as good as in other courses and suggest changes to the ordering of courses in a programme or additional material to be added to courses. It requires input from the ACRs as well as external examiners reports and should look back on the previous AY APR to determine whether any issues raised there have been addressed. It is the APRs that QAC concentrate on to assure the quality of our teaching provision and each QAC member will scrutinise a set of APRs for the School they have oversight of and make responses back to the School.

Good practice from across the Institution:

Some examples of good/innovative practice highlighted from our annual monitoring processes are:

Can we get away from the straight essay as a continuous assessment tool?

Several courses now incorporate continuous assessments that are more "work-relevant" giving students' valuable skills of the type of activity that employers in their subject would require. For example in EV4501 (Remediation technology) this very practical course is assessed by Phase 1 and 2 Desk Studies which focus on applied aspects of contaminated land assessment. Several courses in Politics and International Relations (including PI3571 and PI4575) use the creation of a policy or briefing report as their continuous assessment adding to the students' real-world transferable skills.

How can we make students aware of what they need to do, or what was required, in assessments?

Some psychology courses (e.g. PS1011, PS1511) make extensive use of instructional videos to inform students of what is required in each of the assignments. This has been shown to reduce uncertainty amongst students and it also ensures a shared understanding of the assessment requirements amongst the team of markers. Several psychology courses also use video or audio feedback mechanisms instead of just written feedback on assignments making it clearer to students what was good/not so good about their work and preventing the misunderstanding that can sometimes come from written comments. They have also produced short videos online explaining what was required in exam answers. Similarly PH2535 uses Panopto videos for providing students with feedback on their assessments.

How can we get better engagement of students in their courses/studies and instil a sense of belonging?

Some courses make good use of Ombea in class (e.g. PH1027) or virtual discussion boards and blogs (e.g. ZO4817) to help students engage with the course material and to encourage a sense of community on the course. More generally, some disciplines, e.g. Biological Science and psychology, have active year-wide Facebook groups that are used for Q and A sessions and to give out information regarding course deadlines and upcoming events like seminars.

How can we support the career development of post-doctoral researchers?

PhD students and post-docs are often used to support teaching, by helping to demonstrate in lab classes and acting as tutors for tutorial groups allowing them to develop some small group teaching skills. But what about the wider teaching experience? Anthropology have developed a scheme for post-docs to design and deliver an optional Level 3 course. They are mentored in this by an experienced member of the academic staff with added support from the Head of Discipline. Academic quality is assured by having close mentoring from an experienced academic (and the usual course review), research-led teaching is assured by the post-doc delivering a course close to their research area and the post-doc gains valuable experience of not just face-to-face teaching but of the whole process of course development.

How can we introduce employability into the curriculum?

A new course, Work-Related Learning ED359A has been piloted in the Schools of Biological Sciences and Psychology. This novel, 15-credit, course is structured for students to secure their own placement, part-time work or personal development project which is approved by their academic School. An underpinning part of the course is encouraging students to reflect on their personal and professional development and to make connections between their degree programme and the world of work. Specifically, the course provides opportunities for the University to offer degree programmes with different forms of external engagement and for a wider range of students to have access to work-related learning opportunities during their studies.

Lecture recordings:

The University lecture recording policy now expects all lectures to be recorded unless there is a specific reason to exempt them. Some staff were concerned that the interactive nature of their lectures was such that the quality of the recording would be poor making it not very useful to students. Their solution is to record "mini lectures" prior to the actual lecture. That way the salient parts of the lecture are recorded in a controlled environment and the interactive nature of the lectures is not impeded by having to be recorded. Splitting the lectures into short podcasts of specific topics also makes it easier for the staff member to record and for the students to find the bit of the lecture they want to hear again. Courses where this occurs are CM1021, BI1009 and BI25M7.

Other examples of good practice are showcased on our Good Practice Website. We would very much like to encourage you to disseminate your good practice widely, and details of how you can contribute to this repository are available here. As a 'sweetener' four successful submissions will be awarded £500 each to support the continuation of their good practice. A requirement of any accepted case study is that it will have to include a section on evaluation of the impact of the initiative they have undertaken and, to ensure that consistent, high quality examples are showcased, all proposals will be subject to an institutional quality oversight by a Panel led by the Vice-Principal Education.

Areas for development:

Looking at External Examiner reports has indicated a number of areas where we still have some work to do. These do not apply to all areas of the University but they are all issues that we need to be thinking about.

- Many EEs commented favourably on our moderation procedures, especially the clear evidence trail of how the process was followed and how various grades were awarded. In a few cases, however, there was a lack of annotation on exam scripts giving no clear justification of the grades awarded, especially where there had been disparity between the two markers, and sometimes grades awarded did not matching up with the written feedback to students. We must keep good records of the moderation process to help at Examiners' meetings and to provide good feedback to students and students need to be able to see how a grade was awarded and will often use the written comments as justification for the grade. If these don't match then the student can get confused over what went wrong and what they need to do to improve.

- Group assessments are a staple form of assessment in some courses. Team working is an important skill to develop in students and the group assignment can save on staff marking time. However, some EEs have voiced the concerns of students over too high a proportion of course grades being decided by a group assignment and the problem of "free-loading" where some students get good grades because of the efforts of others in the group or get pulled down because of the lack of effort of others in the group. This also comes with the problem of grades for a course being bunched because of all members of the group receiving the same grade and there being little grade discrimination between groups. We need to find ways to address this; perhaps including peer assessment or an individual assessment component. This issue will be considered by QAC this AY with a view to giving staff more guidance on how best to deal with group assessments.

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Enhancement Themes – funding available for pedagogic projects:

Enhancement Themes are a national programme of activities, overseen by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and supported by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC). Their aim is to enhance the student learning experience by identifying common areas for development in higher education institutions across Scotland, and providing a forum to share ideas about these. The current Enhancement Theme is "Evidence for Enhancement: enhancing the student experience" and aims to look at what kind of information (both quantitative and qualitative evidence) can be used to identify areas that would benefit from some intervention that would enhance the student experience.

The Dean of QE/QA leads the Institutional team for the Enhancement Theme and you can find reports and case studies from the University of Aberdeen for past and current themes here. Our Learning and Teaching Enhancement Programme (LTEP) provides small grants for staff to undertake projects related to the current Theme and the next LTEP will be launched in late Autumn 2018. This is a useful source of funding that can, for example, pay for a student intern to assist you in carrying out a project that you could not complete on your own, or allow you to run focus groups with students and other stakeholders to enable you to determine the impact of an initiative you have been trialling in your teaching.

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Items to be taken through Committees in AY 2017-18:

The following issues will be considered by UCTL, its subcommittees and the Senate during AY 2018-19:

- ***Weighting of honours years***
When we introduced the Common Grading Scale (CGS) and GPA system of classifying Honours degrees Senate agreed that Honours years would count equally to degree classification. Whilst most Schools have adopted equal weighting some Schools, and some disciplines within Schools, did not. We will re-ignite the debate about honours years' weightings at the December meeting of Senate with a view to making a decision at Senate in the spring.

- ***Borderline criteria***
With decision to revert solely to a GPA method of degree classification it is timely to review our use of borderlines. Are our borderline ranges correct? Too narrow? Too wide? And what criteria should be used to consider whether candidates who are borderline should move up a degree classification? This will also be considered by Senate in December with a view to agreement being reached at Senate in the spring.

- ***Revised code of practice on assessment following changes to classification***
As a result of the recent change to classify based on a GPA and the change to the resit policy at Honours (whereby a capped resit grade is now used in degree classification calculations) there need to be changes made to the General Regulations and to the Code of Practice of Assessment. These will be modified and taken through the Committees early in AY2018-19
All staff should be made aware of these papers being presented at QAC, Undergraduate Committee, Postgraduate Committee, UCTL and Senate and should contribute (via their Committee/Senate member) to the discussions to help shape the final policy documents.

ELIR 4

As you will be aware we are currently undergoing ELIR 4. Our Advanced information Set and the Reflective Analysis submission were submitted to QAA Scotland on the 10th August. Our thanks to all of you for the work that you have put into both helping to develop the various documents and ensuring that the materials are now up-to-date in the QA Sharepoint site and on the various webpages.
The ELIR Team visited us on 10 October for a Planning Day and met with our Institutional ELIR Leads and groups of student representatives and subject-level staff from across the University, and again our thanks to all who were involved and contributed to the positive discussions which took place throughout the day. Themes that the ELIR Team have advised they wish to explore during their week-long visit in November include:

- the impact of a changing student demographic on learning and teaching and the management of quality and standards and the specific support

offered for international, online, articulating and widening participation students as these student numbers increase.

- the progress being made with the University's Postgraduate Research School (PGRS) and in developing 'online learner communities' and representation structures for these students approaches to ensuring consistent reflection and analysis in Annual Course and Programme Reviews and consistency of assessment and feedback practice across courses and programmes and

- as the University expands its collaborative provision, how it plans to develop its capacity to manage and assure this provision

During their November visit the Team will wish to meet with academic and profession service staff and students, and we will be in contact in regard to this in due course.