

## Using quality assurance to drive change and enhancement in our new tertiary landscape

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### ABSTRACT

Since 2021, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) has been working collaboratively with colleges, universities, sector agencies and the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) to support the development of Scotland's new Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework (TQEF). In 2023, QAA Scotland was asked by the SFC to oversee design of two key components of the TQEF - an approach to external peer review and follow-up activity, and national thematic enhancement activity. This paper outlines progress so far working with staff and students from across Scotland's colleges and universities, our partner quality and sector agencies, and the SFC.

**Keywords:** tertiary, quality, enhancement, assurance

### Introduction

QAA has been at the forefront for many years in Scotland in using quality assurance as a vehicle to drive change and enhancement. The globally recognised innovative Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF) (QAA, 2024), was 20 years old last year and will evolve in 2024-25, bringing the strengths of the college and university sectors together into a new tertiary quality approach for Scotland. The move to a tertiary context and a new Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework (SFC, 2024) allows us to re-evaluate what is valued within our post-16 sector, and how we quality assure and enhance Scotland's provision.

### The aspiration: A tertiary future

The aspiration in Scotland has long been for a coherent approach to education, skills, and research delivered across colleges and universities. This is underpinned by a belief that what matters is the right balance of pathways and options for learners whatever their ambition and whatever their starting point. Parity of esteem for different learning pathways is therefore critical to enabling a coherent approach which fairly supports ambitions for all in Scotland. Across our post-16 sector, it could be argued that reality and policy have not yet caught up with this aspiration and there is a need to shift the paradigm. Relaying a story, a colleague recalled asking a peer, 'What do you teach?' to which the answer was 'design and technology'. In response to the reciprocal question, the colleague when asked, 'What do you teach?' replied, 'young people'. Arguably, both responses are flawed, with tertiary education not just providing education for school leavers but courses, programmes and opportunities for learners throughout life and where approximately

43% of college (Colleges Scotland, 2024) and 39% of university students are over 25 (Higher Education Statistics Agency).

Recognition of the breadth and diversity of learners sits alongside a need for increased recognition of the important role of Scotland's college sector and a parity of esteem with universities. Going back to the question, 'What do you teach?' is problematic, because it is focused on what we think we are delivering as educators, rather than on what learners want to achieve and how best to help them get there. If, ultimately, learning and development is the goal for our students, an answer like, 'I enable people to learn and help them to get access and achieve in a learning environment that is right for them and meets their needs' might better recognise our goal of a coherent and sustainable approach. It is our view that what is right for Scotland is for institutions, policy makers and educators to undergo a fundamental change in perspective to put learners at the heart of the system and focus on the right pathways for those learners, promoting equity and enabling choice whether their destination is college or university. The ambition of the new enhancement approach we are developing for the tertiary sector in Scotland aims to do just this by recognising the opportunity in bringing staff and students from across further and higher education together to shape our ambition and planning to deliver greater parity and better experience of making and seeing choices through for all learners.

#### Coherent provision and sustainability: A review of tertiary education and research

SFC's National Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability (SFC, 2021) marked the beginning of turning aspiration into reality where the final report set out key recommendations for system change including:

- "Developing a clear strategic, longer-term vision and intent for the future of tertiary education and research undertaken by colleges and universities in Scotland.
- Protect excellent discovery research and develop mission-orientated research/knowledge exchange activities.
- Build capacity and a more systematic approach to the way we collectively plan coherent tertiary provision and skills provision and investment.
- Find better ways to support learning throughout life.
- Ensure the interests of current and future students are protected.
- Recognise more fully the importance of international education connections.
- Galvanise current and future leaders across tertiary education, skills provision and research".

The realisation of these recommendations moves us further towards our aspiration. The first step on this journey was the recommendation in the SFC Review, and subsequent agreement by Scottish Government Ministers to "explore the development of a single tertiary quality framework for Scotland's colleges and universities". By creating parity of esteem in the approach to how we delivery quality assurance and enhancement across all tertiary provision, this recommendation and the work to take it forward, has also created a meaningful context in which those involved in learning and teaching across further education (FE) and higher education (HE) provision can share practice and learn from each other for the first time. SFC was asked to pay particular attention to, "the appropriate balance between assuring and enhancing the quality of tertiary provision" and recognise "the distinct contribution as well as the interconnectedness of each part of the tertiary education system" (Scottish Government, 2021). Following the Scottish Government response, work began on the Tertiary Quality Project (SFC, 2024).

## The Tertiary Quality Project

The Tertiary Quality Project aims to shift the paradigm on coherence and parity and use quality arrangements to drive change and enhancement. The first phase undertaken in 2021-22, explored the feasibility of using a common approach to assuring and enhancing quality in the tertiary sector, with the right flexibilities to support sector needs. Questions explored included, ‘can one approach suit all shapes and sizes of institution?’ and ‘what is similar and what is different?’. A mapping exercise of existing quality processes across colleges and universities was undertaken with quality professionals from each sector (SFC, 2024) supported by extensive stakeholder engagement and co-creation exploratory events. These discussions informed the realisation that all institutions were fundamentally in the business of managing academic standards to support high quality learning and teaching, enhancing the learning experience and enabling student success and that the quality arrangements designed should support those things. In addition, if existing methods could support diverse institutions like Newbattle Abbey College and City of Glasgow College (Education Scotland, How good is our college?) (Education Scotland, 2017) or the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and University of Edinburgh (QAA Scotland, Enhancement-led Institutional Review) (QAA, 2017), then why not Newbattle Abbey College and University of Edinburgh, albeit with recognising institutional context and designing flexible and proportionate arrangements?

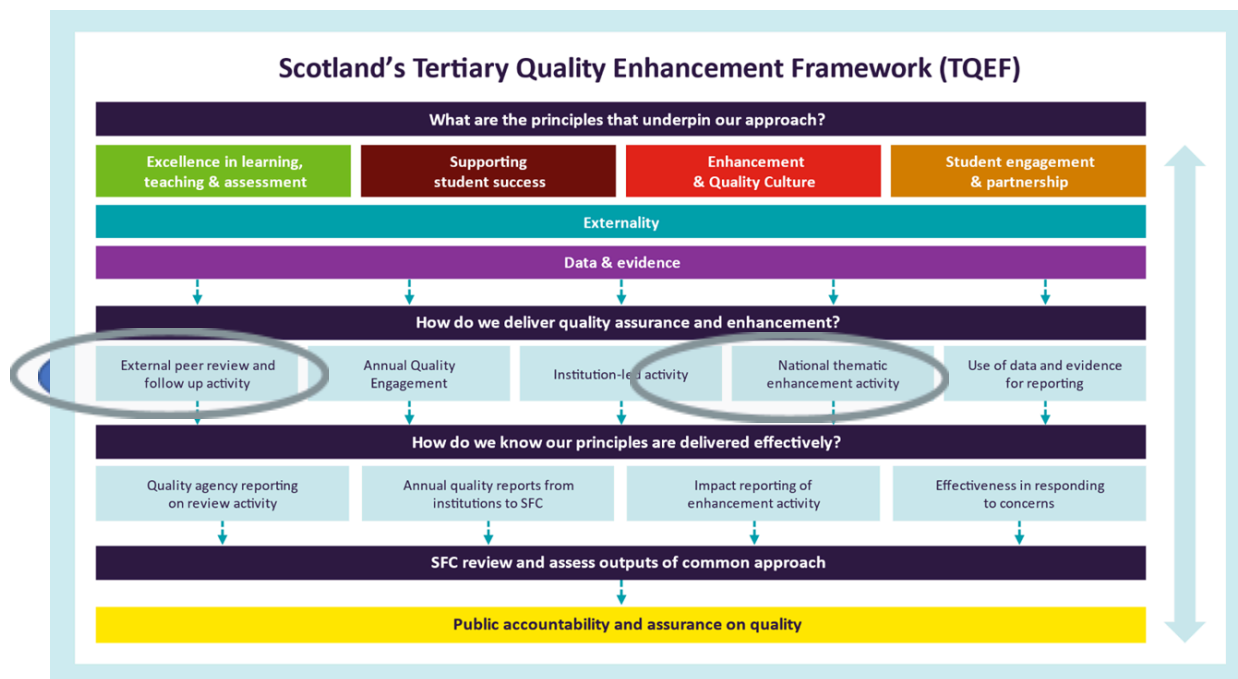
This building evidence and mapping arrangements phase (SFC, 2024) supported the feasibility of a tertiary approach. This exploration generated excitement, a little bit of a fear of change and real hope in the possibilities that a tertiary approach might bring. At this stage, consideration was also given to the benefits and gains of introducing tertiary quality arrangements as well as the wider landscape of policy review and reform including the Muir Review on ‘Putting Learners at the Centre: Towards a Future Vision for Scottish Education (Scottish Government, 2022) and other developing SFC Review activity.

SFC published and commissioned a report produced by the College Development Network (CDN), outlining effective practice in institutional self-evaluation, ‘Self-evaluation in the tertiary sector: co-creating a new approach’ (SFC, 2022), one of the key processes at the core of any effective quality enhancement framework: institution-led self-evaluation. The report foreword outlines the co-creation process, “reviewers from Education Scotland, QAA Scotland, Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland (sparqs) and SFC reviewed self-evaluation documentation from a range of higher education institutions and colleges to arrive at a detailed understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the current reporting systems and of what good practice in self-evaluation looks like. These partners were joined by colleagues from HEI and college quality teams in a series of service design workshops”. Following the project, CDN analysed the outputs of the project to devise a set of key themes in self-evaluation together with recommendations and observations for the sector in progressing the Tertiary Quality Project.

The next phase of the project entailed bringing groups of staff and students from across colleges and universities together to explore what shape some of the core arrangements for quality assurance and enhancement might take, and what the principles underpinning the aspiration to put students at the centre of a tertiary approach might be. This extensive collaborative work, including all of Scotland’s colleges, universities, sector and quality agencies culminated in the development of Scotland’s Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework (TQEF) (SFC, 2024) (Figure 1. below highlights the components QAA has been asked to oversee) and Principles (SFC, 2024). This co-creation approach allowed reflection on contributions from across the sector, increased buy-in, and began the kind of cross-sector working needed to make the TQEF a success. The principles of the SFC TQEF created and developed in partnership, provide a sound

foundation for quality assurance and enhancement work and demonstrate a shared commitment to what we value as a tertiary sector.

**Figure 1 Scotland’s Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework (TQEF)**



**The QAA Commission from SFC – Design and delivery**

In June 2023, SFC commissioned QAA to design, and deliver an approach to two components of the TQEF- peer-led external review including follow-up activity and an enhancement programme for Scotland’s tertiary sector. At QAA, during 2023-24 we have been focusing on the design of these components. This has been quite a job, involving expertise from colleagues and students from colleges, universities, sector quality and other agencies from across the tertiary sector to get us to this point where we have a draft review method out for consultation and a proposal for SFC on an exciting new approach to undertaking national thematic enhancement activity.

**External peer review and follow-up activity**

SFC asked QAA to oversee the design of an external cyclical peer-review methodology that provides assessment of, and supports enhancement of, the quality of all provision delivered by Scotland’s tertiary institutions.

Sector engagements throughout 2023-24 have helped develop proposals for a cyclical enhancement-led external peer review model, Tertiary Quality Enhancement Review. The proposals have been tested with an Advisory Group, sector engagements and with sector agencies. The new method proposals have also been designed to align with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015), published by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, protecting Scotland’s place on the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR), a register of

trusted quality agencies in the European Higher Education Area. Following consultation in summer 2024, the first reviews are expected to commence in academic year 2024-25.

### National Thematic Enhancement Activity

SFC asked QAA to develop supporting structures and processes for the effective delivery of national enhancement activity that would support delivery of the following.

- A culture of continuous improvement at institutional and sector level
- Enhanced collaboration between colleges and universities through sharing of learning, innovation, and good practice across the tertiary education sector
- Improved objective setting at outset of enhancement work, with clearer links between activity and expected outcomes
- Enhanced institutional reflection on, and ownership of, the quality of their provision
- Better evaluation of whether the activity has contributed to improved outcomes and learning experience for students and clearer links to how this will be evidenced.

QAA's proposals to SFC for national thematic enhancement activity, Scotland's Tertiary Enhancement Programme (STEP), is intended to be a collaborative, future-facing programme that enables Scotland's colleges and universities to work together to improve and enhance learning, teaching, the student experience and staff development across tertiary provision by addressing challenges collectively rather than individually. These proposals will be further developed by QAA during autumn 2024 with SFC and sector colleagues.

### Conclusion

These are exciting times for us at QAA and for our students, colleagues and partners across the tertiary sector in Scotland. We are looking forward to continuing to work collaboratively in partnership to develop a sector approach to national thematic enhancement activity and external peer review. Circling back to where we began, our aspirations are to put learners at the heart of the system and focus on the right pathways for those learners, promoting equity and enabling choice whether their destination is college or university. Our new quality arrangements aim to promote a culture of collaboration between universities and colleges which can only benefit Scottish students, their outcomes and their overall learner journeys. So, when asked, as quality professionals, 'what do you?', our answer might be aspirational... 'we think big and we use quality assurance to drive change and enhancement for the benefit of our students, our staff and our sector'.

### Biographies

*Kathryn O'Loan* joined QAA as Director for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in 2023 and co-wrote this piece when in that role. Prior to that she worked at the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), where she was Assistant Director, Access, Learning and Outcomes. She had strategic oversight for SFC's quality assurance and enhancement agenda across further and higher education provision in Scotland's colleges and universities. This included leading the development of the recommendation within SFC's Review of

Sustainability and Coherence – for a tertiary approach to quality. At QAA, Kathryn led on developments in Scotland and on the quality agenda at UK level, including relationships and collaboration with partners across Wales and Northern Ireland and has since left QAA to pursue other opportunities.

*Debra Macfarlane* is an experienced Quality Enhancement Manager and academic developer with experience of working in tertiary education in quality, assessment and feedback and employability, having previously worked in roles both in universities and in industry. Debra is skilled in quality enhancement and review, academic development and training and project management in the UK tertiary education sector and was a previous lead for the Scottish National Enhancement Theme, 'Resilient Learning Communities'. Seconded to SFC from 2021-2023 to work on a tertiary approach to quality for Scotland's colleges and universities, Debra has now returned to QAA to support the commission to deliver tertiary quality arrangements for the Scottish sector.

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