

Our Reference: 24-034

2 September 2024

Dear Kathryn

Tertiary Quality Enhancement Review (TQER) Consultation

Universities Scotland Learning & Teaching Committee discussed the TQER consultation at an extraordinary meeting and we wanted to share our collective high-level response with you. Many individual institutions will, of course, be sharing more detailed responses with you.

We welcome the fact that TQER is peer-led and enhancement-focussed and that it will centre the student voice and student interests. This builds on the strengths of ELIR. However, we would like to better understand how the Scottish Tertiary Enhancement Programme (STEP) will link to TQER.

We welcome the continuing focus on co-creation and partnership between SFC, QAA, other quality agencies, universities and how it has now expanded to include Scotland's colleges. We think that it is this sector ownership that allows Scotland's universities (and now colleges too) to engage fully and to deliver the best learning experience for students.

We also note that the TQER method is now more expansive than ELIR which will place additional burden on institutions as they consider how to resource, manage how they can deliver new aspects, for example the additional information and evidence required as part of the Additional Information Set (AIS), and change or evolve existing processes. This will take time and may be a more challenging prospect for those institutions who will be under review in the early part of the cycle. We hope that there will be flexibility and understanding built in to QAA processes to allow institutions to manage these new arrangements, particularly in the early part of implementation and in the context of the current challenging financial operating environment for many universities and colleges.

We welcome the assurance the new method will be ESG compliant – this is essential for our international partnerships and reputation.

We agree that linking TQER to the principles of the TQEF makes sense. We are also pleased that TQER builds on current approaches to institution-led review.

We have had some questions about the scope of TQER with relation to, for example international provision (including international year one and foundation years) and college partnerships. This may indicate a need to clarify the scope.

We welcome the recognition of institutional distinctiveness and context in the TQER approach. We welcome the ability to tailor the review to the institution, including the composition of the review team. Tailoring the length of review could help to avoid disproportionately overburdening smaller institutions and including specialist reviewers will be helpful for specialist institutions.

There will be substantial training requirements to support institutional staff and students in preparing for TQER. For example, this might include high level overview information and briefings (strategic and operational) along with information to support colleagues within institutions preparing for TQER and TQER review teams.

Similarly, there will be a need for comprehensive guidance and support for student sabbaticals who will be the Lead Student Representative role in their year of office. It is important that these individuals get advance notice of their role. We would also want to avoid placing too much burden on the Lead Student Representative and ensure that the expectations are realistic. We note that student officers are elected for one year (and sometimes a second-year term), and it can be challenging to get up to speed with the details of the quality arrangements, so it is important to ensure a proportionate ask. At the start of the cycle, institutions under review will not have many (or indeed any) self-evaluation and action plans (SEAPs), which form a core part of the Advanced Information Set. It will be important to be clear with these institutions what additional material might be required as a result.

We also note that there is a difference in scope between the SEAP and the Strategic Impact Analysis, which may pose challenges for institutions. The SEAP and SFC data analysis will be used to inform the annual institutional meetings with the SFC outcome agreement manager. However, the focus of these meetings will necessarily be more heavily on SFC funded activity, whereas TQER includes all credit bearing activity, not all of which will be SFC funded – and indeed in many institutions a significant proportion of activity is not SFC funded. There is therefore potentially some tension between these two uses of SEAP.

We find the glossary helpful but would find it useful if some clarity on language relating to external expertise could be expanded upon. This could mean engagement with the sector or could mean use of consultants or third parties. We also think that some of the wording within the guidance uses external peer review, external review and TQER interchangeably. It could be helpful to be consistent in the use of this language to help students and non-quality staff in particular.

We would find it helpful to see the specification of data that SFC will provide. This will help institutions, especially those whose reviews appear early in the cycle. This matters because there can be differences between institutional and external analyses of data. It will be important to understand how SFC is analysing the data and which academic year the data relates to.

Universities will have access to much more timely data than SFC because SFC uses HESA data which has a significant time lag (which was exacerbated this year because of issues with the implementation of a new data collection method). More recent data will help the review teams look at the impact of institutions' actions. However, that could mean that different parts of the TQEF use different data (SEAP, TQER, strategic impact analysis, additional information set, meetings with SFC outcome agreement managers). That could lead to different conclusions. This is perhaps especially important at the current time because several years of recent data are anomalous owing to the impact of the pandemic. We note the reference to the JISC digital evaluation tool in Annex E as part of the AIS. This tool is relatively new (2023) and not all institutions will be using it. It would be helpful to understand if this tool will be compulsory or not.

We agree with the format of the judgements and welcome the inclusion of enhancement and the reference to assurance on academic standards. We suggest that it would be helpful to provide informal, oral feedback on review outcomes on the final day so that institutions do not have to wait for the draft report. This worked well previously in ELIR.

It would be helpful to understand more about the actions arising from institutional partner reviews and particularly on potential SFC action.

It would also be helpful to define more clearly how the Scottish Concerns Scheme will integrate into TQER.

We hope this is helpful feedback as you finalise the TQER method.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Olivier', written in a cursive style.

Professor Steve Olivier
Principal, Robert Gordon University & Convener of US Learning & Teaching Committee