

Case Study: Robert Gordon University (Great Britain)

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Overview

The presentation is based on a Scottish and UK perspective, considering both quality assurance and enhancement. It considers three aspects:

- trends in the development of quality assurance (QA) for 1st+2nd and 3rd cycle provision;
- quality processes currently in place in the UK for 3rd cycle provision;
- directions of future development.

Trends in the development of QA for 1st+2nd and 3rd cycle provision

Approaches to quality for 1st+2nd are compared with those for 3rd cycle.

First, by identifying broad general trends for 1st+2nd cycles as increases in:

- explicitness and transparency;
- focus on employability of graduates and contribution to the economy;
- attention to student representation and student evaluations;
- attention on teaching skills of faculty staff;
- attention on indicators and ranking;
- financial pressure due to declining units of funding resource;
- emphasis on quality enhancement (doing it better, or making the best of) in addition to quality assurance.

Research activity provides the underpinning environment for 3rd cycle provision, and a number of recent trends are identified:

- concepts of 'quality' of research that are based on performance and outputs;
- increasing external, national assessments and rankings that are linked to funding;
- increasing consideration of the economic impacts of research, including 3rd cycle provision.

Trends in the development of QA for 3rd cycle provision are identified as:

- development of referencing to external frameworks for standards and quality, beyond traditional peer review through examination;
- development of explicit, internal university processes for QA of 3rd cycle provision;
- widening the scope of 3rd cycle provision, including new types of degree and wider sets of graduate outcomes, in particular skills promoting employability.

The relationships between teaching and research have been a focus for considerable attention in the UK and Scotland recently. Both diverging and converging trends can be identified:

- specialisation and separation of teaching and research activities with implications for staff activities and organisation;
- increasing consideration of how research can inform and benefit teaching, including development of high-level, research-type skills, in 1st+2nd cycle graduates.

Quality processes currently in place for 3rd cycle provision in the UK and Scotland

A set of national policies, frameworks and initiatives provides reference points for internal quality processes for 3rd cycle provision within universities:

- national qualifications frameworks;

- Code of Practice for quality of research degree provision (3rd cycle);
- external review processes for all universities which include consideration of 3rd cycle provision;
- a Concordat to support the career development of researchers;
- plus a range of other initiatives and organisations.

The QA policies and procedures within the author's own university, The Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, are typical of current Scottish practice, and cover the 3rd cycle student's journey from application through to career development and planning –see urls in list of references and further information.

Directions of future development for quality processes for 3rd cycle provision in Scotland

Directions of development for quality processes in the Scottish university sector have been identified through analysis and synthesis of the outcomes from external reviews (Enhancement-Led Institutional Review ELIR) of all Scottish universities over the period 2003-2007. These have been reported in a set of Learning from ELIR documents, and highlight the following:

- increasing focus on skills training, employability and career development for 3rd cycle students;
- increasing focus on student representation and engagement in quality processes by 3rd cycle students;
- increasing focus on training for research supervisors;
- development of internal quality review processes for 3rd cycle provision.

Directions of development in the author's own university currently involve re-thinking internal review processes for 3rd cycle provision. This is being shaped by two factors:

- re-focussing staff research activities, with shifts in staff roles, organisation and location;
- reflection on recently revised internal quality review processes for 1st and 2nd cycle provision that emphasise more systematic evaluation and planning future enhancement actions.

Conclusion

Comparing quality processes for 1st+2nd and 3rd cycles:

- there are many similarities, but with development and implement of processes for 3rd cycle starting later with a slower pace of development;
- aspects of both convergence and divergence, largely shaped by funding pressures and research performance indicators;
- divergence between universities, in terms of the significance of research activity to institutional mission.

These conclusions and the more detailed points in the paper provide a context to compare the situation in Austria, and in particular to consider what we can learn from, and with each other, through discussion and sharing ideas.

See separate list of references and further information.