

ACADEMIC QUALITY



Quality Assurance

Processes for managing quality, academic standards and academic risk in relation to taught programmes

Summary

Heriot-Watt University has a well-established framework for managing quality, academic standards and academic risk in relation to its taught programmes, and this framework operates effectively across the educational provision delivered to more than 27,000 students across five campuses, 200+ academic partnerships in 150 countries and all online offerings.

In response to a request from the Audit and Risk Committee of the Court, and following a review of practices at other Scottish HEIs, an overview of the effectiveness of the University's framework for managing quality, academic standards and academic risk was provided to the Committee at its meeting on 21 April 2021. The Committee concluded that the University's processes for managing quality, academic standards and academic risk in relation to learning and teaching, the student learning experience and responding to student views were **effective**. Furthermore, it was confirmed that there was no requirement for an additional annual effectiveness review of the institution's quality processes, as the Committee was appropriately satisfied with the robustness of existing processes.

This effectiveness outcome can provide confirmation to the Court that the Annual Quality Report to the Scottish Funding Council, which the Court considers, is robust and accurate and can, therefore, be signed off by the Chair of the Court.

This paper summarises the key processes, both internal and external, which comprise the University's quality framework. Additionally, an overview is provided of the means by which the student voice is heard and responded to. This summary is intended to reassure the Audit and Risk Committee and other internal and external groups and organisations that the University has effective oversight of, and effective arrangements for, managing quality, academic standards and academic risk.

Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework

The University's approaches to quality are aligned with the Scottish sector's Quality Enhancement Framework: an enhancement-led approach is adopted to quality, which focuses on improvement of learning and teaching and of the student learning experience and in which the assurance of quality and academic standards has an enhancement purpose.



The Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework, which the Quality Assurance Agency Scotland manages on behalf of the Scottish Funding Council, is summarised below, together with the key QAA UK frameworks:

QUALITY ENHANCEMENT FRAMEWORK

Quality Enhancement Framework: the enhancement-led approach to quality in Scottish Higher Education.

- Five key aspects, plus one-year Focus On Projects
- In place since 2003
- Developed in partnership by a range of agencies: the Scottish Funding Council, the Quality Assurance Agency Scotland and the National Union of Students Scotland
- Emerged from, and was a reaction to, quality assurance processes that seemed to be intrusive, emphasised compliance and concentrated on the current state of play, rather than on improvement.
- Founded on the principle that the purpose of quality systems in higher education is to improve the student learning experience



QAA UK: Transnational Education Reviews; UK Quality Code

Robustness of HWU's Quality Framework

The University's recent Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR), as conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency Scotland on behalf of the Quality Assurance Agency UK in January-November 2020, confirmed the robustness of HWU's quality framework:

The University has a mature and effective institutional quality framework which is well-understood by staff across all campuses and is supported by the use of clear and accessible documentation. This has enabled an agile and effective response to the global coronavirus pandemic across all campuses, which was effectively led and coordinated at senior level, working across different national contexts.

ELIR Outcome Report, Heriot-Watt University, February 2021

This quality framework ensures that the University meets the requirements of all government and other authorities in all countries in which it operates, primarily the Quality Assurance Agency UK, the Knowledge and Human Development Agency (Dubai) and the Malaysian Qualifications Agency.

In addition to ELIR, which is conducted every four or five years, the robustness of the University's framework is evaluated annually through QAA Scotland Annual Discussions and the University's Annual Quality Report to the Scottish Funding Council.

The key aspects of this framework in managing quality, academic standards and academic risk are outlined in this paper. Additionally, the routes by which students can make their views known are included, as are the external checks and balances.

Further information on the effectiveness of the University's arrangements for managing quality, academic standards and risk can be found in the publicly accessible ELIR reports ([short Outcome Report](#); [full Technical Report](#)).

Fundamental Principles for Assuring Quality and Managing Academic Risk

Heriot-Watt University's diversity of delivery in taught provision is underpinned by safeguards, which are encapsulated in a key, fundamental principle governing all multi-mode, multi-location provision:

identical academic standards; diversity of learning experiences

In terms of academic matters, the principle of *identical academic standards, diversity of learning experiences* means that:

- The academic standards and the quality of learning of all awards must:
 - Meet the formal Expectations and Practices (Core and Common) of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (new version);
 - Be properly located in the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework and consistent with Characteristics Statements;
 - Be consistent with QAA UK Subject Benchmark Statements.
- Programmes offered in more than one location or by more than one mode of study must have identical academic standards and contain the following identical components across all versions:
 - Learning outcomes;
 - Award/programme title;
 - Mandatory courses;
 - Core knowledge, skills and competencies;
 - Courses within programmes must have identical learning outcomes and identical core curriculum (forms of assessment may vary, but must assess identical learning outcomes).

Local modification and contextualisation of courses (ie modules) offered in different locations and modes are permitted and encouraged.

- The learning experience of all students, irrespective of mode or location, must adhere to the following minimum threshold, Expectation and principle:

The quality of the learning experience will enable students to achieve all of the programme's specified learning outcomes;

All Heriot-Watt programmes of study will provide students with the opportunity to develop their academic, personal and professional potential, and the University will seek to enhance the experience of students across all modes and locations;

The University adopts an inclusive, non-segregated approach to all its academic activities and learning environments.

Management of Quality

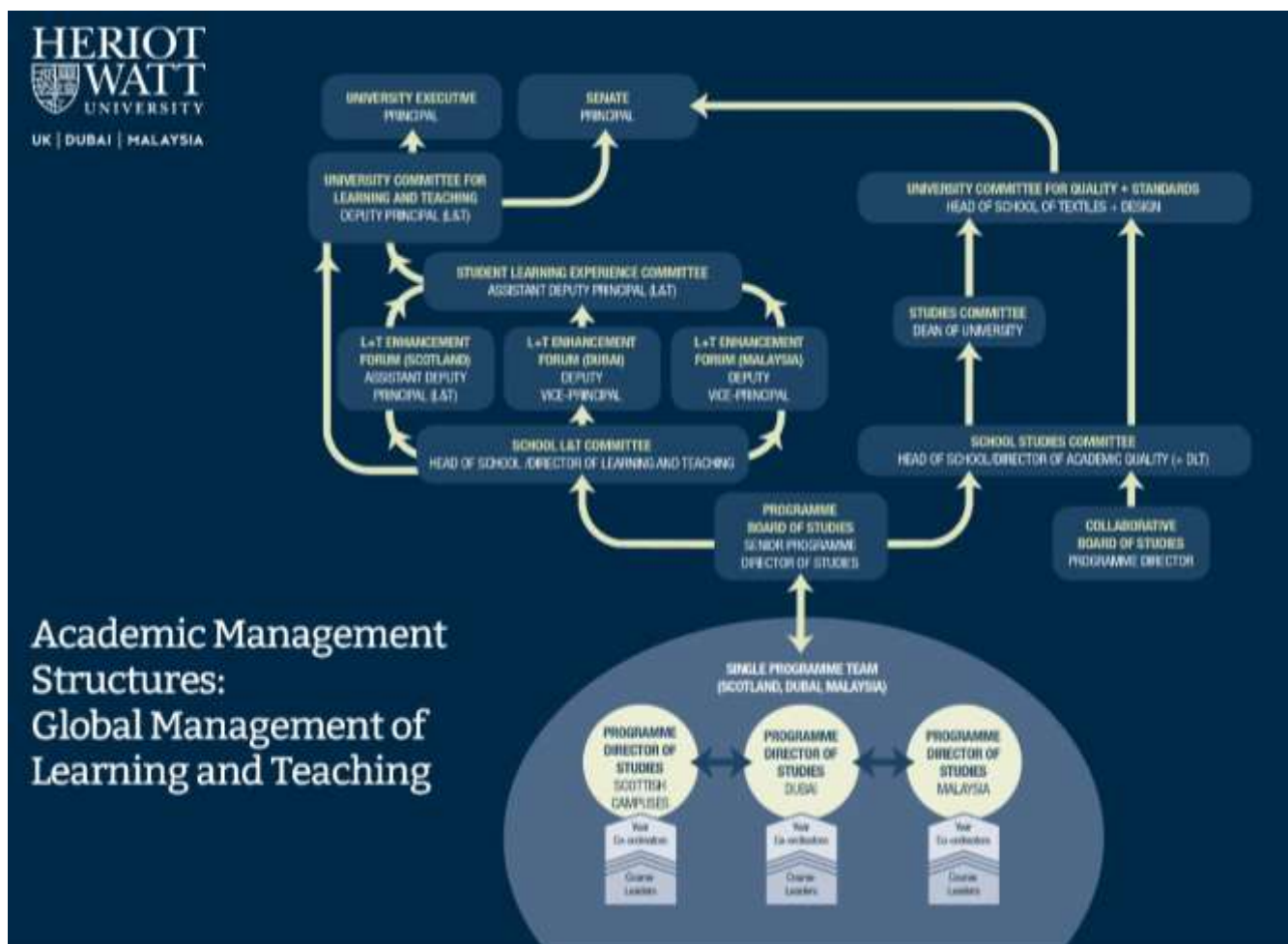
Responsibility for all aspects of the framework ultimately lies with the Senate. Operational aspects are delegated to various Committees of the Senate, the lead committee for quality assurance and academic standards being the University Committee for Quality and Standards (its sub-committee, the University Studies Committee, which undertakes programme approval on behalf of UCQS). The UCQS also monitors the quality of the taught and research student learning experience (across all levels, modes and locations) through the institutional quality assurance processes. Outcomes from all processes related to the quality of the PGR student learning experience are additionally considered by the Research Degrees Committee. The University

Committee for Learning and Teaching is responsible for quality enhancement, including enhancing learning and teaching and the student learning experience.

There are management-related responsibilities associated with assurance processes within the remit of the University Executive, which are led globally by the Deputy Principal (Education and Student Life) in conjunction with the Head of Academic Quality and the [Academic Quality](#) Division (within the Registry and Academic Support Directorate).

At the School level, quality is managed globally through committees and roles comparable to those at the institutional level. Each School has a School Studies Committee (quality assurance) and a School Learning and Teaching Committee (quality enhancement), chaired respectively by the School Director of Academic Quality and the School Director of Learning and Teaching. These committees are supported centrally through the Academic Quality and Academic Operations Divisions (within the Registry and Academic Support Directorate), providing a consistent approach across all Schools.

This integrated approach to assuring (and indeed enhancing) quality is managed through the [global Academic Management Structures](#), which ensure that quality and academic standards are monitored and maintained across all modes and locations of delivery.



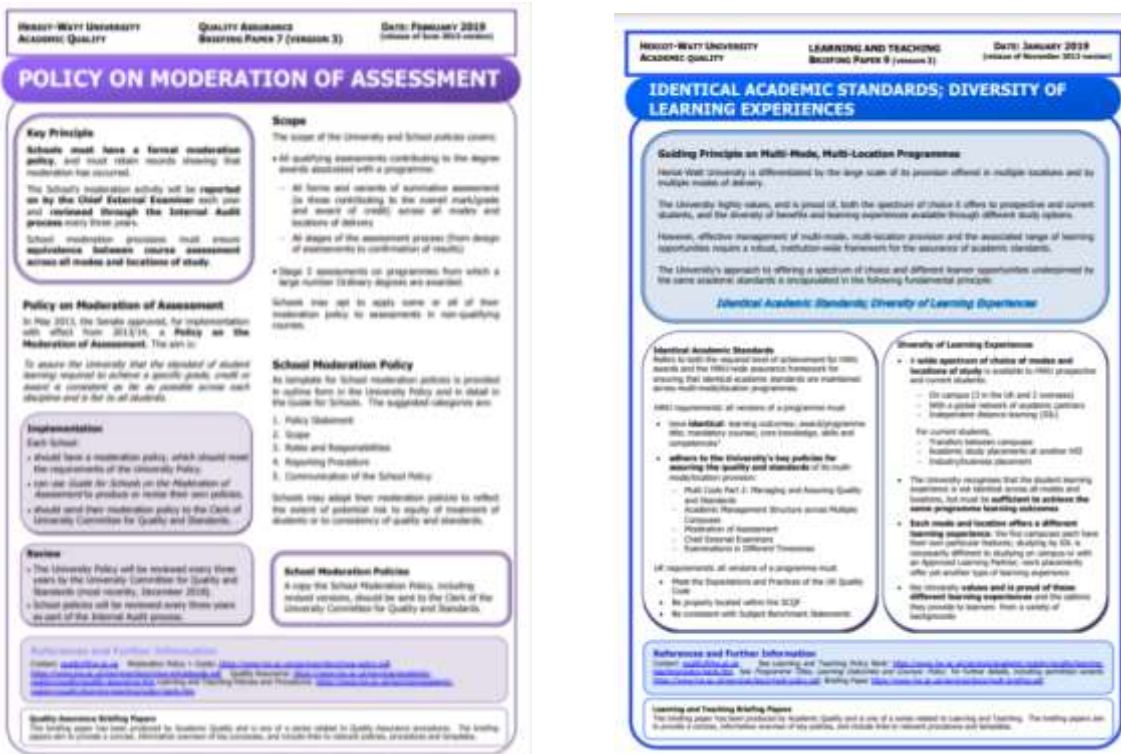
The University's Quality Codes

The key principles related to *identical academic standards, diversity of learning experiences*, which are operated through the Academic Management Structures, are codified and explained in the University's *Code of Practice for the Management of Multi-Location, Multi-Mode Programmes* (known as the “Multi Code”), which provides a framework for the assurance of academic standards across all variants of programmes.

The University is in the process of replacing its Multi Code with a new *Global Code of Practice for the Management, Assurance and Enhancement of Taught Programmes* (known as the “Global Code”), which incorporates, for the first time, the UK, Dubai and Malaysia requirements.

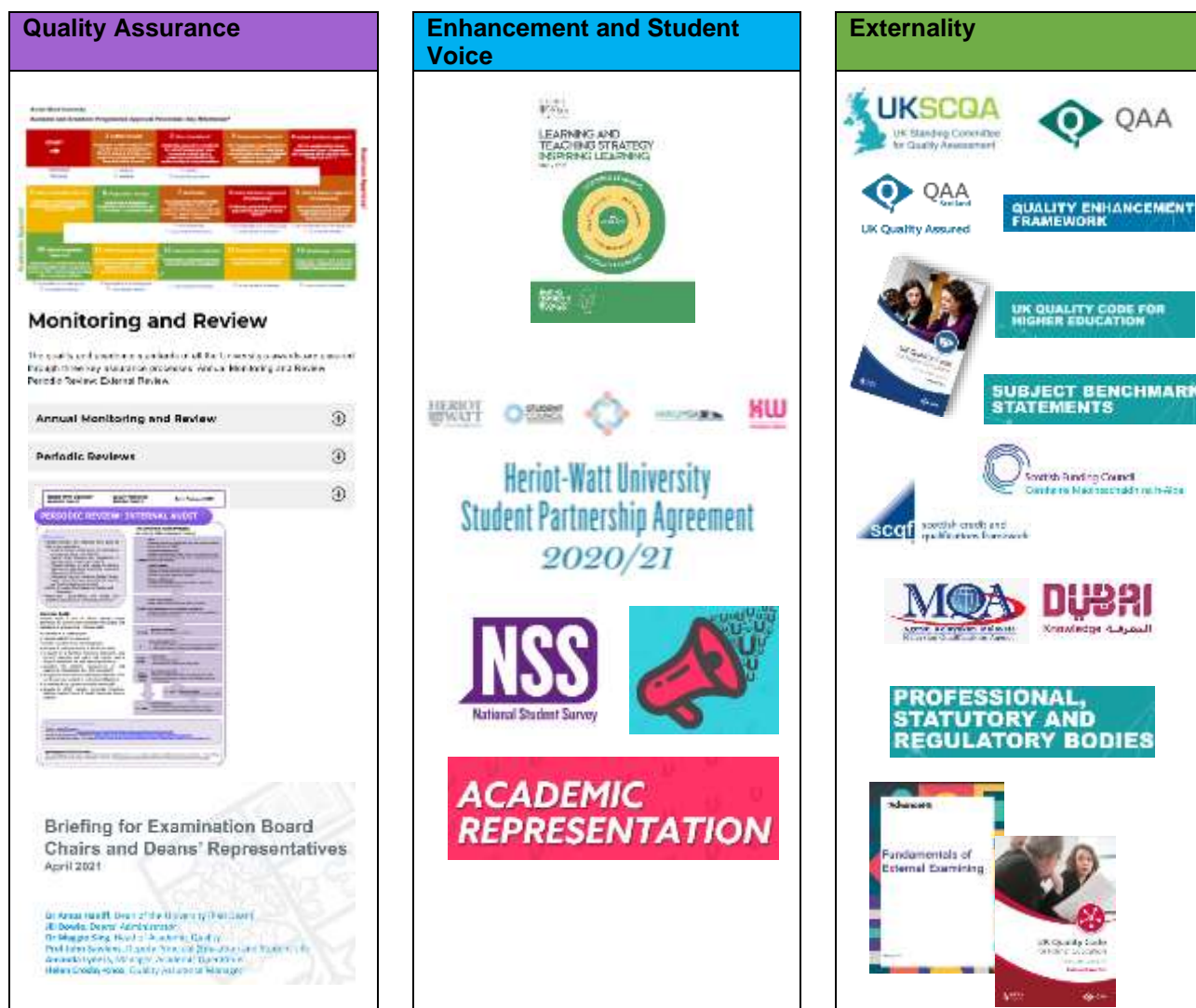


Each key policy and principle summarised in the Multi and Global Codes are explained more fully in the series of one-page [Learning and Teaching](#) and [Quality Assurance](#) Briefing Papers, which were commended for their accessibility the University's recent ELIR review.



Key Components of the University's Quality Framework

The key components of the University's Quality Framework are illustrated below, with an explanation provided in subsequent sections.



Managing Academic Risk

Core to the quality assurance framework of all Scottish HEIs are 3 key internal, institution-wide processes:

- Programme and Partnership Approvals
- Annual Monitoring and Review (AMR)
- Periodic Review

<https://www.hw.ac.uk/uk/services/academic-registry/quality/quality-assurance.htm>

In addition to these three sector-standard processes, the University manages its diverse portfolio through an established academic risk management procedure, differentiating categories of activity by the level of risk associated with it. High and medium risk activities are broadly defined as programmes delivered in conjunction with a partner organisation and independent distance learning provision delivered online.

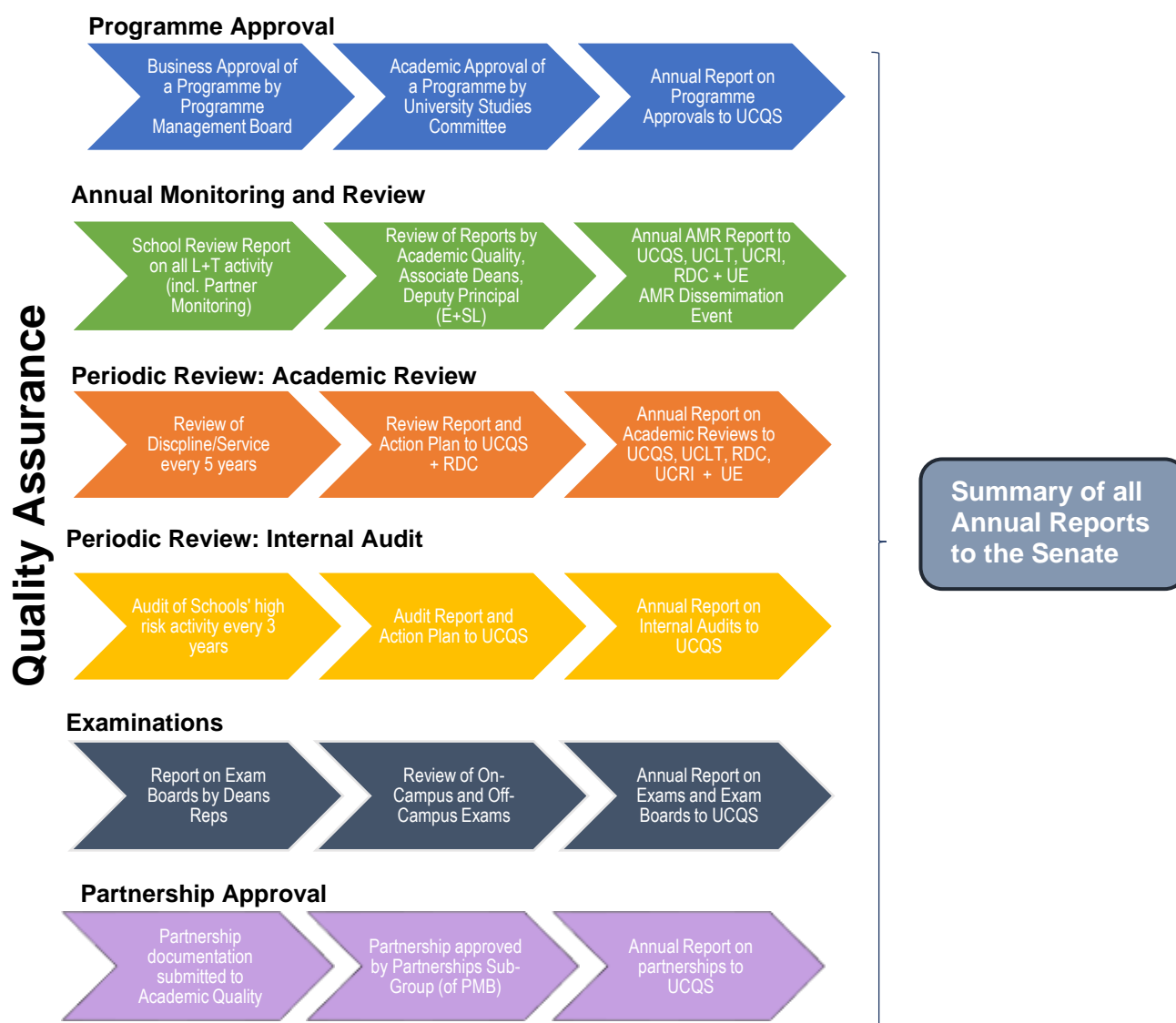
Institutional approval, monitoring and review processes have been adapted to accommodate consideration of this risk. High risk activities require an additional level of approval (by designated members of University's Senior Management) and have more detailed annual monitoring than those deemed to be low risk. There is a periodic, assurance-led [Internal Audit](#), which complements the enhancement-led Academic Review (the University's periodic internal review process), and is designed to ensure that high and medium risk activities

are properly managed and the academic standards of such activities are assured. Annual monitoring and Academic Review have likewise been adapted to ensure appropriate oversight of programmes delivered across all locations and modes, eg [Partner Annual Monitoring and Review](#). Additionally, the University introduced the post of [Chief External Examiner](#) in order to strengthen oversight of multi-location, multi-mode delivery.

Quality Processes in Action

This section outlines how the University's quality processes operate and demonstrates where these intersect and report.

The diagrams illustrate the key stages in each process, with each leading to an annual report, which is reported to either one or both of the University Committee for Quality and Standards and the University Committee for Learning and Teaching, and thereafter to the Senate. The report to the Senate comprises a summary of all Annual Reports as well as the external summary based on all annual reports and the Institutional Quality Report to the Scottish Funding Council; the latter is also considered by the Court.



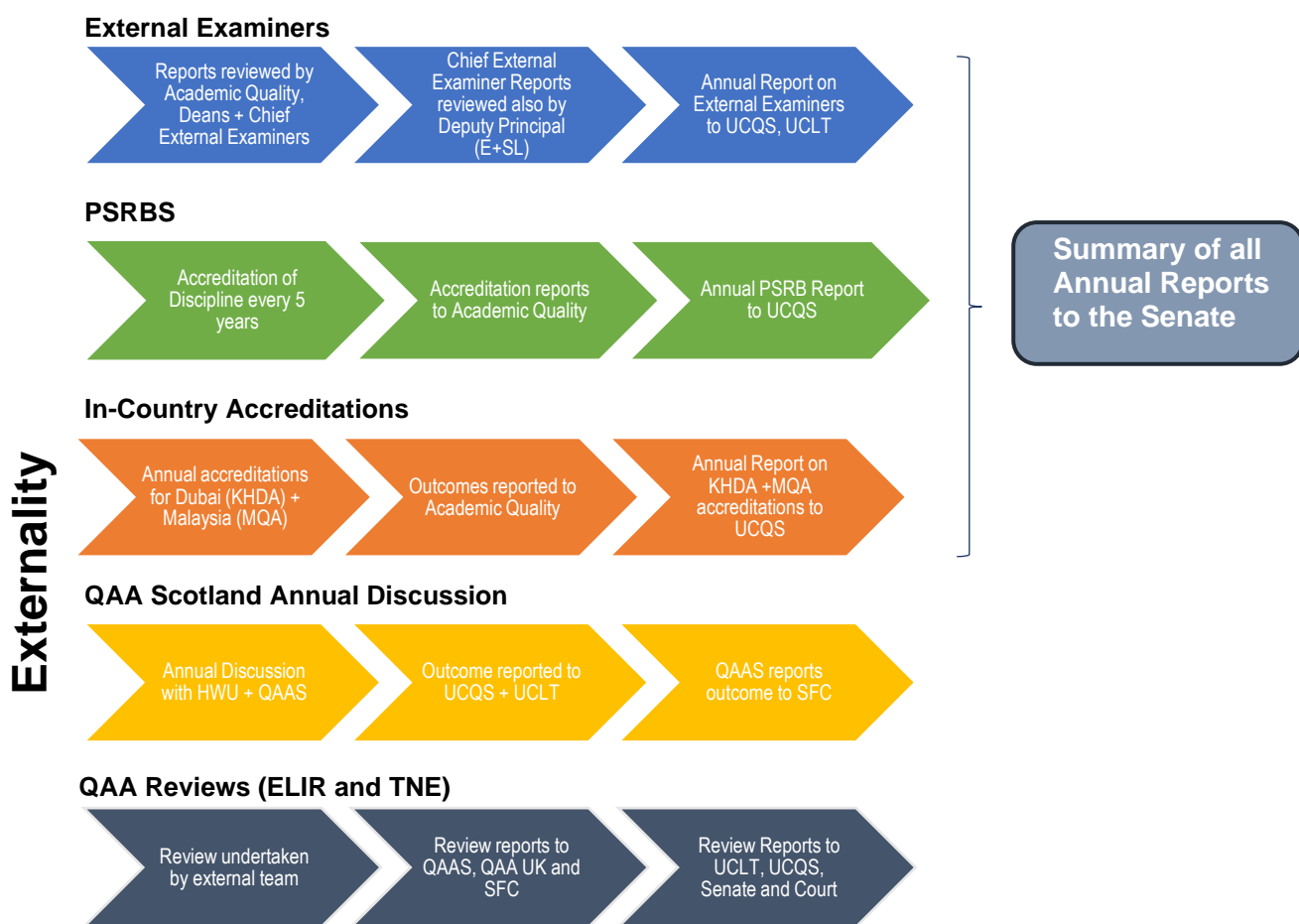
Enhancement and Student Voice are another key facet of the University's quality framework, and the success of both are predicated on strong partnership working between the institution and its three Student Representative Bodies, as was commended in the University's recent ELIR:

Positive partnership working with Student Representative Bodies (SRBs) – the University effectively engages with its SRBs, involving them in active consultation and decision-making processes. They have built, over a period of time, open and collegial relationships between senior management and student officers which demonstrate mutual respect, leading to increasing effective student representation and in turn effective enhancement of the student learning experience.

ELIR Outcome Report, Heriot-Watt University, February 2021

Students have a range of mechanisms to make their views heard: [Student Partnership Agreement](#); Student Surveys; Student Representative Structures. Additionally, if students consider that their experience is not of the highest quality, there is an opportunity to make a [complaint or to appeal](#) a decision.





All of the outcomes of the above quality processes are summarised in various annual reports, which are considered primarily by UCQS and UCLT; relevant reports are also considered, from the perspective of the PGR student experience, by UCRI and RDC. In turn, a summary of all annual reports is produced to assist the Committees in determining their forward agenda. This overall summary is additionally presented to the Senate and, in turn, it shapes the University's Annual Institutional Report on Quality to the Scottish Funding Council. This SFC report is considered by all key University committees, particularly the Court and is signed off by the Chair of Court.

The SFC Report is submitted both to QAA Scotland and to SFC, and forms the basis of the University's Annual Discussion with QAAS as well as being a key document in the ELIR Advanced Information Set. SFC's Learning and Teaching Committee reviews all Institutional Quality Reports based on an analysis produced by QAA Scotland. This sector-wide analysis is made available to all Scottish HEIs through various groups.



Contact Details

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