

Regent College London

UK Higher Education Institutions, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and the UK Quality Code for Higher Education

A Brief Guide

1. General background

Following the commencement of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) was formally dissolved in April 2018 and replaced by the Office for Students (OfS). The OfS is an independent public body, reporting to Parliament through the Department for Education (DfE).

The Secretary of State designated the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) to carry out quality and standards assessment functions as set out in the Higher Education and Research Act 2017. As the Designated Quality Body (DQB), the QAA assesses Higher Education providers on behalf of the OfS, and gives advice on the quality and standards of providers. This includes advice on whether to register a provider or grant degree awarding powers. The OfS retains oversight of these arrangements to ensure that any assessments are fit for purpose and consistent with their mandated approach to regulation

The assurance of academic standards, the quality of learning opportunities for students and accuracy of published information in UK universities is led by the universities themselves, and externally checked by the QAA. The QAA conducts a number of rigorous external review processes including: Higher Education Review (HER), Overseas Audit where UK awards are made through partner organisations both within and outside the UK. From academic year 2015-16 all private higher education institutions (Alternative Providers) were subject to the **Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers)**, which replaced Review for Educational Oversight (REO).

The OfS will monitor Higher Education providers on an annual basis through their annual returns to OfS using a range of nationally published and other data, including the HESA return, information on recruitment, retention, progression and achievement, and national survey results from the National Student Survey (NSS) and the Graduate Outcomes Survey

Additionally, the Government's Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) takes forward the agenda for teaching excellence and will assess teaching at universities by subject. Universities will only be able to charge fees higher than the base fee-cap if they reach certain standards of teaching excellence. Since this is a subject by subject approach the TEF may well result in different fees across different subjects within the same university. The TEF aims to:

- Ensure all students receive an excellent teaching experience that encourages original thinking, drives up engagement and prepares them for the world of work
- build a culture where teaching has equal status with research, with great teachers enjoying the same professional recognition and opportunities for career and pay progression as great researchers
- provide students with the information they need to judge teaching quality
- recognise institutions that do the most to welcome students from a range of backgrounds and support their retention and progression

- include a clear set of outcome-focused criteria and metrics.

2. Higher Education Review for Alternative Providers (HER AP)

The QAA Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) process has academic standards and the student learning experience as central to the review and involves detailed review of:

- ways in which student learning is facilitated and enhanced
- management and maintenance of academic standards
- assessment processes, marking standards and feedback to students
- accuracy of information provided to students and other stakeholders
- means by which students can give feedback on the quality of provision
- means by which students can make a complaint or an academic appeal
- involvement of students in internal course/programme monitoring and the quality assurance procedures operating at the HEI

The QAA report on Higher Education Review (AP) results in judgments being made concerning the soundness of the university's management of the quality of its courses and the academic standards of awards. For the Higher Education Review judgments are expressed in terms of whether each of the Expectation in the Quality Code is met, partially met or not met together with an assessment of risk associated with each expectation (serious, moderate or low risk). This results in four overall judgements being made as follows:

- (1) **Academic standards:** either meets UK expectations; requires improvement to meet UK expectations; or, does not meet UK expectations
- (2) **Learning opportunities:** either commended; meets UK expectations; requires improvement to meet UK expectations; or, does not meet UK expectations
- (3) **Information about higher education provision:** either commended; meets UK expectations; requires improvement to meet UK expectations; or, does not meet UK expectations
- (4) **Enhancement of student learning opportunities:** either commended; meets UK expectations; requires improvement to meet UK expectations; or, does not meet UK expectations.

To 'pass' an HER (AP) the higher education provider must achieve at least 'meets UK expectations' in each of these four judgement areas. All review reports are placed in the public domain on the QAA's website (www.qaa.ac.uk).

Review reports also look at the accuracy, integrity and completeness of information that the HEI publishes about the quality of its courses and the academic standards of its awards. Review reports also identify areas for commendation (good practice), affirmations (recognising enhancements in progress) and recommendations for quality enhancement.

Higher Education Review for Alternative Providers also involves a Financial Sustainability, Management and Governance check (FSMG check) which has the aim of giving students reasonable confidence that they should not be at risk of being unable to complete their course as a result of financial failure of their education provider. The FSMG check is conducted entirely separately from the review of quality assurance arrangements.

Both the HER and the FSMG must be 'passed'.

Higher Education Review (AP) has replaced REO but the annual monitoring after the major HER (AP) report will continue. For the 2017-18 academic year the monitoring process used for REO will broadly apply and will involve the use of published data and HESA returns, as for universities.

3. The QAA UK Quality Code for Higher Education

The Quality Code is a key pillar of UK higher education, protecting the public and student interest, and championing UK higher education's world-leading reputation for quality. It enables providers to understand what is expected of them and what to expect from each other. It has been developed by QAA on behalf of the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment, in consultation with the higher education sector.

The UK Quality Code (UKQC) was revised in 2018 and the new Code is in force from August 2019.

The revised UKQC ensures that the Code will continue to fulfil its role as the cornerstone for quality in UK higher education, protecting the public and student interest, and championing UK higher education's world-leading reputation for quality. The Code is now future-facing, accessible, and truly UK-wide. UKSCQA and QAA considered students' and providers' feedback carefully and the Code is now suited to providers operating in an evolving regulatory landscape, and accessible to the full diversity of the sector and its wider stakeholders.

The Code articulates fundamental principles that apply to higher education quality across the UK, irrespective of changing national contexts. This includes emphasising the role of providers in assuring the quality of the experience on offer to students, supporting student engagement, and ensuring external referencing is used to ensure the integrity of awards and the quality of provision.

The Code is aimed at encouraging broader engagement with Quality Assurance from academic staff, students and other stakeholders.

The Quality Code is based on a number of elements that together provide a reference point for effective quality assurance:

Expectations – these express the outcomes providers should achieve in setting and maintaining the standards of their awards, and for managing the quality of their provision. They are mandatory requirements for all UK providers.

Expectations for Standards

- The academic standards of courses meet the requirements of the relevant national qualifications framework
- The value of qualifications awarded to students at the point of qualifications and over time is in line with sector-recognised standards

Expectations for Quality

- Courses are well-designed, provide a high-quality academic experience for all students and enable a student's achievement to be reliably assessed
- From admission through to completion, all students are provided with the support that they need to succeed in and benefit from higher education

Core practices - represent effective ways of working that underpin the delivery of the Expectations and result in positive outcomes for students. They are mandatory requirements for all UK providers.

Core Practices for Standards

- The provider ensures that the threshold standards for its qualifications are consistent with the relevant national qualifications frameworks
- The provider ensures that students who are awarded qualifications have the opportunity to achieve standards beyond the threshold level that are reasonably comparable with those achieved in other UK providers
- Where a provider works in partnership with other organisations, it has in place effective arrangements to ensure that the standards of its awards are credible and secure irrespective of where or how courses are delivered or who delivers them
- The provider uses external expertise, assessment and classification processes that are reliable, fair and transparent

Core Practices for Quality

- The provider has a reliable, fair and inclusive admissions system
- The provider designs and/or delivers high-quality courses
- The provider has sufficient appropriately qualified and skilled staff to deliver a high-quality academic experience
- The provider has sufficient and appropriate facilities, learning resources and student support services to deliver a high-quality academic experience
- The provider actively engages students, individually and collectively, in the quality of their educational experience
- The provider has fair and transparent procedures for handling complaints and appeals which are accessible to all students
- Where the provider offers research degrees, it delivers these in appropriate and supportive research environments
- Where a provider works in partnership with other organisations, it has in place effective arrangements to ensure that the academic experience is high-quality irrespective of where or how courses are delivered and who delivers them
- The provider supports all students to achieve successful academic and professional outcomes

Common practices - focus on enhancement. They are mandatory requirements for all providers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In England, providers may wish to work towards these, but are not required to do so as they are not currently regulatory requirements and will not be assessed as part of the OfS's regulatory framework.

Common Practices for Standards

- The provider reviews its core practices for standards regularly and uses the outcomes to drive improvement and enhancement

Common Practices for Quality

- The provider reviews its core practices for quality regularly and uses the outcomes to drive improvement and enhancement
- The provider's approach to managing quality takes account of external expertise
- The provider engages students individually and collectively in the development, assurance and enhancement of the quality of their educational experience

Advice and guidance – developed by the sector to support providers in developing and maintaining effective quality assurance practices. This is not mandatory, but illustrative of a range of possible approaches. The Advice and guidance (AAG) addresses 12 themes in detail and outlines the Expectations for Standards and Expectations for Quality. The AAG clearly shows what Core and Common practices are associated with each theme and also provides Guiding Principles and Practical Advice. The latter have been developed as guidelines to help ensure providers meet the Expectations and Practices.

The 12 themes, and the Guiding Principles, are:

Admissions, Recruitment and Widening Access

- Policies and procedures for application, selection and admission to higher education courses are transparent and accessible.
- Higher education providers use fair, reliable and appropriate assessment methods that enable them to select students with the potential to complete the course successfully.
- Higher education providers reduce or remove unnecessary barriers for prospective students.
- Information provided to prospective students for recruitment and widening access purposes supports students in making informed decisions.
- All staff, representatives and partners engaged in the delivery of admissions, recruitment and widening access are appropriately trained and resourced.
- Providers continually develop widening access strategies and policies in line with local and national guidance

Assessment

- Assessment methods and criteria are aligned to learning outcomes and teaching activities.
- Assessment is reliable, consistent, fair and valid.
- Assessment design is approached holistically.

- Assessment is inclusive and equitable.
- Assessment is explicit and transparent.
- Assessment and feedback is purposeful and supports the learning process.
- Assessment is timely.
- Assessment is efficient and manageable.
- Students are supported and prepared for assessment.
- Assessment encourages academic integrity.

Concerns, Complaints and Appeals

- Concerns, complaints and appeals are used to improve the student experience.
- Concerns, complaints and appeals procedures are accessible and inclusive.
- Information is clear and transparent.
- People raising concerns or making complaints or appeals are treated with dignity and respect, and their well-being is properly considered.
- Concerns, complaints and appeals processes are proportionate and allow for cases to be resolved as early as possible.
- Concerns, complaints and appeals procedures are fair and impartial.
- Confidentiality and anonymity are appropriately assured.
- Concerns, complaints and appeals are resolved in as timely a way as possible.

Course Design and Development

- Strategic oversight ensures that course design, development and approval processes and outcomes remain consistent and transparent.
- Accessible and flexible processes for course design, development and approval facilitate continuous improvement of provision and are proportionate to risk.
- Internal guidance and external reference points are used in course design, development and approval.
- Feedback from internal and external stakeholders is used to inform course content.
- Development of staff, students and other participants enables effective engagement with the course design, development and approval processes.
- Course design, development and approval processes result in definitive course documents.
- Design, development and approval processes are reviewed and enhanced.

Enabling Student Achievement

- Strategic and operational plans for supporting students and enabling achievement to align to the student journey.
- Clear, accessible and inclusive policies and procedures to enable students and staff to identify when support mechanisms may be required for academic and personal progression.

- Training and resources are allocated to student support services to enable effective delivery, ensure comprehensive evaluation and subsequent development.
- Clear, consistent and accessible communication about opportunities and support available to students from pre-entry through to completion and beyond.
- Equality of opportunity for all students to develop academic and professional skills.
- Provide an accessible, inclusive and engaging community that incorporates staff and students to facilitate a supportive environment.
- Enable students to take responsibility for their own learning and become resilient individuals, equipped for a rewarding career.
- Clearly communicate course outcomes and graduate attributes to all current and prospective students, staff and associated organisations.
- Actively seek the feedback and engagement of students and staff to ensure continuous improvement of the learning environment.

External Expertise

- Providers use one or more external experts as advisers to provide impartial and independent scrutiny on the approval and review of all provision that leads to the award of credit or a qualification.
- Degree-awarding bodies engage independent external examiners to comment impartially and informatively on academic standards, student achievement and assessment processes for all provision that leads to the award of credit or a qualification.
- Degree-awarding bodies have processes for the nomination, approval and engagement of external examiners and other independent external experts.
- Providers ensure that the roles of those providing external expertise are clear to students, staff and other stakeholders.
- Providers ensure that external experts are given sufficient and timely evidence and training to enable them to carry out their responsibilities.
- Providers have effective mechanisms in place to provide a response to input from external examiners and external advisers.

Learning and Teaching

- Effective learning and teaching is underpinned by a shared understanding of the provider's learning and teaching strategy.
- Effective learning and teaching is underpinned by a focus on student achievement and outcomes.
- Effective learning and teaching provides students with an equivalent high-quality learning experience irrespective of where, how or by whom it is delivered.
- Effective learning and teaching is informed through reflective practice and providers enable staff to engage in relevant, timely and appropriate professional development that supports students' learning and high-quality teaching.

- Effective learning and teaching is underpinned by routine evaluation of provision to manage and enhance their learning and teaching activities, including achievement of qualification and award outcomes.
- Effective learning and teaching activities, facilities and resources make the learning environment accessible, relevant and engaging to all students.
- Effective learning and teaching ensures that information about, and support for, learning and teaching is clear and accessible to all students and stakeholders.
- Effective learning and teaching encourages and enables students to take an active role in their studies.
- Providers encourage and enable students to evaluate and manage their own learning development, supported by opportunities for ongoing dialogue with staff.

Monitoring and Evaluation

- Providers agree strategic principles for monitoring and evaluation to ensure processes are applied systematically and operated consistently.
- Providers normalise monitoring and evaluation as well as undertaking routine formal activities.
- Providers clarify aims, objectives, activities and actions, and identify the key indicators, issues, questions, targets and relevant information/data.
- Providers decide whom to involve in the different stages of monitoring and evaluation, clearly defining roles and responsibilities and communicating them to those involved.
- Providers evaluate, analyse and use the information generated from monitoring to learn and improve.
- Providers communicate outcomes from monitoring and evaluation to staff, students and external stakeholders.
- Providers take account of ethics and data protection requirements when designing and operating monitoring and evaluation systems.

Partnerships

- The awarding organisation will be accountable for assuring the overall quality and academic standards of the provision, regardless of the type of partnership.
- The awarding organisation will have in place appropriate governance to authorise and oversee the development and closure of partnership arrangements and to monitor their effective operation.
- Due diligence enquiries are completed and legally binding written agreements are signed prior to the commencement of student registration - due diligence enquiries are refreshed periodically and before agreements are renewed.
- Provision delivered through partnership arrangements will be subject to quality procedures that are at least as rigorous, secure and open to scrutiny as those used for the provision delivered by the awarding organisation.
- Awarding organisations that make arrangements for the delivery of learning opportunities with others, retain the authority and responsibility for awarding certificates and records of study in relation to student achievement.

- All awarding organisations maintain accurate, up-to-date records of all partnership arrangements that are subject to a formal agreement.
- Awarding organisations monitor and evaluate their partnership arrangements to satisfy themselves that the arrangements are achieving their stated outcomes and that academic standards and quality are being maintained.

Research Degrees

- Provision of information is clear and accessible to research students and staff.
- The research environment is supportive and inclusive for all research students.
- Supervisors are appropriately skilled and supported.
- Research students are afforded opportunities for professional development.
- Progression monitoring is clearly defined and operated.
- Higher education providers offer clear guidance and processes on assessment for research degrees.

Student Engagement

- Student engagement through partnership working is integral to the culture of higher education, however and wherever provision is delivered - student engagement is led strategically, but widely owned.
- Higher education providers, in partnership with their student body, define, promote, monitor and evaluate the range of opportunities to enable all students to engage in quality assurance and enhancement processes.
- Effective student engagement supports enhancements, innovation and transformation in the community within and outside the provider, driving improvements to the experience of students.
- Arrangements exist for effective representation of the collective student voice at all organisational levels including decision-making bodies.
- Providers recognise and respond to the diversity of their student body in the design and delivery of student engagement, partnership working and representation processes.
- Student engagement and representation processes are adequately resourced and supported.
- Providers work in partnership with the student body to close the feedback loop.

Work-Based Learning

- Work-based learning courses and opportunities are designed and developed in partnership with employers, students and other stakeholders (where appropriate) and contain learning outcomes that are relevant to work objectives.
- Work-based learning consists of structured opportunities for learning and is achieved through authentic activity and is supervised in the workplace.
- Work-based learning opportunities are underpinned by formal agreements between education organisations, employers and students.

- Education organisations and employers consider any specific issues in relation to the workplace environment and deal with them appropriately, including informal agreements where appropriate.
- Work-based learning is delivered through a meaningful partnership between students, employers and the education organisation.
- Work-based learning opportunities enable students to apply and integrate areas of subject and professional knowledge, skills and behaviours to enable them to meet course learning outcomes.
- Parties understand and respect the respective roles, responsibilities and expectations of the education organisation, employer and student, and appropriate training and support is provided where required.
- Education organisations and employers acknowledge individuals have unique needs within the education organisation and in the workplace, and collaborate to ensure opportunities are inclusive, safe and supported.
- Work-based learning opportunities are designed, monitored, evaluated and reviewed in partnership with employers.

The Code will be used by UK higher education providers to ensure they achieve the outcomes that are expected of them. The Code presents a series of reference points to aid providers in offering their students a high-quality experience, supporting them through well-designed courses to achieve the qualifications that will help them to fulfil their longer term career aspirations. Providers are expected to use the Code in line with their educational mission, national quality arrangements, and regulatory requirements. Higher education students and their representatives should use the Code as a starting point for engaging with their provider on the quality of their education, and the extent to which the expected outcomes have been achieved.

The Office for Students, in collaboration with the Quality Assurance Agency, will use the Code as a basis for assessing the quality of higher education provision in line with their statutory responsibilities.

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