Preparing a student submission
for Embedded College Review for Educational Oversight

Contents

About this guide

This guide is designed to help you gain an overview of the method being used to review standards and quality at your college, and to explain how you can contribute to this process. Terms in **bold** are explained in context or within the main text of this guide. Underlined terms are explained in the glossary at the end of the guide.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) has been recognised by the UK Border Agency (UKBA) as the body designated to provide educational oversight for independent colleges offering higher education and wanting to obtain highly trusted sponsor status. Such colleges (which QAA calls **providers**) may operate for profit or may have charitable status.

The term **embedded college** means a provider that operates networks of colleges embedded on or near the campuses of two or more UK higher education institutions. The process **Embedded College Review for Educational Oversight (ECREO)** is the method that QAA uses to review providers that have embedded colleges, where the provider wishes to obtain highly trusted sponsor status. This guide explains how students at embedded colleges can contribute to this process.

QAA's mission is 'to safeguard standards and improve the quality of UK higher education.' QAA does this by working with higher education providers to define academic standards and quality, and by carrying out and publishing reviews. QAA reviews are intended to contribute to the enhancement of UK higher education and to reinforce its reputation worldwide. ECREO reflects these core principles.

About this review method

ECREO looks at the higher education provided at the embedded colleges. It evaluates how well the provider:
- manages academic standards
- manages and enhances the quality of learning opportunities
- provides appropriate public information that is accurate and complete.

The broader aims and objectives of ECREO are to:

- evaluate how well providers serve the needs of students at the embedded college(s)
- support providers in enhancing their provision for students at the embedded college(s)
- foster good working relationships between providers and their awarding organisations.

ECREO is a peer review process. This means that reviews are conducted by people with current or very recent experience of providing or assessing higher education and who understand the challenges faced by providers.

The review process begins with the provider submitting a formal document called the self-evaluation to QAA. At the same time students are invited to express their views by means of a voluntary **student submission** (see below). The QAA officer is responsible for discussing with the provider if, and how, a student submission is to be obtained.

The review team will expect the provider to explain (in its self-evaluation) how it takes students' views into consideration. During the visit to each embedded college the team will meet at least one group of students.

Use of external reference points

ECREO presupposes that the provider manages standards and quality in accordance with the **Academic Infrastructure** (for qualifications mentioned in the frameworks for higher education qualifications) or other appropriate external reference points.

The Academic Infrastructure is a set of national reference points, agreed with higher education providers, designed to assure effective practice in the setting and management of academic standards and quality in higher education. It comprises:

- the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (the Code of practice)
- the frameworks for higher education qualifications
- subject benchmark statements
- programme specifications.

The self-evaluation should, where appropriate, include an account of how the provider uses the above four reference points in its management of quality and standards. Review teams will consider this information and may ask providers about it.

Further information about the Academic Infrastructure and its four elements is available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/assuringstandardsandquality. This web area also contains links to publications offering guidance on various aspects of higher education provision.

More information about QAA's educational oversight reviews can be found here: www.qaa.ac.uk/institutionreports/types-of-review/tier-4.

About the student submission

The student submission is an opportunity for students at the embedded college to share their views formally with the ECREO team before the review visit. Producing a student submission ensures that your views and those of your fellow students are recorded and treated with importance, and that the ECREO review team is ready to discuss them with you. Participating in the preparation of a student submission enables you to contribute to the quality of the education offered at your college now and in the future.

The student submission is voluntary. If students are not able to make a submission, despite the best efforts of the provider and the QAA officer, this will not prejudice the outcome of the review. Students at embedded colleges can make separate submissions relating to their own college.

What should the student submission look like?

The student submission can be presented in whatever format you feel best represents student opinion at your college. If you choose to present the student submission as a written document, then it should be between three and four pages long, font size 11 point. Other forms that your student submission could take include video interviews or podcasts.

Whatever form you choose for your submission, you should make sure that it links to the content requirements below.

What sort of content should the student submission contain?

The student submission should identify ideas where improvement is considered necessary or desirable. It should also highlight areas of good practice that students would like to see spread across other higher education programmes.

Remember, the areas that QAA considers are:

- academic standards
- quality and enhancement of learning opportunities
- reliability of public information.

What else is important about the student submission?

Ideally, the student submission will be representative of all higher education students studying at your college. It will draw on the views of both full and part-time students. Your fellow students should see it as their submission, something that they have had the opportunity to contribute to and that correctly reflects the student experience at your college.

What the student submission is not

The student submission is **not** an opportunity to air personal grievances or single out individual members of staff for criticism. Neither should it focus only on the views or opinions of one particular student or group of students.

The student submission is **not** a mere formality; it is your opportunity to raise issues and have an impact on the higher education experience in your college.

What sort of things should you discuss in the student submission?

The student submission should address all aspects of the student experience and not just assessment. Some topics you might like to comment on are:

- students' views of the quality of the academic and personal support available to them
- whether the learning resources and facilities are adequate for students' needs as higher education learners
- whether constructive feedback is provided to students in a timely fashion
- whether students know how their assessments are going to be marked
- what opportunities are available for students to take part in meetings where decisions are made about their studies
- whether there is a way for students to evaluate their courses
- whether the information the provider publishes in its handbooks and prospectuses is accurate and complete.

While producing the student submission it is worth talking with your provider. They may offer further guidance on what they are including in their self-evaluation, allowing you to comment on similar things. This will also allow the review team to see where both parties are in agreement, but also where potential differences of opinion lie.

How can you gather student views in order to create the student submission?

You may gather student views using a variety of different methods. Some of the main challenges that you might face while doing this include:

- little or no culture of student engagement at your provider
- difficulties in communicating with or meeting students who are studying at a variety of different sites
- difficulties in communicating with or meeting part-time students who might only be on site during the evening.

However, these challenges should not put you off. The good news is that there is no set formula for producing a student submission, and you can design your own method to address the specific needs of the student body at your provider.

At this stage this may seem like a daunting task, but you can use the people around you for support in drawing together your student submission. Get in touch with other students interested in quality - it is useful to involve a range of students who can provide different perspectives on the student experience. Contact your tutors or teachers, and your provider's quality office - perhaps these people will be able to help pull together a focus group, disseminate questionnaires, or provide you with copies of, or results from, a previous provider-based survey.

How should the student submission be structured?

Student submissions may take a variety of forms, such as a summary of responses to recent student questionnaires, a written report of student focus groups or even a video or podcast. If the submission is a written document it only needs to be three or four pages of 11-point text. The essential point is that it should reflect students' own views of their experiences as learners.

QAA will provide guidance at the preliminary meeting, to which student representatives will be invited. The QAA officer will discuss with your provider what support can be given to students in preparing the submission, for example by sharing information.

To help your submission take shape, whatever its format, you may find it useful to include the following sections.

Introduction

This is your chance to introduce your submission and explain how it was compiled. You may want to include details such as:

- how many students were involved
- how you gathered students' views and prepared the student submission
- which students' views were included, which were not, and the reasons for this.

Main content

This is the main body of your submission and should detail students' views on certain topics or themes. You should comment on the most important issues affecting students at your provider.

There is a variety of methods you can use to gain student views, but the most important thing to remember is that any points, opinions or issues raised should be supported by evidence such as statistics, graphical representations or minutes.

Ideas for evidence to use in your submission include:

- results of surveys and questionnaires
- written notes or highlighted recordings from a focus group
- video interviews or podcasts with groups of informed students
- any other student comments raised, for example in student-staff committee meetings.

Remember that this is a report of students' views and opinions. Throughout the submission you will need to analyse the views or statistics that are presented and draw conclusions from them. Try to ensure that the submission is constructive by offering some suggestions for improvements to the student experience, including ideas for sharing good practice across the provider's higher education programmes.

Conclusion

This section should offer a summary of students' views and opinions. Remember to include information about how you have shared your submission with fellow students. You may also wish to share it with staff, although you may decide that you would prefer the student submission to be confidential and circulated just to the higher education students at your provider. It is important to remember that QAA will not attribute particular comments to individual students.

Frequently asked questions

How can you get help in developing the student submission?

Get in touch with all the different people who are there to support you. Tell the provider's administrative team or quality office staff if you are finding the task difficult, and outline some of your worries. They may be able to assist with some administration. If you are still finding it difficult, do the best job you can and highlight which student groups have, and have not, been included in your submission.

Can provider staff help with producing the student submission?

QAA wants to hear what students think of their experience at the provider. So long as the submission is a true reflection of student views, and students do not feel they have been put under pressure to say things they do not believe, then it doesn't matter who has produced the student submission. Thus, provider staff might be able to help by taking notes at focus groups and meetings, analysing data from surveys, providing technology or with the presentation of your submission.

What happens to the submission once it has been produced?

The student submission should be sent to QAA eight weeks before the initial team visit so that it can be fully considered by the ECREO team. If you are invited to be involved in the review visit you will need to be familiar with the contents of the submission and be able to speak confidently about how students' views were collected and analysed.

Will the student submission make a difference?

Yes. The ECREO team will consider all information given in the student submission and in meetings with students. The submission will inform the types of questions the team asks throughout the visit and may help the team identify specific points of good practice or areas for

improvement. For example, if students record that their opinions are not valued by the provider - or, on the other hand, that their provider really listens to them - the issue can be explored through talking to students at the review visit.

What happens if the student submission conflicts with the self-evaluation?

ECREO teams use both the self-evaluation and student submission to inform their lines of enquiry during the visit. Conflicting information would indicate an area for further discussion with the provider staff.

Key contacts

You may find it helpful to contact the staff in your provider who deal with quality. They can often be found in the provider's quality office.

More information about educational oversight reviews can be found on the QAA website: www.qaa.ac.uk/institutionreports/types-of-review/tier-4. If you have any further questions please contact edoversight@qaa.ac.uk. If you'd like to give feedback on this guidance document please email comms@qaa.ac.uk.

Glossary

This glossary explains terms used in this report. You can find a fuller glossary at: www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/glossary. See also the extended glossary published as part of the Embedded college review for educational oversight handbook[1]. The handbook explains the review process in detail. More information is available at www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance.

Academic Infrastructure Guidance developed and agreed by the higher education community and published by QAA, which is used by institutions to ensure that their courses meet national expectations for academic standards and that students have access to a suitable environment for learning (academic quality). It consists of four groups of reference points: the frameworks for higher education qualifications, the subject benchmark statements, the programme specifications and the Code of practice. Work is underway (2011-12) to revise the Academic Infrastructure as the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.

academic quality A comprehensive term referring to how, and how well, institutions manage teaching and learning opportunities to help students progress and succeed.

academic standards The standards set and maintained by institutions for their courses and expected for their awards. See also threshold academic standard.

action plan The plan that a provider is required to produce following an ECREO, showing how the issues identified in the recommendations will be addressed.

awarding body A body with the authority to award academic qualifications in the frameworks for higher education qualifications, such as diplomas or degrees.

awarding organisation An organisation with the authority to award academic qualifications in the *Qualifications and credit framework for England and Northern Ireland* (these qualifications are at levels one to eight, with levels four and above being classed as higher education).

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[1] www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/embedded-college-handbook.aspx

Code of practice The *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* published by QAA: a set of interrelated documents giving guidance for higher education institutions.

designated body An organisation that has been formally appointed to perform a particular function.

differentiated judgements Separate judgements respectively for the provision validated by separate awarding bodies or organisations.

educational oversight Scrutiny of educational provision by an independent organisation, particularly referring to QAA's scrutiny of colleges wishing to obtain highly trusted sponsor status as defined by the UK Border Agency. (See also Review for educational oversight and Tier 4.)

enhancement Taking deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of learning opportunities. It is used as a technical term in QAA's audit and review processes.

external reference points See reference points.

feature of good practice A positive aspect of the way a higher education institution manages quality and standards, which may be seen as exemplary to others.

framework A published formal structure. See also framework for higher education qualifications.

frameworks for higher education qualifications A published formal structure that identifies national qualification levels and describes the general achievement expected of holders of the main qualification types at each level, thus assisting higher education providers in maintaining academic standards. QAA publishes the following frameworks: *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and *The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland* (FQHEIS).

highly trusted sponsor An institution that the UK government trusts to admit migrant students from overseas, according to Tier 4 of the UK Border Agency's points-based immigration system. Higher education institutions wishing to obtain this status must undergo a successful review by QAA.

learning opportunities The provision made for students' learning, including planned programmes of study, teaching, assessment, academic and personal support, resources (such as libraries and information systems, laboratories or studios) and staff development.

learning outcome What a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completing a process of learning.

peer review A process of review conducted by people with current or very recent experience of the activity being reviewed (in this case, providing or assessing higher education).

programme (of study) An approved programme or course of study which provides a coherent learning experience and normally leads to a qualification.

programme specifications Published statements about the intended learning outcomes of programmes of study, containing information about teaching and learning methods, support and assessment methods, and how individual units relate to levels of achievement.

provider An institution that offers courses of higher education, typically on behalf of a separate awarding body or organisation. In the context of ECREO, the term means an independent college.

public information Information that is freely available to the public (sometimes referred to as being 'in the public domain').

quality See academic quality.

Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) An independent body funded by subscriptions from UK universities and providers of higher education, and through contracts with the main UK higher education funding bodies, which reviews standards and quality in higher education.

reference points Statements and other publications that establish criteria against which performance can be measured. Internal reference points may be used by providers for purposes of self-regulation; external ones are used and accepted throughout the higher education community for the checking of standards and quality.

Review for Educational Oversight (REO) The main type of review conducted by QAA for purposes of educational oversight as required by the UK government. It is concerned with taught higher education programmes of study at levels 4-7 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and at levels 7-11 in Scotland (see framework for higher education qualifications). REO evaluates all aspects of the provider's management of its higher education provision and leads to judgements and a conclusion about the management of that provision.

review secretary The person contracted by QAA to manage the ECREO, who will be someone with experience of managing higher education and will be responsible for coordinating all the main activities of the review.

self-evaluation A document submitted to QAA by the provider in advance of the ECREO, describing its responsibilities for higher education provision and evaluating how effectively they are addressed by the policies and procedures in place; typically this is in the form of a commentary with references to a portfolio of existing documents.

subject benchmark statement A published statement that sets out what knowledge, understanding, abilities and skills are expected of those graduating in each of the main subject areas (mostly applying to bachelor's degrees) and explains what gives that particular discipline its coherence and identity.

threshold academic standard The minimum standard that a student should reach in order to gain a particular qualification or award, as set out in the subject benchmark statements and national qualifications frameworks. Threshold standards are distinct from the standards of performance that students need to achieve in order to gain any particular class of award, for example a first-class bachelor's degree. See also academic standard.

Tier 4 The part of the UK Border Agency's points-based immigration system that is concerned with individuals who want to come to the UK to undertake a course of study at an educational establishment. Higher education institutions intending to recruit such migrants must achieve highly trusted sponsor status through a QAA review.

widening participation Increasing the involvement in higher education of people from a wider range of backgrounds.

All QAA's publications are available on our website www.qaa.ac.uk