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Strategic plan

2006-11

QAA - 2006-11

Strategic themes

Our work over the period of this plan will be informed by five strategic themes:

- safeguarding standards
- supporting and enhancing quality
- offering expertise
- rationalising regulation
- working worldwide.

Strategic goals

These strategic themes will allow us to achieve nine broad strategic goals:

- continued and justified public confidence in the standards and quality of UK higher education
- external standards and quality assurance frameworks in the different parts of the UK that are proportionate to risk and responsive to change and development
- support for institutions in their management and enhancement of quality and standards
- better understanding in universities and higher education colleges of standards and quality assurance developments in Europe and elsewhere
- rationalisation of the 'regulation burden' on universities and higher education colleges
- publication of a wider range of intelligence-based materials to support institutional improvement
- stronger engagement with the full range of higher education's stakeholders
- publication of a differentiated range of information to meet the needs of students, employers and the general public
- diversification in QAA's client base and range of services.

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‘QAA’s role and ambitions over the next six years’

Foreword by the Chairman, Sam Younger

This is my first strategic plan as Chairman, but QAA's third. In the *Strategic plan 2003-05* we described our aims, objectives and programmes of work for the period and our ambitions for the strategic position we wanted to reach by the end of 2005. We have successfully completed what we set out to do, on time and to budget.

This *Strategic plan 2006-11* includes a summary of our achievements in relation to the *Strategic plan 2003-05*. A full report is published on our website.

We provide a wide range of assurance, enhancement and information services to universities and colleges, students and other stakeholders in higher education.

Through our work we help institutions to build their capacity to manage quality and standards. Over time, this will help to embed within the higher education community a culture that will embrace the complementary functions of assurance and enhancement.

For this new plan, we have adopted a structure of broad strategic themes and goals over a six-year period.

The five strategic themes will allow us to achieve nine broad strategic goals over the period of this plan - goals that relate to both the external impact of our work and the evolution of QAA as an organisation. Many of these developments are already underway. We are confident of achieving the goals we have set ourselves and of improving the benefits we provide to students, potential students, universities and colleges and their staff, and other stakeholders in higher education.

I hope this plan gives you a clear picture of QAA's role and ambitions over the next six years. We aim to carry out our work in an open, accountable way and I would welcome any comments on the plan.

Mission, purposes, values and standards

Mission

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's (QAA) mission is to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualifications and to inform and encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education.

Purposes

To achieve its mission, QAA works in partnership with the providers and funders of higher education, staff and students in higher education, employers and other stakeholders, to:

- safeguard the student and wider public interest in the maintenance of standards of academic awards and the quality of higher education
- communicate information on academic standards and quality to inform student choice and employers' understanding, and to underpin public policy-making
- enhance the assurance and management of standards and quality in higher education
- promote wider understanding of the nature of standards and quality in higher education, including the maintenance of common reference points, drawing on UK, other European and international practice.

Values

QAA's work is underpinned by core values.

The importance of higher education

QAA acknowledges the academic vocation and the importance of higher education in the lives of citizens. We respect the diversity and autonomy of higher education providers, and value the high regard in which UK higher education is held internationally.

The entitlements of learners

Students are entitled to a higher education that has value, with academic standards that reflect national expectations and awards that meet published specifications; and to fair and equitable treatment in all aspects of their studies. QAA values the participation of students in the assurance of academic standards and quality.

The significance of the responsibilities of the providers of higher education

The providers of higher education have the primary responsibility for protecting academic standards and quality; QAA works with them to meet that responsibility. We depend on help from many colleagues in higher education and the professions who work with us, and we value their contribution to our peer processes.

The validity of the public interest in higher education

The public invests a lot in higher education. It has a legitimate expectation that the standards

of higher education qualifications are maintained and that the quality of provision supports learners to achieve the necessary standards.

Standards

QAA sets itself high standards in all its work.

Integrity

We aim to show impartiality, fairness, independence and honesty in our work and to base our judgements on evidence.

Professionalism

We aim to achieve high professional standards and provide a cost-effective service. We aim to get it right first time. Where we get something wrong, we will acknowledge it, correct it and learn from it.

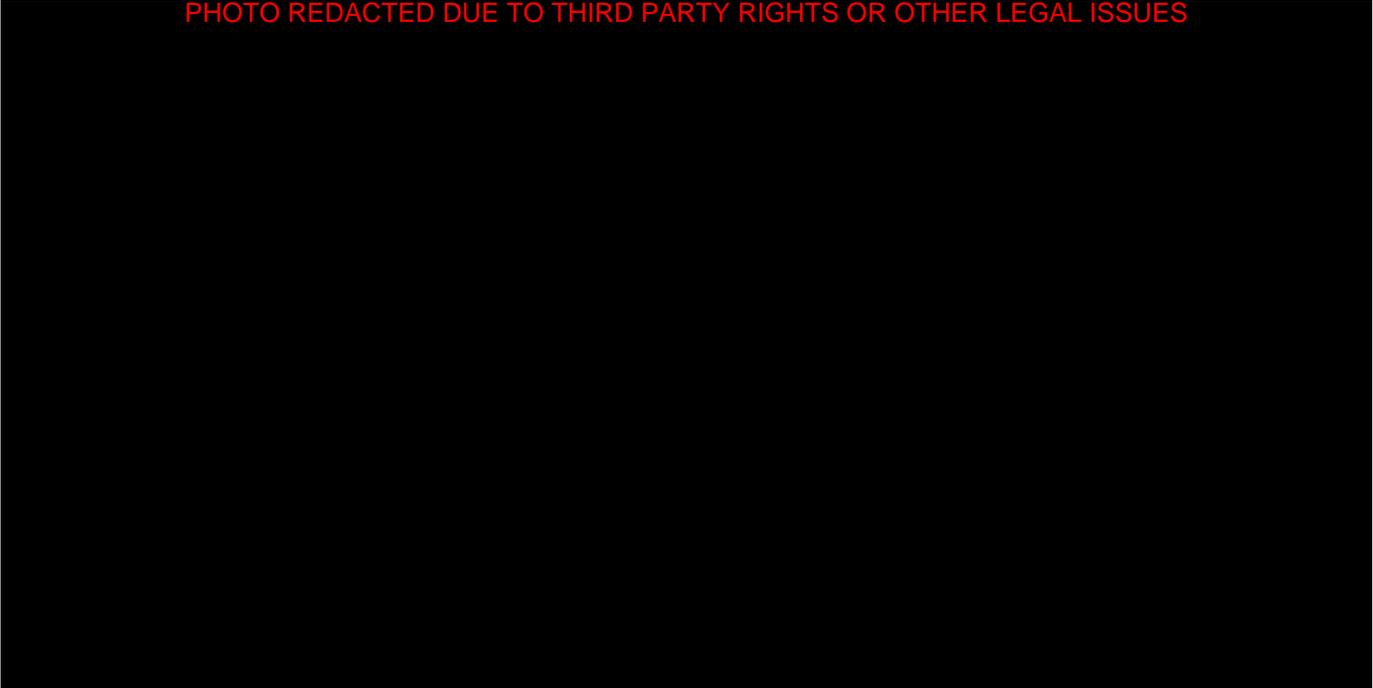
Accountability

QAA is accountable to its subscribers - the universities and higher education colleges - and to a wide range of other stakeholders. We aim to demonstrate that we use our resources to good effect.

Openness

We aim to be open and approachable, and to be transparent in our work and methods. We aim to communicate in a clear, consistent and accessible way.

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‘our success will be measured by the
benefits to our stakeholders’

Introduction by the Chief Executive, Peter Williams

QAA undertakes many tasks. We audit universities and higher education colleges' management of academic standards and quality, and review the quality and standards of higher education provision in further education (FE) colleges, publishing reports on our audits and reviews. In addition, we develop and maintain the Academic Infrastructure, including qualifications frameworks, subject benchmark statements and the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (the *Code of practice*). We analyse and disseminate the intelligence from our reports and are involved in a wide range of work with the higher education sector and at national, UK, European and international levels. QAA advises governments, professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs), other public bodies and bodies overseas.

This plan describes what QAA wishes to achieve over the period 2006-11. It has been developed in light of what we have done during the period of the previous plan, 2003-05, and our understanding of the probable landscape in which we will be working in the coming five to six years. The plan is strategic rather than operational in that it focuses on the 'whats' and 'whys' of our work rather than the more detailed 'hows' and 'whens'.

As a body with UK-wide responsibilities, QAA constantly has to balance those aspects of its work which refer specifically to the needs and priorities of the individual parts of the UK with those that are, by consensus, relevant and applicable to all parts. This plan recognises the important differences among the devolved administrations and the need to respond to them in inventive and fruitful ways, for the benefit of all.

The plan also takes further a central tenet of QAA's previous strategy: that quality assurance in higher education, be it internal or external, is not an immutable process or set of inspection procedures, to be repeated when completed. Rather, it is a constantly evolving means to achieve certain desired outcomes, including institutional and public confidence in academic standards and quality; an opportunity to acquire institutional self-knowledge, leading to improvement of practice; public information; and a proper degree of accountability. Most of these aspects of quality assurance and enhancement will be most effectively achieved within institutions themselves. As institutions are increasingly able to demonstrate clearly this achievement, the nature of QAA's engagements will change. The plan actively encourages this evolutionary approach, which is already underway and chimes with the UK Government's policy for better regulation and the aims of the Higher Education Regulatory Review Group (HERRG). The expectations of both have been fully borne in mind during the plan's development.

Although an independent organisation, QAA does not function autonomously. We provide a service to, and must be particularly responsive to, the wishes and expectations of a range of direct and indirect clients: universities and higher education colleges and their staff, funding councils, students, potential students, governments, employers and regulators. In this plan we assume that the fundamental purposes of our work will continue to be determined primarily through stakeholder interests external to us, but moderated and influenced by our knowledge, expertise and professional judgement. Our success will be measured by the extent to which we can provide benefits to our stakeholders.

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‘reviews in this period painted a very solid picture of institutional capacity in managing standards and quality’

Achievements 2003-05

During a period of considerable organisational change, QAA achieved what it set out to do in the *Strategic plan 2003-05*.

Diverse needs

We met the diverse needs of the UK's nations through development and implementation of revised review methods in Scotland and Wales and an intense transitional programme of reviews in England. At the same time, we also took on - at the request of stakeholders - additional programmes of work in relation to Access to higher education (HE) in England and Wales, Foundation Degree reviews in England and Northern Ireland, and Enhancement Themes in Scotland. We also advised government departments on the review of criteria for granting degree-awarding powers and university title in England and Wales from 2004.

Healthcare education

QAA was able to secure, through competitive tender, a contract with the Department of Health in England to undertake an extensive programme of work in healthcare education. We now have a key role in the Partnership Quality Assurance Framework for Healthcare Education in England, in partnership with the Department of Health, Skills for Health, the Strategic Health Authorities, the Health Professions Council and the Nursing and Midwifery Council. We also secured a contract with the General Osteopathic Council to undertake on its behalf the accreditation programme for providers of osteopathy courses.

Reviews and enhancement

We completed the contracted programmes of audits and reviews, on time and to budget. The summer 2005 report of the Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) Review Group in England, and the continuing external evaluations of the enhancement-led institutional review (ELIR) process in Scotland, attested to the quality and value of QAA's work. The audits and reviews in this period painted a very solid picture of institutional capacity in managing standards and quality, but did not flinch from making tough judgements when these were called for. One of the themes of our new plan is to help and support institutions to improve that capacity further.

QAA took a lead in promoting an understanding of quality assurance as a process that embraces quality enhancement, and has provided enhancement benefits in a number of ways. An institution's engagement with its reviews and audits - including preparation of self-evaluations, engagement with teams of peer reviewers, and engagement with the reviewers' suggestions (and in some cases requirements) for improvement - is an important opportunity for self-learning and improvement.

We have also disseminated collective, sector-wide intelligence from our reviews and audits, as well as through institutional liaison and other development work with the sector, to highlight themes, questions and good/less good practice. This information has been published in the *Learning from...* series, and in guides, briefing papers and working documents on a variety of topics. In 2005, we introduced a new, web-based *Outcomes from institutional audit* series based on thematic interrogation of a large number of audit reports. The first reports in this series were published in May 2005.

Enhancement Themes in Scotland

The enhancement focus has been taken a step further in Scotland with an explicit programme of Enhancement Themes (as part of the overall Quality Enhancement Framework) designed to support institutions in a process of continuous improvement. The Enhancement Themes approach was introduced and refined during the period of the plan. Extensive programmes of activity have been completed in relation to assessment, students' needs, flexible delivery and employability.

Liaison and partnerships

We carried out annual discussions with universities and higher education colleges in Scotland as part of the ELIR method, and were able to introduce a liaison scheme with universities and higher education colleges in the rest of the UK. This has proved very successful as a channel of communication between individual institutions and QAA and as a means of sharing ideas, concerns and good practice. We initiated or responded positively to a wide range and increasing number of partnership and project-working developments, particularly in relation to the use, maintenance and further development of the elements of the Academic Infrastructure.

Providing expertise

QAA expertise and experience have been sought frequently and extensively, and we are now asked to make many more contributions than we have the capacity or resources to meet. We are consulted frequently by government departments, funding bodies and professional and statutory bodies. Our website is a prime source of information and was redesigned during the period of the plan to promote navigability and ease of access. Continuing to refine our role as a provider of expertise, advice and information will be one of the themes of our work over the next five years.

Involving students

Relations with students broadened and deepened over the period of the plan. Students have been involved in the review and audit processes through the student written submission and meetings with the audit team in England, Northern Ireland and Wales. There has been systematic evaluation with students of the benefits they derive from their involvement in the new institutional audit/review processes. Students have also been included as members of the ELIR teams in Scotland. Training and briefing sessions have been provided for student sabbatical officers, and students have participated in working groups in relation to sections of the *Code of practice*. In Scotland, there was a 'responding to student needs' Enhancement Theme, and the sparqs (student participation in quality scotland) initiative, in partnership with NUS Scotland. QAA has contributed to events for students organised by NUS, the National Postgraduate Committee and other student bodies. There has also been student membership of the QAA Scotland Committee and a student observer attending meetings of the QAA Board of Directors.

QAA internationally

QAA strengthened its role in Europe. We were active in the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and many other European and global developments. We were able to influence the evolution of the Bologna Process 2005 standards and guidelines for the quality assurance of higher education in Europe. The Bologna Process is an intergovernmental initiative to create a common structure for European higher education by 2010, which will foster student mobility within Europe and increase the competitiveness of European higher education globally. We also supported institutions and stakeholders in improving their understanding of European developments and

their implications. We have been asked to provide experts by a variety of international bodies, including the Council of Europe.

More widely, we developed links with other quality assurance agencies around the world and signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Higher Education Quality Council in South Africa and renewed our partnership with Lembaga Akreditasi Negara (National Accreditation Board) in Malaysia. We participated in and contributed to a wide range of international activities in association with the British Council, overseas governments and international organisations.

In summary

Overall, QAA is proud of its achievements in the three years that have just ended. Starting at a difficult time, we were able to achieve the targets we set ourselves, complete a heavy programme of work on time and to budget, and take on additional work during the period. At the same time, we have developed and consolidated our relationships with our key partners and stakeholders; provided benefits and support to higher education providers; helped to build institutional capacity to manage standards and quality; strengthened our role as a source of expertise and information; improved what we do and how we do it; and helped to build and consolidate a quality culture within the academic community, where assurance and enhancement are seen as complementary rather than in opposition.

We improved our services to our key clients. QAA has evolved as an organisation with a portfolio of assurance, support, information and enhancement services which have a clear focus on providing benefits to students, the academic community and others with an interest or stake in higher education.

A full report on achievements against the *Strategic plan 2003-05* is published on our website.

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‘maximising the benefits of our work by
devoting more resources to development
and enhancement across the UK’

Our future role in UK higher education

This plan takes as its starting point our mission: 'to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualifications and to inform and encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education'. Confidence in the academic standards of qualifications underlies the public interest in the UK's higher education system. All who use or pay for the system must be able to depend on universities, colleges and other higher education providers across the whole of the UK to offer qualifications that have a meaning and a value. We see it as a prime objective to make judgements about the confidence that can be placed in standards and quality in UK higher education providers.

Standards and enhancement

An external quality assurance agency that simply makes judgements about standards and quality is, however, missing a vital opportunity to contribute to the development and enhancement of these important elements of academic life. The Quality Enhancement Framework in Scotland has provided us with experience of such possibilities through the Enhancement Themes and the ELIR process. In this plan we commit ourselves to maximising the benefits of our work by devoting more time and resources to development and enhancement across the UK, in ways that are appropriate to the academic communities concerned.

The UK offers an unusually broad spectrum of types of higher education and a wide range of diverse institutions. The resulting complexity of provision can be hard to understand. Hand in hand with the technical aspects of the assurance and enhancement of academic

standards and quality goes a need to ensure that straightforward information about quality and standards is readily available to anyone who might need it, but especially potential students and employers. The plan envisages a central role for QAA in meeting that need.

The institutions themselves have the primary responsibility for maintaining standards and managing and enhancing quality; it is an important part of both their formal and their practical autonomy. They do this through their own internal academic management structures and through the external examiner system. QAA's role is complementary. Through processes of external peer review, we offer an independent, external, objective opinion that can inform those who engage with higher education (students, employers) and those who pay for it (students, parents, the taxpayer/government and in some cases employers). We also provide in our reports constructive advice - and sometimes recommendations for essential action - about areas that institutions, either individually or collectively, can improve. We envisage these principles informing our review work throughout the period of the plan, thereby ensuring our conformity with the European standards for quality assurance endorsed by ministers in Bergen in May 2005.

We manage the Access to HE scheme in England, Northern Ireland and Wales, which prepares non-traditional students for entry to higher education. We provide advice to government departments across the UK, against criteria set by those departments, on applications for university title and degree-awarding powers from publicly funded colleges and, in England and Wales, from private providers of higher education. These are both

areas of national importance which we have reviewed and renewed in recent years. We expect to continue providing these services during the period of the plan.

The Academic Infrastructure

Safeguarding standards and enhancing quality are about more than reviewing and auditing. QAA has responsibility for the development, maintenance and updating of the Academic Infrastructure. This term relates to a set of connected but distinct reference points to help institutions in their management of quality and standards and to inform the public about the structure of higher education. *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* and the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) offer a configuration of qualifications and awards; the subject benchmark statements describe in general terms the characteristics of degree-level study in a range of subjects; programme specifications provide a common structure for institutions to describe and communicate their standards to students and externally; and the *Code of practice* includes advice and sector-wide good practice on, for example, the management of curricular and assessment matters. We will continue to act as stewards of the Academic Infrastructure during the period of the plan, and will review its effectiveness and value with a view to proposing any revisions that appear necessary.

The European dimension

QAA is a leading player on the European quality assurance scene, where we make sure that the UK voice is heard clearly and effectively. The European dimension will become increasingly important over the period of this plan, and it is crucial that the UK's expert body on the management of standards and quality in higher education is engaged in these debates. We will

strengthen this role - and report more extensively on this area of our work - for the benefit of the sector and UK governments. We will also ensure that we continue to meet the criteria for membership of ENQA.

Depth and diversification

In eight years, our depth of expertise and wide range of activities have made us one of the leading higher education quality assurance organisations in the world. We have developed, implemented and adapted a wide range of review and audit processes for our clients - higher education representative bodies, funding bodies, government departments and PSRBs. We have a significant portfolio of development and enhancement work, expressed primarily through development and stewardship of the various elements of the Academic Infrastructure, through publications, and through our intelligence and institutional liaison functions. The Academic Infrastructure is now largely embedded in the life of higher education in the UK, and has already influenced a number of developments overseas. We are increasingly consulted by bodies in the UK, and by governments, agencies and institutions outside the UK, on a wide range of developments in higher education. We are a major source of advice, expertise and intelligence on the management of standards and quality in higher education.

Over the period of this plan we will consider the potential for diversifying our services further to allow us to meet the needs of a wider range of clients. We will seek to take appropriate opportunities across the UK (and in Europe and further afield where appropriate) to promote the principles of sound management of academic standards and quality, reflecting the values of education and scholarship, responsibility and autonomy that underpin the UK's higher education community.

‘we are a major source of advice,
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‘our work will be informed by five
strategic themes’

Strategic themes and goals 2006-11

Our work over the period of this plan will be informed by five strategic themes. We will work to safeguard standards, support and enhance quality, offer expertise and rationalise regulation and will take account of developments worldwide, for the benefit of

higher education in the UK. These strategic themes will allow us to achieve nine broad strategic goals over the period, including areas where we work in partnership with higher education providers and stakeholders to achieve collective aims.

Strategic themes	Strategic goals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● safeguarding standards ● supporting and enhancing quality ● offering expertise ● rationalising regulation ● working worldwide 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● continued and justified public confidence in the standards and quality of UK higher education ● external standards and quality assurance frameworks in the different parts of the UK that are proportionate to risk and responsive to change and development ● support for institutions in their management and enhancement of quality and standards ● better understanding in universities and higher education colleges of standards and quality assurance developments in Europe and elsewhere ● rationalisation of the 'regulation burden' on universities and higher education colleges ● publication of a wider range of intelligence-based materials to support institutional improvement ● stronger engagement with the full range of higher education's stakeholders ● publication of a differentiated range of information to meet the needs of students, employers and the general public ● diversification in QAA's client base and range of services.

Safeguarding standards

Our priorities over the period of this plan are to:

- renew our audit and review methods in response to external evaluations and changing needs
- conduct agreed audit and review programmes in accordance with the published methods and protocols
- continue to develop our work with our partners in healthcare education
- maintain, renew and further embed the Academic Infrastructure
- continue to develop our role as custodian of the Access to HE scheme in England, Northern Ireland and Wales.

QAA carries out a range of programmes of peer review. These are at the heart of our role in safeguarding standards. There are distinct processes in England and Northern Ireland, in Scotland and in Wales for the review of institutions. These processes are agreed with the universities and higher education colleges' representative bodies and the relevant funding councils or government department.

We conduct reviews in line with published methods and protocols, agreed with our partner bodies. We make judgements about what we find and publish reports.

QAA manages the Access to HE scheme in England, Northern Ireland and Wales. This scheme has the support of the higher education sector and provides a route into higher education for the 20,000 students who gain the QAA-recognised Access certificate each year. We will work to maintain the standards and integrity of Access to HE programmes and modernise the scheme to improve the opportunities available to social groups traditionally under-represented in higher education.

We also conduct reviews at subject level as agreed with our funding council partners, with our healthcare partners in England (the Department of Health, the Health Professions Council, the Nursing and Midwifery Council, the

Strategic Health Authorities, Skills for Health) and with individual regulatory bodies to assist them in meeting their statutory responsibilities.

We advise governments across the UK, against criteria they have established, on applications for the grant of degree-awarding powers and university title from colleges of higher education and, increasingly, in England and Wales, from private (that is, not publicly funded) providers of higher education.

In the light of external evaluation in England in 2005, we expect overall stability in our review processes and programmes, but will take the lead in developing them as needs change. We will manage that evolution in a way that minimises any disruption to institutions and students. The ELIR method in Scotland will continue to be evaluated during the period of the plan.

The Academic Infrastructure provides the shared framework of reference points that allows institutions to describe and communicate their standards and quality, and in the light of which we report our findings. A priority for us will be to maintain, develop and further embed the elements of the Academic Infrastructure to reflect developments in other sectors of education, in Europe, and in the light of evaluation in 2006-07.

Supporting and enhancing quality

Our priorities over the period of this plan are to:

- strengthen the focus on learners in our review and audit methods and in our publications and communications
- increase the sector-wide intelligence that can be derived from audit and review reports
- support institutions' enhancement agendas through publications, briefings, institutional liaison, Enhancement Themes and other forms of dissemination
- establish an effective relationship with the Higher Education Academy to maximise benefit for institutions
- maintain, further develop and embed the elements of the Academic Infrastructure in the light of experience in the sector and different parts of the UK, evaluation, and developments in other sectors of education and in Europe.

We already have extensive student involvement in our reviews, produce publications specifically for current and potential students, and carry out a range of briefings and collaborative work with student representatives. We will do even more to reflect the learner perspective in our communications and publications and in our review methods as they evolve.

Clear information about the standards and quality on offer, and confidence in their delivery, will be more important to learners with the introduction of tuition fees in parts of the UK from 2006. This makes it increasingly important for the evolution of QAA's work to reflect fully the learner perspective. We have already made good progress on this and will do more.

We prepare and publish sector-wide overview reports. These draw together the main findings from a programme of reviews and are published in our good practice series.

We will strengthen this intelligence function by publishing a series of thematic briefings based on analysis of reports as they appear during the course of a review programme, rather than

at the end of a complete round of reviews. By doing this we will be able to disseminate emerging issues and areas of good practice more quickly. Not only will it help institutions to enhance their management of standards and quality, but it will also inform the evolution of the review methods themselves. The *Outcomes from institutional audit* series of web-based briefings began in 2005.

In Scotland we manage the Enhancement Themes programme of work; the first publications in the *Enhancing practice* series appeared in 2005.

QAA is not the only external body that supports higher education providers in managing and enhancing the quality of students' experiences and learning opportunities. We welcomed the establishment of the Higher Education Academy. QAA and the Academy have distinct but complementary functions, and we will work closely and share information in our respective areas of work, so that institutions gain the greatest benefit. We will agree with the Academy a joint statement of our respective primary roles, together with a programme of joint activities where appropriate.

Offering expertise

Our priorities over the period of this plan are to:

- support institutions' improvement work and help to build institutional capacity in the management and enhancement of quality and standards
- broaden the information we provide to stakeholders
- take a more active approach to building relationships with employers and understanding their needs
- diversify the range of services we can provide and the range of clients we work with
- establish appropriate organisational structures to support a more diversified range of work.

The nature of our work is dynamic and we have diversified the range of what we do to meet our partners' needs. Our work with the funding councils now includes, for example, surveys of Foundation Degree provision (in England), the management of postgraduate research degree standards (in England and Wales), and management of sector-wide Enhancement Themes (in Scotland). Our relationship with our healthcare partners has grown from simply carrying out a programme of reviews to providing a wider range of facilitative, evaluative, advisory and communications work.

The nature and balance of our work have evolved into a mixed portfolio of assurance, support, information and enhancement services. We will be active in identifying and pursuing appropriate opportunities to diversify further our range of services.

To make sure that our expertise provides value for stakeholders, we need to communicate in ways that are clear and accessible, and the information and advice we provide must be reliable and impartial. This involves relationship-building and communication.

Our relationships with universities and higher education colleges, government and funding bodies, students and PSRBs are good and

extensive. We will strengthen our relationships with employers to understand and meet their needs.

Most of our reviews result in published reports. We recognise that our reports and communications may not be right for all our audiences. We intend to improve our effectiveness as a provider of information. We will investigate the information needs of our various audiences and review the suitability of the content, style and form of our reports for them. We will also discuss with them how our role in relation to teaching quality information might develop.

Other organisations frequently ask us for help in developing review methods, the training of staff and reviewers, and other consultancy services. At present, our capacity to meet these requests is limited. In turn, this limits our capacity to influence national and international developments in quality assurance. We are working with our partners to consider how we can best strengthen our capacity to provide advisory and consultancy services to a wider range of clients, on a contract basis, where this is consistent with QAA's core purposes and will not compromise the services that QAA provides to higher education and its stakeholders.

Rationalising regulation

Our priorities over the period of this plan are to:

- promote rationalisation of the various regulatory systems in higher education
- introduce regulatory impact assessments for new QAA work
- use our expertise in working with a range of organisations to develop robust review methods that reduce burden.

Working with our partners, we intend to take whatever steps we can to rationalise regulation in higher education. We welcome the principles of good regulation.

The providers of higher education - universities and higher education colleges and some FE colleges - are subject to many regulators, including government departments, funding councils, education inspectorates, financial auditors and PSRBs. QAA's own work with institutions can also be seen as a form of regulation.

We believe there is some scope for rationalisation, and that we have the expertise and a track record of working with others to help deliver good regulation and reduce the burden. Through our expertise in developing review methods and programmes we can help institutions, funding bodies, government departments and PSRBs to meet their responsibilities in ways that do not impose disproportionate burdens on the institutions. Our experience with major review provides one possible model; our work with individual PSRBs provides another. More generally, there is considerable scope for greater coordination and information-sharing between PSRBs and QAA; steps in this direction have already been taken. We are closely involved in discussions designed to rationalise the review and inspection methods applied to FE colleges that provide higher education.

In doing this work, we will be operating with the grain of 'good regulation' and the work already

carried out by the Better Regulation Review Group and its successor the Higher Education Regulation Review Group, which we support. Specifically, we will introduce regulatory impact assessments for any new areas of work we develop. More strategically, we believe that the good regulation agenda can inform the wider process of rationalisation we want to promote. We welcome, and will be party to, HERRG's development of a concordat between the major regulators in higher education, designed to promote and embed the principles of good regulation.

QAA itself is also, rightly, subject to regulation and we welcome the insights these processes bring. We have a range of mechanisms to assure the quality and effectiveness of our work. For example: institutions evaluate the conduct of reviews; we provide training for the reviewers and auditors who work on our behalf; we have published complaints and representations procedures; our partner bodies monitor achievement of our annual operating plans and their contracts with us; subscription levels and contract prices are subject to annual negotiation; we are required to report to contracting bodies, Companies House and the Charity Commission; and internal and external audits report on the security and reliability of our financial and management systems.

We are also engaged in European developments and are confident of being able to satisfy the emerging criteria for continuing membership of ENQA. We will be reviewed against those criteria during the period of the plan.

Working worldwide

Our priorities over the period of this plan are to:

- take a leading role in European developments in relation to standards and quality assurance, including transnational and cross-border education, on behalf of the higher education sector and UK governments
- monitor and report more extensively on international developments
- support the sector more actively on international developments
- maintain an active engagement with ENQA and the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education.

European and other international developments will become more important over the period of this plan. They include: development of European quality assurance standards and guidelines; development of elements of a European standards infrastructure and a European qualifications framework; international demands for closer policing of transnational higher education; probable changes in the European Credit Transfer System from a credit transfer to a credit accumulation system; and proposals for international accreditation processes.

Globalisation of higher education is developing rapidly and is already impacting on UK higher education. QAA, as the UK's expert body on standards and quality assurance, monitors, reports, contributes and advises, as appropriate, for the benefit of UK higher education.

We will strengthen our engagement in international work and be even more active in articulating the UK perspective on international developments. We will provide intelligence on those developments and report and advise on the implications for UK higher education providers and UK governments. We will continue our close partnership with the Europe Unit and play an active role in ENQA and the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education.

We also carry out audits of partnerships between UK universities and higher education colleges and overseas providers to ensure that the UK degree brand is protected. The resources for this work are limited and we may wish to consider, with our partners, whether there are other means to achieve this objective, such as some form of accreditation process. Any development in this direction would be subject to consideration of regulatory impact and cost-effectiveness.

We provide an extensive programme of briefings to visitors from all over the world about the work we do and standards and quality in the UK more generally. We cooperate actively with the British Council to help to meet the demand for UK experience and know-how. We have also, at the request of governments and institutions, provided expertise in review activities across the world.

Where there is a clear benefit to QAA in terms of exchange of information and experience, we have signed Memoranda of Understanding with agencies in other countries, for example Jordan, Malaysia and South Africa. This range of connections gives us insight into good practice across the world and allows us to influence developments and practice globally. We will extend the range of Memoranda of Understanding.

‘we will strengthen our engagement
in international work and provide
intelligence on those developments’

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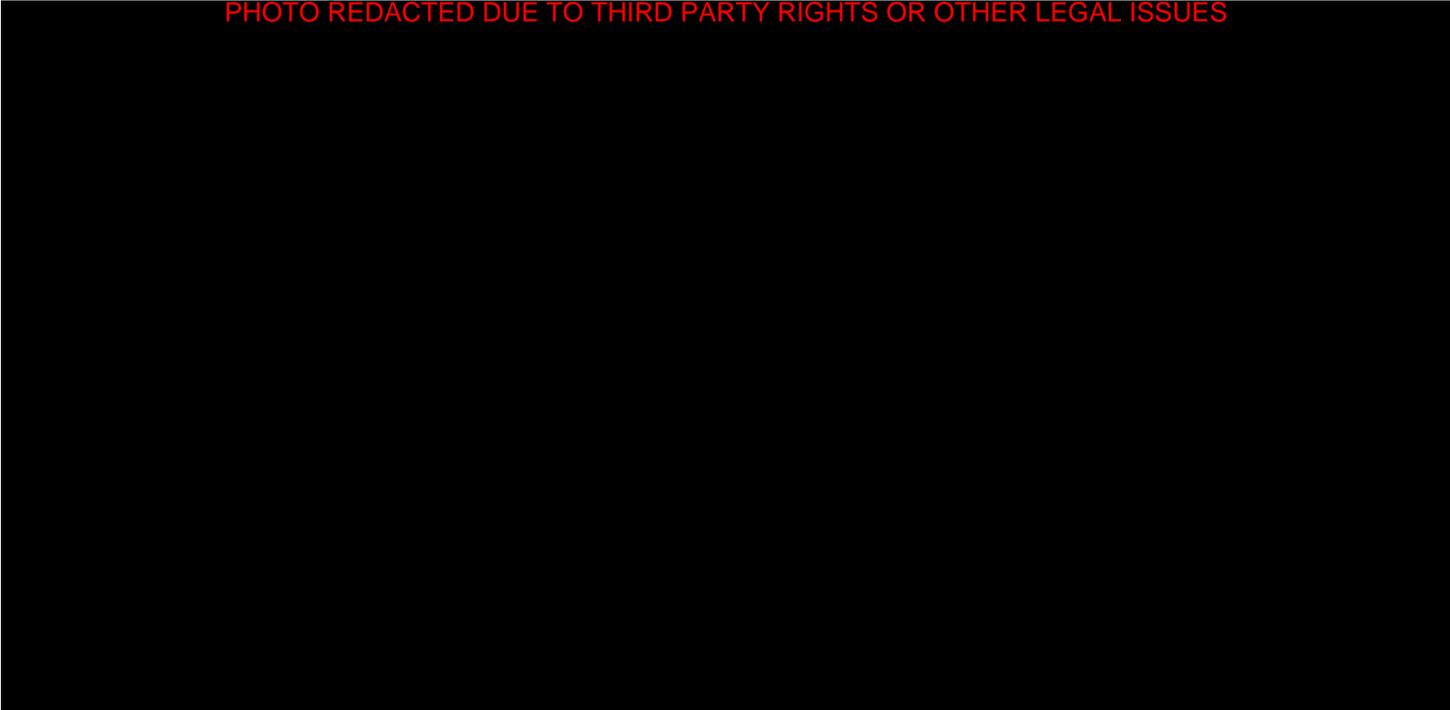


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‘we take an active approach to the management of risk so that we have the best chance of achieving our goals’

Managing risk

We recognise that there are factors - risks - that may prevent us from achieving our strategic aims and objectives, or make it more difficult to achieve them. Some risks are within our control, while others are less so or not at all.

We take an active approach to the management of risk so that we have the best chance of achieving our goals. Our approach is based on distinguishing between operational risks and strategic risks, and having clear lines of responsibility for identifying, managing and monitoring each type of risk.

Operational risks

These risks are primarily to do with the day-to-day conduct of QAA's business (reviews, Academic Infrastructure, degree-awarding powers and university title, publication and dissemination, liaison and support) or the management of QAA as an organisation (governance, staffing, resourcing, office systems). Operational risks are managed at local level by each one of QAA's five operational groups.

Strategic risks

By contrast, strategic risks relate more to the nature and purposes of QAA, our ability to achieve our mission, the environment we work in, competitors, the stakeholders' needs we seek to satisfy, our response to opportunities and threats, our vulnerability to political shifts, and the solidity of our reputation and standing. The QAA Executive and Board are responsible for identifying and managing strategic risks. The main areas of risk within each of our strategic themes (some of which can also be seen as opportunities) are outlined below.

Safeguarding standards

- Greater differentiation within the four countries of the UK, and possible fragmentation of national quality structures.
- The commercialisation and globalisation of education.

Supporting and enhancing quality

- The respective roles of QAA, statutory and other sector bodies.
- Accessibility, timeliness and relevance of intelligence and information for different audiences.

Offering expertise

- Capacity to manage a changing and wider portfolio of work, while achieving core mission.
- Demonstrating the benefits and value for money in our work.

Rationalising regulation

- Achieving the right balance of regulatory burden against the benefits of quality assurance to the public, the providers of higher education and the wider higher education community.

Working worldwide

- QAA and UK compatibility with ENQA standards and guidelines for quality assurance in Europe.
- The possible emergence of a market for quality assurance in Europe.

As an organisation we face strategic risks in relation to our capacity to manage and communicate a wider portfolio of work,

variations in our portfolio in different parts of the UK, and our capacity to manage short-term reductions or increases in the volume of work.

The strategic risk register is a live document that guides our work. It sets out how we manage strategic risk and is monitored and reviewed periodically. The strategic risks we face are not new, though they are changing. We have successfully negotiated a shifting landscape over the past few years. Our record reflects, among other things, our ability to manage strategic risk. Key strategies include adaptability and responsiveness, working in partnership with stakeholders to understand and meet their needs, developing our own expertise, analysing and disseminating the enhancement value in our work, demonstrating the benefits of what we do, and changing what we do and how we do it as circumstances alter.

Adaptability, responsiveness and partnership working do not mean that we compromise in the matter of judgements. One of our core areas of business remains the conduct of reviews, resulting in published reports on institutions' management of quality and academic standards. It is our job to provide reliable public information. We are conscious of what can go wrong in the conduct of a review and have systems in place to assure the quality of our own processes. Even as the benefits of our work become clearer, those risks do not go away.

‘it is our job to provide
reliable public information’

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‘publication of information to meet
the needs of students, employers
and the general public’

Our effectiveness and evolution

We will judge our effectiveness over the period covered by this plan against our mission and purposes. To do this, we will need to achieve the goals we have set ourselves and evolve as an organisation. Gauging our success in achievement will also require an understanding of the impact and benefits of our work and the changes we have helped to bring about in relation to public confidence in higher education, improvement and enhancement, and the burden of regulation, along with stakeholder and sector confidence in QAA. We will use a range of techniques, strategies, sources of information and evidence, including:

- external evaluations, surveys, use of consultants
- development of performance indicators
- feedback through the continuing work of the Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) Review Group and HERRG in England, and the external evaluation of ELIR in Scotland
- review by ENQA against its 2005 criteria for an effective quality assurance agency
- formal and informal feedback from institutions and other stakeholders
- demand for, and satisfaction with, our products and services
- continued support from our subscribers
- securing repeat and new contract business
- the nature and extent of media coverage
- success each year in delivering our annual programmes of work
- satisfactory outcomes from our own internal and external audits.

Strategic goals

The specific tasks that will allow us to achieve our strategic goals are set out below.

Continued and justified public confidence in the standards and quality of UK higher education:

- completion of agreed programmes of reviews and audits 2006-11
- published reports arising from the 2006-11 reviews and audits
- review of the Academic Infrastructure and revision where necessary in 2005-06
- evaluation of the 2004 England and Wales degree-awarding powers and university title criteria in 2006-07.

External standards and quality assurance frameworks in the different parts of the UK that are proportionate to risk and responsive to change and development:

- implementation of the revised institutional audit method in England and Northern Ireland in 2006, developed in the light of the QAF Review Group report and the work of HERRG
- review of ELIR in Scotland in 2007-08
- review of the institutional review method in Wales in 2006-07
- continued contribution to the overall Partnership Quality Assurance Framework for Healthcare in England from 2006-07
- development and implementation of new review methods for the provision of higher education in FE colleges in England from 2008-09

- implementation of revised licensing arrangements for Access to HE authorised validating agencies from 2005-06.

Support for institutions in their management and enhancement of quality and standards:

- annual liaison meetings and institutional discussions
- collaboration and co-ordination with the Higher Education Academy
- publication of overview reports, the *Outcomes from institutional audit* series and the *Enhancing practice* series
- maintenance of SCQF in Scotland and contribution to the development of a credit framework in England
- management of the Enhancement Themes work in Scotland
- completion of review and revision of the sections of the *Code of practice* in 2006-07
- continued support for subject benchmarking.

Better understanding in universities and higher education colleges of standards and quality assurance developments in Europe and elsewhere:

- briefings, reports and support on international developments and their implications
- maintenance and review of the Academic Infrastructure in the light of European developments.

Rationalisation of the 'regulation burden' on universities and higher education colleges:

- introduction of regulatory impact assessments for QAA work
- signatory to proposed HERRG Concordat

- closer relationships with PSRBs, including information-sharing and coordination of events and possible contract work
- redevelopment of the review method for the provision of higher education in FE colleges from 2008-09, in partnership with the funders, government and statutory inspection bodies.

Publication of a wider range of intelligence-based materials to support institutional improvement:

- *Outcomes from institutional audit* series
- *Enhancing practice* series
- overview reports
- briefings on European developments
- review of programme specification guidelines in 2006
- contribution to the progress files project
- subject benchmark statements.

Stronger engagement with the full range of higher education's stakeholders:

- closer working with employers, including their representative bodies and the Sector Skills Councils
- more active engagement with student bodies
- support for academic staff through the Quality Strategy Network, collaborative work with the Higher Education Academy and maintenance of the Academic Infrastructure.

Publication of a differentiated range of information to meet the needs of students, employers and the general public:

- development of publications tailored to their audience in form, content and language
- continued development of the QAA website.

Diversification in QAA's client base and range of services:

- exploration of the potential for additional contract work (for example with PSRBs), where appropriate and with due regard to QAA's core business.

Evolution

To date, QAA has been seen primarily as a body that carries out reviews of standards and quality in higher education. These programmes of reviews, carried out in the main under contract with the higher education funding bodies, have been extensive: between 200 and 500 a year. That high-volume review business came to an end with the completion of the transitional programme of reviews and audits in England and Northern Ireland in 2005. A core review programme will continue in the period of this plan, but on a reduced scale. So QAA will now be able to put more emphasis on other important areas of its portfolio. QAA will evolve as an organisation that:

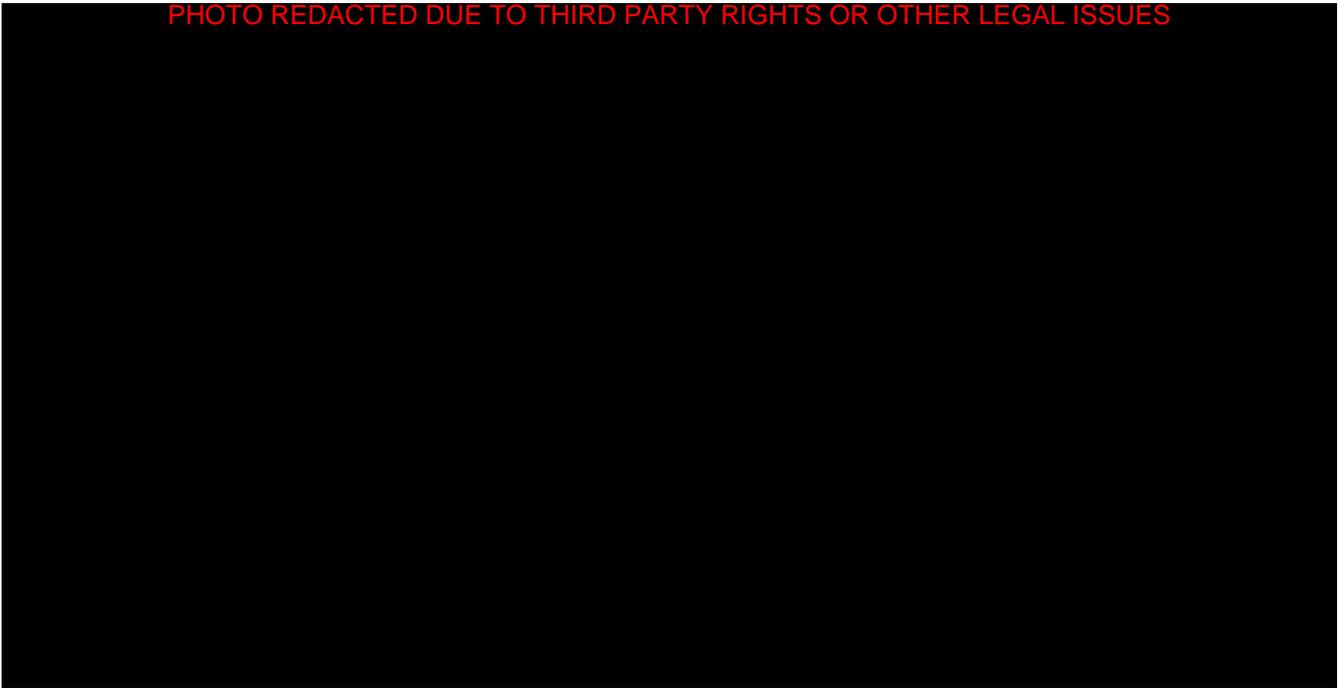
- offers a mixed portfolio of assurance, support, information and enhancement services
- has the capacity to carry out a range of review and audit processes, in the light of the needs of its subscribers, the funding bodies and other purchasers of services
- supports institutions' enhancement agendas through the provision of intelligence-based information, liaison, networking, dissemination and communication
- supports students and employers through a better understanding of their information needs and how to meet them
- works closely with PSRBs and other 'regulators' to rationalise demands on institutions, while ensuring that all statutory and other requirements can be met

- keeps its review and audit processes and the Academic Infrastructure under review to ensure continuing relevance and appropriateness
- contributes to, monitors and reports more extensively on European and other international developments, and supports institutions in responding to those developments
- has the capacity to provide consultancy, advice and know-how services, both in the UK and overseas, where this is consistent with QAA's core purposes and will benefit UK higher education
- can demonstrate its commitment to providing value for money by operating with increasing efficiency and economy.

We will take stock of our progress and review the plan after three years.

More information and all QAA's publications are available on our website www.qaa.ac.uk

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About QAA

QAA was formed in 1997. It is a registered charity and a company limited by guarantee. The company's members are the representative bodies of the heads of universities and higher education colleges. The Board of Directors has 14 members: four appointed by the representative bodies, four by the higher education funding bodies, and six (including the Chairman) appointed by the Board itself. Three observers attend Board meetings, representing government education departments, students and the Higher Education Academy. Most of QAA's work is financed through institutional subscriptions (by all publicly funded and some privately funded universities and higher education colleges in the UK) and through contracts with the funding bodies, government departments and PSRBs. QAA has offices in Gloucester and Glasgow. It has around 120 staff (as at December 2005). Its annual turnover is of the order of £11-12 million.

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