

QAA Viewpoint

Alternative providers: standards and quality

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Alternative providers are an important part of the higher education landscape, contributing to the diversity, choice and opportunities available. As independent colleges and universities, alternative providers operate either on a 'for-profit' basis or have charitable status, but do not receive direct recurrent grant funding from any of the higher education funding bodies.

Although collectively referred to as 'alternative providers', this is a highly diverse group in terms of mission, size, specialism, reputation and track record. As an illustration:

- some are well-established colleges with strong reputations for particular technical or vocational specialisms, such as musical instrument making or needlework
- a small group of ten alternative providers have their own degree awarding powers
- others are relatively new to higher education, offering mainstream commercial courses that have a broad appeal, particularly to international students – many of these providers tend to be based in London and the South East;¹ some have attracted negative media coverage about their provision.

Quality assurance of alternative providers

Since the beginning of 2012, QAA has provided external quality assurance of higher education alternative providers on behalf of the Department for Education (previously the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills) and the Home Office, for two primary purposes:

- i the designation of a provider's higher education courses for public funding
- ii Highly Trusted Sponsor (HTS) status, a requirement for providers wishing to recruit international students through a Tier 4 licence.

Current government policy (for example, the 2016 Department for Business, Innovation and Skills [higher education White Paper](#) and the draft [Higher Education and Research Bill 2016-17](#)) is to actively support new, high quality providers in entering the sector, while safeguarding quality and standards. In the past three years the Privy Council has granted degree awarding powers to four alternative providers, university title to three, and university college title to two.

The majority of alternative providers are subject to [particular review requirements](#), currently delivered through QAA's Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers). The review process culminates in the publication of a report by QAA containing judgements, recommendations, examples of good practice and affirmations – following which the provider must produce an action plan in consultation with students, describing how it intends to respond. All providers reviewed are expected to implement their action plans, and QAA carries out annual monitoring checks to ensure this happens.

Findings from QAA reviews of alternative providers

In July 2016, QAA published [Higher Education Review \(Alternative Providers\): Key Findings 2013-15](#), an overview of review outcomes and trends over two academic years. QAA conducted 27 reviews of 23 alternative providers during this period (four undergoing a repeat review because of an unsatisfactory outcome or identified risk), ranging from new to more established providers. Over 80 per cent (19) of those reviewed were based in London.

¹ In 2014, only 32 per cent of alternative providers in England were based outside London/the South East, according to a report by [IFF Research](#) (PDF, 969KB) on behalf of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

Key outcomes data from QAA's reviews showed that:

- almost 70 per cent of providers (16) had positive outcomes [latest data, from 40 alternative providers reviewed in 2015-16, shows around 80 per cent had positive outcomes – an upwards trend – more detailed analysis of this data will be published in due course]
- two providers received commendations
- seven providers had unsatisfactory outcomes: as a result, they were barred from recruiting international students or receiving public funding for specific courses
- two providers initially judged as requiring improvement took effective remedial action, following which QAA amended their judgements positively.

QAA's view: themes and trends

A number of factors emerged from QAA's report that were common to those alternative providers achieving satisfactory outcomes from their reviews. These providers tended, although not exclusively, to be longer established, with a clear and distinct higher education mission, enrolling a sustainable volume of higher education students.² To illustrate this, four of the providers with unsatisfactory outcomes had fewer than 20 students, although the remaining three providers with unsatisfactory outcomes had over 400 students. The [findings from QAA's reviews of further education colleges](#) also suggest an apparent relationship between a college's review outcome and its volume of higher education students.

Where in a validating arrangement, providers with satisfactory outcomes generally also worked with university partners – rather than other awarding organisations – offering programmes leading to awards from those universities. Data also show that those providers that had undergone two or more reviews or monitoring visits from QAA performed significantly better than those that had only one QAA engagement. This trend requires further research, but could indicate that universities have a more direct relationship with their partners than other awarding bodies, leading to better outcomes.

These factors are not, however, hard and fast determinants of provider quality in themselves. For example, providers such as the New College of the Humanities (established in 2012), London School of Business and Management (established as a higher education provider in 2002) and the Royal School of Needlework (fewer than 50 students) demonstrate that new entrants and smaller providers add to the richness of the sector, providing new opportunities while delivering a good student academic experience.

Common areas of good practice identified through QAA's reviews of alternative providers have included: responsiveness to the student voice; provision of vocational learning in specialist areas that prepare students for industry or professional practice; and improvement of students' learning opportunities through positive engagement with QAA and the Quality Code. The good practice identified has benefits for the wider education community, and QAA works with commended providers to develop case studies on their approaches, as well as making review findings available through an online [Knowledgebase](#).

More broadly, quality assurance has had a significant positive impact in this area of higher education. Since QAA began working with alternative providers in 2012, through to October 2016:

- 462 alternative providers have applied for QAA review (educational oversight, course designation)
- 246 of these providers have withdrawn, transferred or had poor outcomes
- 216 are still in the programme (46.7 per cent).

There is a high bar for quality, recognising and supporting high quality alternative provision, while safeguarding the interests of students and the hard-won reputation of the sector from those providers that do not meet UK expectations.

² 'Sustainable', in general and based on previous HEFCE policy on college higher education, will be around 100 students, although this is by no means prescriptive and will depend on other factors, such as the provider's strategic commitment to higher education and engagement with the Quality Code.