

Summarised consultation responses on the requirements of the external quality assessment review

General (2 respondents)

Key points

- Endorsement of the need for quality systems to evolve and innovate
- The need for an integrating statement setting out how the framework aligned with arrangements in other countries of the UK to achieve reasonable comparability;
- The elements of the Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) did not appear to represent a 'lighter touch' overall;
- The importance of monitoring the cumulative effect and burden of the changes;
- There was a need for further detail on how the elements of the QAF would operate in practice;
- The difficulty of determining the likely cost of the proposed approach;
- The ongoing use of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code) in the review requirements in Wales as part of the baseline requirements was welcomed;
- Quality assurance systems should retain core principles of co-ownership, co-regulation and comparability and take account of policy differences across the UK.

Question 1: Do you agree with the proposal that a further external quality review should be undertaken when there have been significant changes to provision? (16 respondents)

Agree (including with caveats): 9

Disagree: 3

Inconclusive: 4

Points raised

Agreement

- Welcomed the emphasis on governing bodies exercising their judgement and discretion, and the scope this gives for a proportionate, risk-based approach
- The significant changes noted in the consultation were appropriate

Disagreement

- It was not clear why an additional review should apply to established institutions other than in case of merger, although it could be relevant to newer providers;
- Significant changes should be defined as exceptional circumstances and determined by scale (eg organisational mergers), and not increased and planned growth;
- Not all new locations would require an additional review, in particular where this involved franchise provision, but overseas locations could be the exception to this;
- New provision should be monitored through the fee and access plan process, the 6 yearly review, and the implementation of appropriate risk management strategies, processes and procedures by the institution, rather than an earlier review;

- Concern that marginal changes could prompt a review, particularly where small numbers were involved, as a percentage threshold could have a disproportionate effect;
- Only merger between two (or more) organisations should trigger a review.

Other

- It would be useful to have further definition of significant changes and exemplars;
- Any additional review should be proportionate and reflect the context;
- Unplanned changes in HE in FE in could result from decisions of the validating HEI, and impact on the ability of the FEI to achieve its mission;
- A commentary in the annual assurance from the governing body could confirm the action the organisation had taken to minimise the risk to quality as a result of significant changes to provision and provide assurance to HEFCW;
- Metrics could also provide assurance regarding quality in a change context
- Clarification was needed regarding whether changes in numbers of students or types of provision would be measured at the end of a three year period, or at any time within that three year period;
- The methodology should clarify what substantial structural change comprised;
- Negative PSRB reports could be included as an element that might prompt governing bodies to commission a review, rather than being stated separately.

Question 2. Do you agree with the definition of significant new provision provided in paragraph 22 above? Please give details. (16 respondents)

Agree (including with caveats): 6

Disagree: 4

Inconclusive: 6

Points raised

Agreement

- The definition seemed appropriate;
- The triggers for 'significant new provision' were appropriate

Disagreement

- The definition was unhelpful;
- Significant new provision should not automatically trigger a review;
- Any review requirement should be limited to where there was 'significant new provision' at a new location;
- Decisions should be made on a more nuanced basis;
- It was important to not increase the burden on institutions, by requiring multiple reviews;
- It would not be proportionate or reasonable to trigger an institutional review based on the findings of a single PSRB;

Other

- The first collaboration for an institution was more significant than additional collaborations for experienced institutions;
- Governing bodies should be able to exercise discretion in determining the circumstances in which new reviews may be commissioned. More guidance was needed to enable them to do this;
- Further definition of significant new provision was needed, and the associated risk assessed;

- Only some new locations would constitute a significant change. The only circumstance where new provision would trigger an external review should be merger or a new overseas campus;
- The timing of a review of any new campus needed to be considered. If this was done within a year of the campus starting to operate then there may not be sufficient evidence to inform any outcome;
- Clarification was needed regarding whether increased transnational education would trigger a review;
- The definition could state that, for providers without degree-awarding powers, changes might include changes of or by the awarding body (where the programmes themselves may change little but the regulation and assessment governing programmes may change);
- a set of FAQs might provide further clarity;
- Institutions should have measures in place to identify whether provision was likely to become inadequate as a result of planned major strategic changes.

Question 3: Is the judgement terminology appropriate? If not, please explain why and suggest alternatives. (16 respondents)

Agree (including with caveats): 12

Disagree: 0

Inconclusive: 4

Points raised

Other

- The importance of aligning with terminology used in England;
- There was a risk of the EQAR review outcomes looking different to TEF outcomes;
- The English judgement of 'Pending – the producer will be referred for further investigation and intervention,' could be added;
- There should be an additional category referring to the implementation of HEFCW's statement of intervention;
- The English judgement of, 'Does not meet baseline regulatory requirements – concerns are sufficiently serious to warrant removal of the provider from the Register of HE Providers' could be added;
- Inclusion of more detail in the statements to clarify how the judgements aligned to England;
- The terminology should match that used in the revision of judgement section;
- The methodology should clarify that the shorter review interval would apply to institutions receiving judgements other than 'meets requirements' even when the judgement has been amended;
- Further clarity on how HEFCW would initiate its 'inadequate quality procedures prior to intervention' to ensure there was integration and understanding of how the process maps into statutory legislation.

Question 4: Would it be useful to have a judgement of 'Excellent' (or 'Commended')? Please explain why/not. (16 respondents)

Agree (including with caveats): 6

Disagree: 4

Inconclusive: 6

Points raised

Agreement

- it would enable good practice to be celebrated/ rewarded;
- It would encourage institutions to stretch themselves beyond compliance;
- It would ensure that institutions continued to be aspirational and drive continuous improvement;
- It would signal that reviews are about more than baseline accountability
- It would enable the sector to learn and develop as a whole, as well as enabling institutions to build on their strengths;
- It could be used as part of the TEF evidence.

Disagreement

- It would fall outside the baseline standards for the QAF;
- The extra judgement could be confusing;
- Excellent/ commended did not relate to threshold standards;
- The review should identify good and commendable practice as well as recommendations, but this did not need to be formalised as a judgement;
- An unpublished, technical report could be used instead to provide institutions with formative remarks for their own development.

Other

- The importance of aligning as far as possible with arrangements in England and Northern Ireland;
- A judgement of excellent could be difficult to achieve if it was expected across all areas;
- there was the potential for this to overlap with the TEF, and/or result in different outcomes for TEF vs review (bronze and excellent, or vice versa);
- it might be more appropriate for individual areas to be commended rather than for this to be an overall judgement;
- recognition of best practice could be achieved via a narrative and case studies;
- An operational definition of the judgement would be required to clarify what it meant and how it could be demonstrated;
- The term 'excellent' might be confused with Estyn findings, and therefore 'commended' might be more appropriate; conversely that 'excellent' would align with Estyn inspections and be more easily understood;
- A decision about the purpose of the reviews (ie for internal or external purposes) should inform the decision;
- It could be useful to include contextual information, such as referring to specific areas of quality being developed or advanced.

Question 5: Are these judgement areas appropriate? Should there be any additional judgement areas? Please explain your response and suggest alternatives/additions if appropriate. (15)

Agree (including with caveats): 10

Disagree: 1

Inconclusive: 4

Points raised

Agreement

- The areas appeared appropriate

Disagreement

- The QAF should align with the European Standards and Guidelines for internal quality assurance, and therefore there should be a single judgement

Other

- A query regarding whether the UK Quality Code would be superseded by the quality assurance framework in Wales;
- An additional evidence base would be required to support an 'excellent' judgement;
- There was some overlap in the two judgement areas, as both covered standards, quality and information. This might result in a provider receiving unsatisfactory judgements in both areas due to the same issue;
- Where an institution received any judgement of 'meets requirements with conditions' the conditions should signal the issues involved;
- The quality code section on public information was not the same as the Consumer Rights Act 2015;
- It would be useful to clarify the other elements of the UK Quality Code to be used, particularly qualifications characteristic statements and subject benchmark statements.

Question 6: Should there be a separate judgement on enhancement or should this be a commentary? (15 respondents)

Judgement: 5

Commentary: 5

Inconclusive: 5

Points raised:

Judgement

- A separate judgement would require institutions to take action to ensure enhancement was led strategically
- A separate judgement would make enhancement a specific focus and present opportunities for positive case studies;
- It would be helpful to have a judgement based on the current picture and a separate judgement on each institution's ability/capacity to improve.

Commentary

- Enhancement should be holistic and embedded in the strategic approach of the institution and therefore should not be judged separately
- concern about institutions in Wales having to meet additional areas of judgement;
- A separate judgement was not necessary to achieving the benefits of enhancement
- A separate judgement would shift the focus of the review from assurance to enhancement. Reviews would then need to align with the strategic priorities for each institution to reflect the success of enhancement, rather than measurements against the baseline. This could lead to divergence and lack of comparability between reviews.

Other

- The QAA definition of quality enhancement could be used;
- Care should be taken with regards to a perceived separation in terms of comparability and creating additional burden without additional value;
- A definition of enhancement was needed;
- The relationship of enhancement to the baseline should be clarified;

- A clear focus on enhancement would ensure that the review looked at future development as well as past performance, and encourage student engagement in quality;
- A failure to engage in enhancement would not mean that provision was (likely to become) inadequate;
- The approach should fit the national context and maturity of the sector and provide an opportunity for constructive dialogue with experienced peers.

Question 7: Do you have any more general comments about the external quality assurance review? If so, please provide detail. (12 respondents)

Points made:

Positive

- Welcoming the focus on the protection of the international reputation of the UK higher education brand;
- Welcoming the opportunity to participate in joint arrangements to ensure cross-sector consistency and comparability;
- Welcoming the flexibility for governing bodies to place additional requirements on the review process;
- Welcoming the continued emphasis on partnership with students and student engagement with review;
- Welcoming the focus on enhancement and student participation embedded throughout the consultation to drive quality, rather than just assuring it.

Negative

- Concern regarding over-regulation, review and inspection of FEIs, especially in proportion to the smaller number of students, restricting its ability to respond flexibly to the needs of students and employers;
- Any delay/ lead-in time in commissioning external reviews could prevent FEIs engaging in higher apprenticeships in the short term;
- Concern about the potential for over regulation if external reviews took place more frequently than on a 6 year cycle.

Other

- It was not clear that any agency on the register would have the capacity/language skills to deliver other than QAA, therefore there could be a pan-Wales recommendation that the QAA be used;
- Estyn judgements should be considered to meet the review requirements for HE in FE;
- The review system should be flexible and inclusive to meet the potential changes resulting from the Diamond and Hazelkorn reviews;
- The different impact on FEIs, rather than HEIs, should be taken into account;
- Dates and deadlines should be aligned to take account of other regulatory matters such as Fee and Access Plans;
- The review should remain risk-based, proportionate and linked to the strategic plans of each provider in order not to hinder or inhibit the ability of institutions to respond creatively to opportunities;
- The changing sector framework, particularly with the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework, made concrete feedback more challenging.

Question 8: Does this consultation have any unintended impacts or negative consequences in terms of equality and diversity, Welsh language, and/or sustainability? (14 respondents)

Yes: 2

No: 10

Inconclusive: 2

Points made:

Issues

- The specific situation in FEIs, needed to be taken into account consistently, recognising the role of FEIs in widening access, as there were unintended consequences for FEIs, higher apprenticeships and economic development;
- It was difficult to determine whether a review of any new location of delivery might have unintended negative consequences for students;
- HEFCW should provide full details on how the framework will operate in practice and what the totality of these processes might mean for institutions in terms of overall burden.

Respondents

Aberystwyth University
Bangor University
Bridgend College
Cardiff Metropolitan University
Cardiff University
Coleg Cambria
Colegau Cymru
Grŵp Llandrillo Menai
Neath Port Talbot College Group
Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
Swansea University
Wrexham Glyndŵr University
Universities Wales
University of South Wales
University of Wales
University of Wales Trinity Saint David