



Future arrangements for quality assurance in England and Northern Ireland: outcomes of consultation

Summary of consultation outcomes

What is this document?

1. This document summarises the outcomes of a consultation published on 1 December 2009: '[Future arrangements for quality assurance in England and Northern Ireland](#)' (HEFCE 2009/47). This summary is aimed at current and prospective students of higher education, employers, the public and journalists.
2. The consultation asked for views on:
 - how we should ensure that students receive a high-quality student experience when studying a higher education course (such as a degree or a higher education diploma) in England or Northern Ireland
 - how standards (that is, the level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain a qualification) can be maintained at a high level
 - changes that could be made to how quality assurance arrangements are checked, so as to improve the experience of students and the reputation of higher education.
3. The full consultation and outcomes documents are available to download on the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) web-site, www.hefce.ac.uk, under Publications.

The current quality assurance method

4. Government funding for higher education is administered by HEFCE and the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland (DEL).
5. Because they use taxpayers' money, HEFCE and DEL are legally obliged to make sure that the higher education they pay for is of good quality. They do this by asking a specialist organisation, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), to visit institutions and make judgements about their higher education provision. The reports and judgements from these visits are made public on QAA's web-site, www.qaa.ac.uk.
6. Universities and higher education colleges also have a responsibility to ensure their provision is of good quality, and they pay a subscription to the QAA. HEFCE, DEL, universities and colleges are therefore all joint funders of the quality assurance system in England and Northern Ireland.
7. The QAA audits each university and college every six years, with a follow-up after three years.

8. The audit considers the systems of the university or college for quality and standards, that is to say:

- how they manage the **quality** of teaching, support, assessment and opportunities for learning being provided for students
- how they set and monitor **standards** (the level of achievement that a student must reach to gain a degree or other award).

Why review the quality assurance method?

9. The current audit method has been in place since 2002 and will reach the end of its current six-year cycle in summer 2011. HEFCE, DEL, universities and colleges therefore had to decide whether the method needed to be changed after this. We were also aware that there had been public criticism about quality assurance and we wanted to make sure that any new method was fully up-to-date and appropriate.

10. HEFCE, DEL and the two organisations that represent universities and colleges in England and Northern Ireland (Universities UK and GuildHE) therefore began to discuss what a new method should be like. We consulted closely with the National Union of Students and the representative body for further education colleges (the Association of Colleges) as well as seeking advice from QAA. We also talked about our proposals with a committee of people involved in or affected by quality assurance in higher education, which includes people from universities and colleges, the schools sector, student unions and other public bodies. This group is going to help us monitor quality assurance in future.

11. As well as talking about what QAA auditors should look at when they visit an institution, our discussions considered more widely the quality assurance system as a whole in England and Northern Ireland, to make sure that we were looking at the big picture of quality assurance in higher education and not just one facet of it. This included:

- the use of external examiners (experienced staff from other institutions or organisations, who consider exam questions, advise on coursework and check that marks are fair)
- the Academic Infrastructure, produced by QAA, which gives all institutions a shared framework for setting, describing and assuring the quality and standards of their degrees and other higher education courses
- universities' and colleges' own internal systems for quality management.

12. In December 2009, HEFCE, DEL, Universities UK and GuildHE published a consultation (HEFCE 2009/47) that proposed new principles and objectives for the quality assurance system as a whole, and suggested ways in which the audit method might change.

13. We received responses from 169 people and organisations. Most of these were universities and higher education colleges but other respondents included further education colleges, students and organisations that are involved in accrediting courses such as professional qualifications.

What did the responses say?

14. In general, respondents agreed with the proposals outlined in the consultation but they wanted more clarification and detail on some aspects.

What is going to change?

15. The Boards of HEFCE, DEL NI, Universities UK and GuildHE, advised by the group of people involved in or affected by quality assurance in higher education, considered the responses carefully. As a result, we agreed a set of principles and objectives that will underpin the quality assurance method. The final version is '[Future arrangements for quality assurance in England and Northern Ireland: Outcomes of consultation](#)' (HEFCE 2010/17).

16. These principles and objectives will apply to any developments in the quality assurance system from autumn 2011 onwards.

17. QAA will develop a description of how a revised audit method, to apply from 2011-12 onwards, will operate. In comparison to the current method, this will include:

- greater flexibility so it can respond to issues as they arise
- a dual approach in which each institution will receive the same 'core' audit but the auditors can then look at a greater variety of aspects called 'themes'
- clear assurance to the public that threshold standards are being maintained
- more formal consideration of the information that universities and colleges publish about themselves
- clearer, less technical terms to describe judgements
- student members in all audit teams
- a greater concern for addressing public understanding of quality and standards.

18. QAA will publish its own consultation on the revised audit method in autumn 2010.