

Higher Education Review: themes for 2013-15

1 Background and introduction

Higher Education Review (HER) has a core element and a thematic element. The core element focuses on academic standards, quality of learning opportunities, information and enhancement. The thematic element focuses on an area which is regarded as particularly worthy of further analysis or enhancement. The thematic element, or theme, is selected by the Higher Education Review Group (HERG) - which includes representatives of Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), Universities UK, GuildHE and Association of Colleges - and changes periodically. More information about the theme, including the role it plays in the review process, is provided in the HER handbook¹.

This document announces the themes for 2013-15 and gives further information and guidance (for the benefit of providers in particular) about how these themes will feature in the review process.

2 The themes for 2013-15

HERG has selected two themes for reviews happening in the academic years 2013-14 and 2014-15: Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement; and Student Employability. Providers undergoing reviews in 2013-15 will be required to explore one of these themes. It is up to providers to decide which theme they would like to pursue in partnership with their student representatives. The choice of theme should be discussed with the QAA officer coordinating the review during the preparatory meeting held approximately 16 weeks before the review visit. The QAA officer will consider the provider's proposal and confirm within one week of the preparatory visit that that proposal is acceptable. Only where there is a disagreement between the provider and its student representatives about the choice of theme would the QAA consider not accepting the provider's proposal.

3 Rationale for the themes identified

Student Involvement in Quality Assurance Enhancement

The first of the two themes selected by HERG - Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement - was also a theme in 2012-13 in HER's predecessor methods, Institutional Review (England and Northern Ireland) (IRENI) and Review of College Higher Education (RCHE).

If students are to be placed at the heart of the higher education system, they need to be given opportunities and encouragement to provide feedback on their experiences, and to contribute to changes and improvements. By involving students in quality assurance and enhancement, providers enable them to be active participants in shaping their own education, and gain access to a vital source of feedback and creativity.

¹ www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/HER-handbook-13.aspx

In recent years, student involvement in quality assurance and enhancement has become a higher priority for providers, to the extent that it is now well established. Across the sector, students' voices are heard and their views are being taken seriously. Alongside this, a body of research and resources relating to the wider field of student engagement continues to develop. This gives providers new perspectives on student involvement in quality (as well as other aspects of their learning), and provides support and guidance to those providers who wish to develop and refine what they do.

In June 2012, the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code), *Chapter B5: Student engagement* was published. This sets out what all UK higher education providers can expect of each other in terms of student engagement, and what students and the general public can therefore expect of providers. It is expected that providers will have reflected closely on their student engagement activities during the academic year 2012-13 to ensure that they are in a position to meet the expectation of *Chapter B5: Student engagement* by the autumn of 2013 (from which point the Chapter will be used as a reference point in review).

The theme of Student Involvement in Quality Assurance Enhancement, therefore, ought to consolidate the work that providers are likely to have done to appraise their student engagement activities. It would reach beyond the territory covered in the 'quality of student learning opportunities' part of the review process, to give providers the opportunity to present a fuller and more detailed picture of student involvement in quality, and showcase examples of good practice. Topics covered might therefore include: innovations in student involvement in quality student contributions to enhancement staff experience of/participation in student involvement in quality closing the feedback loop.

Student Employability

Student employability and the steps providers of higher education take to improve the employability of their students and graduates have emerged as important areas for discussion both within higher education providers and in the wider community, reflected in recent national initiatives for instance, the CBI report *'Tomorrow's Growth'*². Student employability is high on the educational and political agenda. This is fuelled by the impact of higher fees on students' expectations of course content and quality and the broader economic climate that graduates enter into and is demonstrated by the emergence of a range of initiatives across the higher education sector such as volunteering accreditation, student employability award schemes and extracurricular activities that focus on the development of professional skills and student employability.

There is a long and productive track-record of higher education providers working in partnership with employers to provide relevant programmes of study, opportunities for work-based learning and programmes designed for employees. Initiatives around student employability often enable providers to address local and regional employment requirements and support economic growth and development.

Despite the prominence of student employability within the educational environment there are, however, a number of challenges around the variation in the provision of resource for student employability across the higher education sector. These include the impact of technology, demography, the environment, globalisation, societal changes and social mobility, student and societal expectations and student engagement with student employability initiatives.

² www.cbi.org.uk/campaigns/skills-for-growth/tomorrows-growth-report

The prominence of student employability and the challenges in responding to the agenda impacts on the quality of a student's higher education experience and is worthy of further exploration and analysis.

The theme of Student Employability, therefore, will consolidate the work that providers are likely to be already undertaking to prepare their students for employment. It would reach beyond the territory covered in the various parts of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code) that refer to student employability, to give providers the opportunity to present a fuller and more detailed picture of what they do to develop the employability of their students, and showcase examples of good practice. Topics covered might therefore include:

- exploration of current career services (where available) within higher education providers and the various methods providers adopt to develop student employability skills
- exploration of student employability initiatives delivered by providers, their effectiveness and their role in enhancing the students' experience
- exploration of how student employability is embedded in curriculum design and assessment, including skills development modules, the use and availability of placements within higher education courses and the steps taken by providers to help students think beyond their areas of study when considering and pursuing career options
- exploration of the response by providers to national initiatives such as the *Higher Education Achievement Report*
- exploration of the links between employers, their representative organisations and higher education providers
- exploration of how providers facilitate skills development and professionalisation in the existing workforce.

The outcomes of the theme would provide a snapshot of student employability measures across the sector in 2013-15. This might be used as a basis for measuring change and developments in subsequent years, and for reviewing the impact of resources produced by QAA and others on institutional practice.

4 Operationalising the theme in the review process

Providers will be encouraged in their self-evaluation document, submitted in advance of the review, to emphasise any arrangements or activities relevant to the theme. Similarly, in the student submission, student representative bodies will be encouraged to focus on the provider's arrangements with respect to the theme.

Reviewers, informed by the self-evaluation document and student submission, and using prompts included in the 'further guidance' provided in the Annexes below, will gain an understanding of the provider's approach to the theme area through the normal schedule of meetings and reading of institutional documentation. It is not anticipated that there will have to be meetings exclusively focused on the theme.

Each Higher Education Review report will reflect the team's findings in two ways. Firstly, in the various sections of the report the review team will detail as appropriate the provider's approach to topics covered by the theme. Secondly, the report from each Higher Education Review will contain a specific commentary on the provider's approach to the theme.

The commentary will not lead to any specific separate judgements but will summarise the findings covered in the various sections of the report.

5 Aggregate reporting on the theme

In accordance with the expectation that there should be useful and timely good practice guidance for the sector resulting from the thematic element of Higher Education Review, QAA will produce a report on the outcomes of the theme. This will bring together the outcomes of all reviews addressing the theme in a format accessible to a wide audience. The report is likely to be published in early 2016. It is anticipated that the report will contribute to sector-wide enhancement activities.

6 Further information

Further information on the particular aspects of the themes that review teams will explore during review is provided in Annex A (on Student Involvement in Quality Assurance Enhancement) and Annex B (on Student Employability).

7 Reviewer training

The reviewer training programme will include generic training on the thematic element of review. Reviewers will be reminded that the further guidance is not intended to be a checklist, but is a mechanism by which QAA can assure itself that each provider has been subject to a consistent approach to the theme.

Annex A - Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement: further guidance

Introduction

Student involvement in quality assurance and enhancement has become a much higher priority for higher education providers in recent years, to the extent that it is well established across the sector, because of the enhancement it can provide to the student learning experience. Now more than ever students' voices are being heard and their contributions to quality assurance are taken seriously.

As the body of research and resources relating to the wider field of student engagement continues to develop, higher education providers are being given new perspectives to consider about student involvement in quality (as well as other aspects of their learning), and new evidence to support and guide them in refining what they do.

This review theme therefore seeks to capture a picture of student engagement in the UK today, as an established but evolving area. It is intended to consolidate, where relevant, the work that higher education providers are undertaking to appraise their student engagement activities, in the light of the new resources available to them. It will reach beyond the territory covered in the 'quality of student learning opportunities' element of the review process, to give higher education providers an opportunity to present a fuller and more detailed picture of student involvement in quality, and showcase examples of good practice.

Review teams will focus on three broad aspects of student involvement in quality assurance and enhancement during the review. These have been identified as areas of particular interest for providers across Institutional audit reports, and sector-wide research, and are as follows:

- innovations in student involvement in quality assurance and enhancement (especially the nature of the student contribution, and how a diverse student body is included)
- staff experience of/participation in student involvement in quality
- how contributions from students are acted upon, and how students know they are acted upon (often referred to as 'closing the feedback loop').

This paper highlights some context for each area, and the sorts of questions that reviewers might ask. It is intended to help providers and student representatives as they prepare their self-evaluation document and student written submission, respectively. It will also provide an aide memoire for reviewers during the review process. Useful further reference points in particular include the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, Part B, *Chapter B5: Student engagement* and *Chapter B3: Learning and teaching*.

It should be noted that there is potential for overlap between the three topics listed above. Respondents are encouraged to approach each in the way that best reflects their activities.

Innovations in student involvement in quality assurance and enhancement

Higher education providers employ a variety of mechanisms to support and promote student involvement in quality assurance and enhancement. Recent Institutional audit reports suggest that the vast majority now have systems in place for student representation, both at organisational level and within individual faculties, schools or departments. Students are involved in senior boards and committees, in periodic review, and in staff-student liaison

activities, and a partnership approach with students' unions (where they exist) is common³. Evidence of student involvement in enhancement activities is less common. However, it is clear that higher education providers are seeking to be increasingly innovative in the way in which they involve students in what they do.

Possible review questions

1. Can you cite any examples of student contribution to quality enhancement projects?
2. What do you do that you consider to be innovative in the way you approach student involvement with quality assurance?

Staff experience of/participation in student involvement in quality

Studies have shown that there can be uncertainty around the ownership of certain aspects of student involvement in quality⁴. However, higher education providers acknowledge the importance of ensuring that all staff understand the processes and systems that exist to support student involvement in quality, as well as the ways in which they can support and contribute to them.

Possible review questions

1. How do staff support the involvement of students in quality assurance processes?
2. What do staff see as the benefits of student involvement in quality assurance processes, and their contribution to quality enhancement agenda?

Acting on student contributions and 'closing the feedback loop'

The importance of 'closing the feedback loop' - or, letting students know what actions have been taken in the light of their input - is now widely acknowledged across UK higher education. It reflects openness and transparency and can be helpful in encouraging continued or repeat feedback from students. However, audit reports and other evidence suggests that higher education providers still face challenges in this area, particularly when it comes to convincing students that their feedback is (or will be) acted upon, and ensuring that their actions are timely.

Possible review questions

1. Do you have mechanisms in place for closing the feedback loop and what are they?
2. How is the student contribution to quality assurance processes and the enhancement agenda at your provider evaluated and disseminated?

³ QAA audit and review reports are available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/Pages/default.aspx. Outcomes papers highlight good practice relating to particular topics in audit and review reports. Series two and three papers on Student representation and feedback arrangements and Student engagement and support, respectively, may be of particular interest. Outcomes papers are available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/ImprovingHigherEducation/Pages/Outcomes.aspx.

⁴ See, for example, CHERI's Report to HEFCE on student engagement (February 2009), available at: www.hefce.ac.uk/media/hefce/content/pubs/2009/rd0309/rd03_09.pdf

Annex B - Student Employability: further guidance

Student employability has become a much higher priority for higher education providers in recent years. This reflects a growth in public interest in the extent to which higher education is providing the professional skills needed by industry and society in general.

As the body of research and resources relating to the employability in higher education continues to develop, higher education providers are being given new perspectives to consider about improving the employment prospects of their students and their graduates, and new evidence to support and guide them in refining what they do.

These resources include reflections on the professional currency of higher education programs in several chapters of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code), which are described below.

The new theme seeks to capture a picture of how higher education providers facilitate employability in the academic and supportive activities that they offer in the UK today. As an established but evolving area, it is intended to consolidate, where relevant, the work that higher education providers are undertaking to appraise their employment initiatives and activities, in the light of the new resources available to them. It will reach beyond the territory covered in the various chapters of the Quality Code to give higher education providers an opportunity to present a fuller and more detailed picture of initiatives and activities that promote and enhance employability and showcase examples of good practice.

Review teams will focus on two broad aspects of employability during the review. These have been identified as areas of particular interest for higher education providers:

- innovations in promoting the employability of students
- how employers are involved in the delivery and development of the curriculum.

This guidance highlights some context for each of these three areas, and the sorts of questions that reviewers might ask. It is intended to help providers and student representatives as they prepare their self-evaluation document and student submission, respectively. It will also provide an aide-memoire for reviewers during the review process.

It should be noted that there is potential for overlap between the three topics listed above. Respondents are encouraged to approach each in the way that best reflects their activities.

Innovations in promoting the employability of students

Higher education providers employ a variety of mechanisms to support and promote employability. Recent reports from reviews of higher education suggest that most providers encourage the development and application of professional skills at a variety of levels, through liaison with employers and industry and the subsequent development of academic opportunities and enhancement initiatives. Despite the prominence of student employability within the higher education sector there are number of challenges. These include the variation in the provision of resource for employability across the higher education sector, the impact of technology, demography, the environment, globalisation, societal changes and social mobility, student and societal expectations and student engagement with employability initiatives. Reviewers might use the theme to explore how student employability is embedded in curriculum design and assessment, including skills development modules, the use and availability of placements within higher education courses and the steps taken by providers to help students think beyond their areas of study when considering and pursuing career options. Many higher education providers are also involved in employment related

initiatives across the higher education sector that are intended to improve the employability of students and graduates. Reviewers might use the theme to explore provider engagement with these initiatives, their effectiveness and their role in enhancing the student's experience. Reviewers might also use the theme to explore career services (where available) within higher education providers and the various methods providers adopt to develop employability skills.

Possible review questions

- What steps does the provider take to enable their students to develop relevant employability skills across all courses?
- What use does the provider make of work-based and/or placement learning initiatives and opportunities to develop employability skills?
- What analysis does the provider undertake of first destination leaver statistics (and/or other related surveys)? How do providers use this analysis and how is it used to enhance learning opportunities?
- How do employability initiatives at a provider level work in helping graduates get and keep jobs?

How employers are involved in the delivery and development of the curriculum

There is a long and productive track-record of higher education providers working in partnership with employers to provide relevant programmes of study, opportunities for work-based learning and programmes designed for employees. Recent reports from reviews of higher education suggest that many employers also contribute to the design of curricula and may be involved in course validation and review activities. Some employers are also involved in the delivery of learning opportunities and may have a role in the assessment and moderation of students' work. This liaison with employers can enable providers to address local and regional employment requirements and support economic growth and development. Reviewers might use the theme to explore links between employers, their representative organisations and higher education providers, how such links enhance student employability and how such links are monitored to ensure their currency.

Possible review questions

- How does the provider use externality in developing and delivering initiatives that enhance student employability?
- How actively does the provider engage employers/industry representatives in the development, design, assessment and review of higher education provision?
- How does the provider engage with distance learning, part-time and work-based higher education students to enhance student employability?
- How far do students/alumni agree that their studies are preparing/have prepared them for employment?

References in the Quality Code relevant to developing student employability and working with employers

A number of overarching themes are addressed throughout the Quality Code, as appropriate to the topic. These include:

- how the employability of students can be addressed in relation to the topic
- how the topic relates to all the diverse needs of students, in particular non-traditional learners (for example, work-based learners, part-time students and so on).

Part A: setting and maintaining academic standards

- The qualification descriptors for each level in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) include a section on 'qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment'.
- Subject benchmark statements may describe typical employment routes for graduates in the subject, particularly if there are specific and close links with particular professions, and/or professional, regulatory and statutory bodies.
- Subject benchmark statements also describe generic/transferable skills which students develop.

Chapter B1: Programme design and approval (unrevised version, as current for 2013-15)

- Indicators 1 and 5 list the requirements of employers as one of the external reference points to be taken into account in programme design and approval processes.
- Appendix 2 (additional guidance) includes preparation for specific and/or general employment as possible purposes for which a higher education programme is offered.

Chapter B3: Learning and teaching

- Indicator 1 refers to themes which cross subject boundaries which higher education providers may wish to consider as part of their strategic approach to learning and teaching; these include enterprise and entrepreneurship, and ethical behaviour.
- Indicator 3 refers to learning and teaching practices being informed by evaluation of professional practice, in particular where the 'teacher' is a 'practitioner' of a particular profession.

Chapter B4: Enabling student development and achievement

- The Expectation refers to enabling students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential.
- Indicator 6 focuses on the development of employability and career management skills.

Chapter B6: Assessment of students and accreditation of prior learning (unrevised version, as current for 2013-15)

- Refer to the *Guidelines on the accreditation of prior learning* (2004) www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Guidelines-on-the-

[accreditation-of-prior-learning-September-2004.aspx](#) in relation to recognition of learning in a range of contexts, including the work place.

Chapter B7: External examining

- Indicator 5 refers to external examiners drawn from business, industry or the professions.

Chapter B8: Programme monitoring and review (unrevised version, as current for 2013-15)

- Indicator 5 lists feedback from employers as a source to inform programme monitoring.
- Indicator 6 refers to changing expectations of employers and employment opportunities as factors which could be considered in periodic review.

Chapter B10: Managing higher education provision with others

- The Chapter provides guidance to providers who are working with others to offer higher education, including work with employers to deliver work-based and placement learning opportunities.

Chapter B11: Research degrees

- Indicator 14 refers to students developing research, personal and professional skills and references the Vitae Researcher Development Framework (endorsed by QAA), which is a tool kit for career development of researchers.

Part C: Information about higher education provision

- Indicators 3, 4 and 5 refer to information for prospective and current students, which may include information about future employment prospects and opportunities during their studies for work-based and placement learning, and the development of transferable skills.
- Indicator 6 is about information about student achievement provided on completion of studies, one of the purposes of which is to provide evidence to a future employer.

Other relevant resources

- Enterprise and entrepreneurship education: Guidance for UK higher education providers www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/enterprise-entrepreneurship-guidance.aspx.
- Extra-curricular awards stimulus papers:
 - Centre for Recording Achievement perspective www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/extra-curricular-awards-CRA.aspx
 - Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services perspective www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/extra-curricular-awards-AGCAS.aspx (note: particularly helpful discussion of what 'employability' may be understood to mean).
- Forthcoming (December 2013): Recognising achievement beyond the curriculum: a tool kit for enhancing strategy and practice.
- QAA Scotland Enhancement Themes:

- Graduates for the 21st Century
www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/enhancement-themes/completed-enhancement-themes/graduates-for-the-21st-century
- Flexible Delivery www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/enhancement-themes/completed-enhancement-themes/flexible-delivery
- Employability www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/enhancement-themes/completed-enhancement-themes/employability
- ASET Good Practice Guide for Work-based and Placement Learning in Higher Education - launched 3 September 2013; produced in association with QAA.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

Southgate House
Southgate Street
Gloucester
GL1 1UB

Tel 01452 557000
Fax 01452 557070
Email enquiries@qaa.ac.uk
Web www.qaa.ac.uk

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