



Raising concerns about standards and quality in higher education: guide and submission form

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Please read through this guide before submitting your submission form. The guide is designed to assist you in completing the form with all the relevant information we require to deal with your submission efficiently.

Once completed and signed, please return your submission to concerns@qaa.ac.uk or by post to:

**Concerns
The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
Southgate House
Southgate Street
Gloucester
GL1 1UB**

If you require us to communicate in a particular way due to disability, please contact us at enquiries@qaa.ac.uk or telephone 01452 557000.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education: safeguarding standards and improving the quality of UK higher education.

Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| A guide to raising concerns about standards and quality in higher education | 1 |
| Principles | 1 |
| The difference between a concern and a complaint | 1 |
| Whom we can investigate | 1 |
| What we can investigate | 2 |
| What we can't investigate | 3 |
| How to raise a concern with us | 4 |
| How we investigate | 5 |
| Outcomes | 6 |
| Action plan and sign-off | 6 |
| Reporting | 6 |
| Concerns raised by named organisations | 7 |
| Concerns about programmes delivered with others | 7 |
| Standards of service | 7 |
| Protecting those raising concerns | 7 |
| Representations | 8 |
| Contacting us | 8 |
| Section 1: Your details | 9 |
| Section 2: Provider and course information | 10 |
| Section 2a - student | 10 |
| Section 2b - member of staff | 12 |
| Section 2c - neither student nor member of staff | 13 |
| Section 3: Completion of Procedures letter | 14 |
| Section 4: Your concern | 15 |
| Declaration | 16 |
| Anonymity | 16 |
| Monitoring form | 18 |
| Annex A | 20 |

A guide to raising concerns about standards and quality in higher education

The primary responsibility for academic standards and quality in UK higher education rests with individual universities and colleges. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) carries out reviews and reports on how well they meet their responsibilities.

We can also investigate concerns about the standards and quality of higher education provision, and the information that higher education providers produce about their learning opportunities. Where there is evidence of weaknesses that go beyond an isolated occurrence, and where the evidence suggests broader failings in the management of quality and standards, we can investigate. These concerns may be raised by students, staff, organisations, or anyone else. This guide is for those who wish to bring a concern to our attention. Note that 'we' refers to QAA throughout.

Principles

We work with the higher education sector to safeguard standards and improve quality in UK higher education. As part of the drive to maintain and enhance standards, we investigate concerns about standards and quality raised by students, staff and other parties. Where such concerns indicate serious systemic or procedural problems, we will conduct a detailed investigation.

The difference between a concern and a complaint

We use the term **concerns** to mean concerns about how higher education providers manage their academic standards, the quality of learning opportunities, and the information that they make available about their provision.¹

We do not resolve individual complaints against providers and we are unable to provide redress or compensation to any individual submitting a complaint to us. However, we can look at individual complaints for evidence of broader failings in the management of academic quality and standards. Where we consider that these indicate serious systemic or procedural problems, we will investigate them as concerns.

The aim of an investigation by QAA under the Concerns Scheme is to safeguard and improve the overall quality of UK higher education by addressing weaknesses within a particular higher education provider. Those seeking redress or compensation should contact the [Office for the Independent Adjudicator](#).²

Whom we can investigate

We can investigate concerns about:

- higher education providers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland that subscribe to us (see the [list of our subscribers](#))³

¹ We have a separate process for complaints about QAA. We have a separate process for appeals for those raising formal objections to the outcomes of QAA reviews. This document is about our concerns procedure only.

² www.oiahe.org.uk

³ www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/subscribing-institutions/pages/list-of-subscribing-institutions.aspx

- courses provided by higher education providers that subscribe to us, whether delivered by the providers directly or through working with other organisations and partners in the UK or overseas
- higher education providers that have applied to QAA for educational oversight⁴
- higher education providers that have entered the detailed scrutiny stage of an application for degree-awarding powers or university title
- Access to Higher Education courses.⁵

A separate scheme operates for Scottish higher education: [Protocol for managing potential risks to quality and academic standards](#).⁶

If the concern is about an Access to Higher Education course, this guide should be read in conjunction with the [guidance on our website](#).⁷

What we can investigate

We can investigate:

- concerns about academic standards and quality, where we think these raise broader issues about the management of quality and standards
- concerns about the information that higher education providers produce about the learning opportunities.

Standards - The standards set and maintained by higher education providers for their courses (programmes and modules) and expected for their awards. The **threshold academic standard** is the minimum acceptable level of achievement that a student has to demonstrate to be eligible for an academic award.

Quality - A comprehensive term referring to how, and how well, higher education providers manage teaching and learning opportunities to help students progress and succeed.

We will only investigate concerns we think indicate serious weaknesses in the higher education provider's approach to the management of quality and standards. Information about isolated mistakes or occurrences of bad practice, or unverified anecdotes or hearsay, will not normally be sufficient to trigger further action.

Quality

We can investigate:

- the absence of effective processes for the design and approval of programmes
- failure to have admissions policies and procedures that are clear, fair, explicit and consistently applied
- failure to define (and systematically review and enhance) learning opportunities and teaching practices
- the absence of effective arrangements to support students with their learning
- the absence of deliberate steps to engage all students, individually and collectively, as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience

⁴ www.qaa.ac.uk/complaints/concerns/pages/educational-oversight.aspx

⁵ www.qaa.ac.uk/complaints/concerns/pages/raising-concerns-about-access-to-HE.aspx

⁶ www.qaa.ac.uk/complaints/concerns/documents/managingrisksprotocol.pdf

⁷ See note 5.

- the lack of appropriate opportunities for students to show they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the award of a qualification or credit
- failure to make scrupulous use of external examiners
- the lack of effective procedures to routinely monitor and periodically review programmes
- the lack of fair, effective and timely procedures for handling students' complaints and academic appeals
- the lack of effective processes for managing learning opportunities delivered with other organisations
- failure to provide a robust research environment.

Standards

We can investigate:

- where the academic standards of qualifications are not set at the appropriate level
- higher education programmes that do not meet the expectations for a degree in a particular subject area
- failure to make available definitive information on the aims, intended learning outcomes and expected learner achievements for a programme of study
- the absence of independent and external participation in the setting and management of threshold academic standards
- failure of assessment to be robust, valid and reliable.

Information about higher education provision

We can investigate:

- whether information a higher education provider makes available about learning opportunities is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy.

Examples of what we can investigate:

- misleading information about the accreditation of a course by a professional body
- inadequate guidance for examiners on marking examination scripts
- inadequate support for placement or distance learning
- failure to follow assessment regulations
- inaccurate or misleading public information
- failure to meet commitments made in prospectuses and other published material
- inadequate use of academic regulations
- weaknesses in the management of academic standards and quality when delivering learning opportunities with others.

What we can't investigate

We can't investigate:

- matters of academic judgement, such as examination results
- individual claims for tuition fee refunds
- requests for institutions or external examiners to remark work
- grievances against individual staff
- problems that the institution has already rectified
- isolated mistakes or occurrences of bad practice.

We cannot investigate concerns about:

- private institutions that do not subscribe to us and have not applied to us for educational oversight or reviews for specific course designation (unless they are involved in delivering learning opportunities with a (partner) institution that subscribes to us)
- courses that do not lead to higher education awards or to specific credit towards higher education awards (other than certain elements of Access to Higher Education).

There is guidance about [what to do if we cannot investigate your concern](#) on our website.⁸

How to raise a concern with us

Anyone wishing to raise a concern should make a submission to us. We will decide whether the issues raised provide evidence of broader concerns about the management of academic quality and standards, and/or about public information.

Before making a submission, you should first raise the issue directly with the higher education provider through its internal procedures. If the provider fails to resolve the issue, it can be raised with us. Depending on the circumstances, we may make inquiries or investigate before the provider has completed its own investigation.

If the issues raised by the same person are under investigation by the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA), we may contact the OIA to collect relevant information about the case where it has already been compiled, under a formal information-sharing agreement.⁹

If the issues raised by the same person are related to ongoing legal proceedings or an Employment Tribunal, then those processes should be completed before we will consider investigating.

Submissions to the Concerns Scheme should be made via the form below and **should be accompanied by documentary evidence** to justify any inquiries to the higher education provider concerned. Those raising concerns could consider making a request under the Freedom of Information Act or by means of a Subject Access Request to the provider to obtain information to support their submission.

We cannot consider a submission based on wholly unsubstantiated allegations. We reserve the right not to investigate concerns considered to be vexatious or malicious.

Examples of acceptable documentary evidence include:

- external examiners' reports
- internal quality assurance reports
- copies of correspondence, including letters and emails
- papers showing that the matter has been raised directly with the provider
- published materials from the provider
- minutes of meetings and committees.

⁸ www.qaa.ac.uk/complaints/concerns/pages/what-to-do-if-we-cannot-investigate-your-concern.aspx

⁹ www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/corporate/pages/memoranda.aspx

How we investigate

Screening

Normally, we will screen information submitted formally to us within two to four weeks in order to determine whether it is something we can investigate. If we cannot investigate, we will explain why.

Regardless of whether or not we can investigate, we will inform the higher education provider concerned of the matters raised and their nature. We may also pass information to other relevant organisations, such as a professional, statutory or regulatory body.

Where the higher education provider has a QAA review visit scheduled within the next nine months, we may investigate the issues raised within that review and not produce a separate report about it. If we choose to investigate through a review, we will pass the information and accompanying evidence to the reviewers. We will explain the nature of the concern to the provider and invite them to provide a response to the reviewers. The reviewers' subsequent view of the seriousness and validity of the concern may affect the review outcome.

Where the provider's next review visit is more than nine months away, we will normally investigate separately in two stages, as follows.

Stage one: initial inquiry

The purpose of the initial inquiry is to gather further information from the higher education provider and determine whether the evidence supports the concern. A case officer will read the submission and the supporting evidence in detail, and may refer to other evidence about the provider, including reports from QAA and other bodies. A serious concern, if well evidenced, can directly instigate a full investigation without an initial inquiry.

The case officer may also ask the institution if and how it has dealt with the concern, and make enquiries of other organisations, such as professional bodies, where relevant.

At the end of the initial inquiry, we will decide whether concerns remain and if they indicate unresolved systemic weaknesses. If so, we shall proceed to a full investigation.

The outcomes of an initial inquiry are as follows:

| Concern is investigated | Concern is rejected |
|---|---|
| A full investigation will be carried out as explained below. It is not possible to appeal against a decision to proceed to a full investigation. | If we decide that the concern should not proceed to a full investigation, we will write to the person who raised the issues to explain why. |

Stage two: full investigation

Following an initial inquiry, and if there is sufficient evidence of a concern, there will be a full investigation. The purpose of the full investigation is to examine the evidence and determine whether it reflects serious systemic or procedural shortcomings by the provider. We will write to the provider setting out the nature of the concerns and asking for a (further) response and copies of relevant evidence.

The full investigation will be led by a QAA member of staff or representative, and may also involve others, depending on the nature of the concern and its complexity. We will check to make sure no one involved in the investigation has a conflict of interest with the provider concerned. The case officer who dealt with the initial inquiry may coordinate the full investigation, but they will not participate in formulating the findings.

If the person leading the full investigation cannot resolve the case based on the information made available to us by the provider, they can request further information and/or arrange to visit the provider to meet relevant staff and/or students.

The higher education provider will have the opportunity to comment on the factual accuracy of the findings. At the end of the full investigation, the person who led it will present the findings to QAA's Chief Executive, who will decide whether to make recommendations to the provider.

Outcomes

The consequences of a concern being upheld in whole or in part will depend on the nature, extent and seriousness of the concern. In all such cases, we will recommend to the higher education provider concerned how they may ensure that the problems identified do not reoccur. Normally we would also request an action plan, with targets for the implementation of the recommendations. Where the concern relates to learning opportunities delivered across other organisations, an action plan may be requested from the delivery organisation and/or the awarding body. We will inform the higher education funding councils of the action to be taken in the case of providers they fund. QAA will decide if the provider's next review should be brought forward.

Action plan and sign-off

Where an action plan is requested, it must be agreed with QAA and must fully address the recommendations. The higher education provider must ensure that the actions set out in it are taken in a timely manner. QAA will monitor the action plan and will need evidence of its completion.

When QAA requests an action plan, the procedure is as follows.

- 1 The provider submits an action plan, which is agreed as fit for purpose by QAA, or returned to the provider for further work. An agreed action plan is published by QAA.
- 2 QAA member of staff maintains contact with the provider to monitor progress.
- 3 When the actions are complete, QAA meets with the provider to confirm this.
- 4 A QAA officer writes a report detailing how the QAA recommendations have been addressed.
- 5 QAA's Chief Executive signs off the report.
- 6 A statement is added on QAA's website confirming that the action plan has been implemented.¹⁰

Reporting

At the end of the full investigation we will report the findings on our website, regardless of the outcome. The provider concerned has the opportunity to comment on the statement before it is published. Sections may be redacted to protect the anonymity of those who raised the concerns, as well as representatives of the provider.

¹⁰ www.qaa.ac.uk/complaints/concerns/pages/concerns-reports.aspx

Concerns raised by named organisations

There is a group of professional, statutory, regulatory and other bodies (listed in Annex A) that we have recognised for the purpose of presenting information to us and requesting a full investigation under this procedure. When one of these organisations raises a concern with us, we will normally proceed directly to a full investigation.

Concerns about programmes delivered with others

Where a submission to the Concerns Scheme relates to a programme delivered by a third party (for example, through a collaborative arrangement with a degree-awarding body that subscribes to us) we will normally direct our initial inquiry at the provider but may involve the awarding body, with all correspondence copied to the awarding body.

Standards of service

We strive to investigate concerns quickly and thoroughly, and then publish our findings. This makes it clear in a timely manner either that the concern has been upheld and addressed, or that it has been shown to be unjustified.

How long it takes us to investigate depends on a number of factors, including the complexity of the issue and the speed and ease with which we can obtain supporting evidence.

The table below gives information on the likely timeline. In some cases it will be possible for us to complete our work more quickly. In exceptional cases an investigation may take longer, such as when the concerns are about learning opportunities delivered with others, requiring visits to separate delivery and awarding bodies, or where the concern is investigated through a review. We are responsible to our Board for completing our work within these timescales.

| Time | |
|-------------|--|
| 0 | Information is submitted to us and evidenced |
| 1-5 days | We acknowledge receipt of the information in writing |
| 1-4 weeks | Within four weeks, we screen the submission and inform the person making it whether this is something we can investigate |
| 5-12 weeks | We conduct an initial inquiry. Initial inquiries may take longer if further evidence is needed |
| 12-24 weeks | We conduct a full investigation if appropriate |
| 32 weeks | We publish a summary statement about the investigation on our website |

Protecting those raising concerns

Concerns about academic standards and quality are not regarded as qualifying disclosures under the *Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998*. Those submitting concerns to us are therefore not offered legal protection under the Act, so if they wish to remain anonymous they need to make this clear on the concerns submission form. Please bear in mind, however, that the provider may be able to identify those raising concerns from the nature of the issues raised.

Representations

Higher education providers subject to a full investigation are unable to appeal against the outcomes, but can make representations on grounds of flawed procedure on our part, and/or new evidence becoming available.

Contacting us

For further guidance on any aspect of this process, please contact:

Concerns
The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
Southgate House
Southgate Street
Gloucester
GL1 1UB

Email: enquiries@qaa.ac.uk

Section 1: Your details

This section is for you to enter personal details so that we can contact you.

Please enter a preferred name if the name you prefer to be known by is different from your official name.

We will need at least one method of contacting you with written communication, either post or email, as much of our concerns investigation process is conducted in writing.

You can indicate if your preference is for contact by email by ticking the appropriate box.

Title: Mr Mrs Miss Ms Other

Surname/family name: _____

First name(s): _____

Gender: Male Female

Address: _____

Town: _____ County: _____

Country: _____ Post code: _____

Telephone (landline): _____ Mobile: _____

Email address: _____

Preferred method of communication: Post
Email

You will need to inform us of any changes in your contact details while your case is being considered.

Section 2: Provider and course information

If you are or were a **student**, please complete Section **2a**. If you are or were a **member of staff**, please complete Section **2b**. If you are not or were not either a student or a member of staff, please complete Section **2c**.

Section 2a - student

Name of the provider you are/were registered with and which awards the qualification you are/were studying for

Please enter the name of the provider you are/were registered with and are raising a concern about. This will be the institution that will have issued you with the Completion of Procedures letter following completion of the internal complaints procedure.

Where you are/were attending classes (if different from above)

You may be attending a local college which is running a course leading to an award from a university - please enter the name of the institution where you are/were attending classes. If the qualification you are studying for is awarded by the university rather than the college, then we can look at a complaint about what the university has done. You may be able to go through the university's internal complaints or appeals procedures. At the end of these procedures, the university should issue you with a Completion of Procedures letter.

Programme/course you are/were registered on

Please enter the name of the course or programme you are/were studying, for example 'BA Law'.

Programme level

Please tick the appropriate box to indicate the programme level:

| | | |
|---------|---|--|
| Level 8 | PhD | |
| Level 7 | Master's or Integrated Master's Degree or Postgraduate Diploma or Postgraduate Certificate | |
| Level 6 | Bachelor's Degree | |
| Level 6 | Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) | |

| | | |
|---------|--|--|
| Level 5 | Diploma or Foundation Degree or Higher National Diploma (HND) | |
| Level 4 | Certificate or Higher National Certificate (HNC) | |

Type of provision

Please tick the appropriate box to indicate whether you are/were studying your course:

- full-time (attending the total number of modules assigned for a year's study)
- part-time (attending a number of the modules assigned for a year's study in one year and attending the rest the next year).

| | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Full-time | |
| Part-time | |
| Distance learner | |
| Work-based learner | |
| Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) | |

Beginning of course

Please enter the date that you started your course.

End of course

Please enter the date that you finished your course.

If you are still a student, please enter the date you expect to finish your course.
If you withdrew or were withdrawn from your course, please enter the date of withdrawal.

How are you categorised by your provider?

Please tick the appropriate box.

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| Home student | |
| EU student | |
| International student | |

Section 2b - member of staff

Name of the provider

Please enter the name of the higher education provider where you are/were a member of staff and are raising a concern about.

Your employment

| | |
|----------------------|--|
| Job title | |
| Nature of employment | |
| Period of employment | From: (month/year) To: (month/year) |

Is your concern currently being investigated by an Employment Tribunal, or is an Employment Tribunal pending?

Yes No

Please note: QAA is not normally able to investigate concerns while an Employment Tribunal is in progress or pending. If you have signed a compromise agreement with the institution concerned, you may wish to seek legal advice before submitting this form. It is your responsibility to ensure that you comply with the terms of any relevant prior agreements.

Section 2c - neither student nor member of staff

Name of the provider

Please enter the name of the higher education provider that you are raising a concern about.

What is your relationship to the institution concerned?

Section 3: Completion of Procedures letter

Before you can raise a concern with QAA, you should complete the provider's internal complaints or appeals procedures. This is so that we can be sure the provider has had an opportunity to deal with your complaint or appeal before we look at it. Once you have done so, the provider should issue you with a Completion of Procedures letter.

In **exceptional** circumstances we may look at a concern where the internal complaints or appeals procedures have not been completed. For example, if we were satisfied that the provider was unreasonably refusing to progress your complaint, or to issue a Completion of Procedures letter, we might consider it appropriate to investigate your concern.

Has your case been investigated through the provider's own internal procedures?
(please tick)

Yes No Ongoing

Has your case been investigated by the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA) or the Board of Visitors (for institutions in Northern Ireland)?

Yes No Ongoing

If yes, what is the date on your Completion of Procedures letter?

(Day/month/year) _____

Please note: QAA will not normally investigate submissions which are under investigation by the OIA until they have completed their work. The OIA will not communicate its decision to QAA directly.

Section 4: Your concern

Please describe your concern below (please use a separate sheet if required).

Your submission should be accompanied by documentary evidence to justify any inquiries to the institution concerned. If the evidence is not available to you, you could consider a request under the *Freedom of Information Act*. We cannot consider a submission based on wholly unsubstantiated allegations.

Evidence provided (please tick)

You should send us any relevant information including letters or emails, and a copy of your Completion of Procedures Letter and of your original complaint or appeal to the higher education provider.

| | |
|--|--|
| Provider's Completion of Procedures letter | |
| OIA Completion of Procedures letter (if required) | |
| Programme specification/course handbook/prospectus | |
| Copy of original complaint to provider | |
| Relevant email communication/correspondence | |
| Any other documentation relevant to the concern raised | |

How did you hear about the QAA Concerns Scheme?

Please tick the appropriate box.

| | |
|---|--------------------------|
| QAA web site | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Internet search | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Through student support services | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Through a students' union | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Friends and colleagues | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Through the Office of the Independent Adjudicator | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other, please specify: | |

Declaration

- I declare that the information given on this form is, to the best of my knowledge, true and complete.
- I have read the QAA guidance note and understand that the Concerns Scheme is not a complaints resolution service, but a means for QAA to identify any systemic failings by a provider.
- I understand that QAA cannot provide redress for individual students.

| | |
|-----------|--|
| Signature | |
| Date | |

Please note that if you email your form to us, typing your name into the box below will be considered comparable to an electronic signature.

Anonymity

If we decide to investigate your concern, the process will be considerably aided if we are able to disclose the details you have provided in Sections 1 and 2 above (excluding your postal and/or email address) to the institution concerned and to any other organisation that we may need to consult in the course of our investigations. If you do not want us to disclose this information during the investigation, please tick this box.

If you have ticked the box above, please note that although QAA will not disclose the details you have provided in Sections 1 and 2, by completing this form you give permission to QAA to discuss the case with the institution concerned, and any other appropriate organisations that we may need to consult in the course of our investigations (such as a professional,

statutory or regulatory body). **You should be aware that we may not always be able to preserve your anonymity, as you may be identifiable to the institution through the details of your submission to the Concerns Scheme.**

Regardless of whether or not we can investigate your concern, we will pass information about your submission on to the institution concerned. This is to ensure the institution is aware of the concern. We may also pass information on to other relevant organisations, such as professional, statutory and regulatory bodies. If you have indicated above that you do not want us to disclose the information you have provided in Sections 1 and 2, we will ensure this information is not passed on by us to any third parties.

Finally, we should be very grateful if you would complete the monitoring form below to accompany this submission. This will help us to identify whether concerns about academic standards and quality are related to some of the characteristics protected under the *Equality Act 2010*.

Please send this submission and monitoring form to:

Concerns
The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
Southgate House
Southgate Street
Gloucester
GL1 1UB

Email: concerns@qaa.ac.uk

Monitoring form

The information we ask you to provide on this form helps us to identify whether concerns about academic standards and quality are related to some of the characteristics protected under the *Equality Act 2010*. When we receive your complaint, this section will be removed and used for statistical purposes only. The information is held confidentially and will not affect the way we deal with your submission. The information will not be passed on to anyone outside QAA.

I am: (please tick the appropriate box)

Male

Female

Age: (please tick the appropriate box)

Under 25 years

25 - 39

40 years and over

I would describe my ethnic origin as: (please tick the appropriate box)

White – English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British

White - Irish

White - other

Mixed- white/black African

Mixed - white/black Caribbean

Mixed - white/Asian

Mixed - other

Asian/Asian British -Indian

Asian/Asian British - Pakistani

Asian/Asian British - Bangladeshi

Asian/Asian British - Chinese

Asian/Asian British – other

Black/black British – African

Black/black British - Caribbean

Black/black British - other

Other ethnic group

Are you disabled within the meaning of the *Disability Discrimination Act 1995* (superseded by the *Equality Act 2010*)? (please tick the appropriate box)

Yes

No

If yes, please specify your disability:

Annex A

List of professional, statutory, regulatory and other bodies that are recognised for the purpose of presenting information to QAA and asking it to investigate concerns, under the foregoing procedure, about a higher education institution in England, Wales or Northern Ireland:

Architects Registration Board
Association of Chartered Certified Accountants
Association of International Accountants
Bar Council
British Psychological Society
Care Council for Wales
Chartered Institute of Management Accountants
Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy
Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
Department for Education and Skills
Department for Employment and Learning Northern Ireland
Department of Health
Engineering Council UK
Estyn
General Chiropractic Council
General Dental Council
General Medical Council
General Optical Council
General Osteopathic Council
General Teaching Council for Wales
Health Care Professions Council
Higher Education Funding Council for England
Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
Higher Education Statistics Agency
Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales
Law Society
National Health Service Wales
National Union of Students
National Union of Students Wales
Nursing and Midwifery Council
Office of the Independent Adjudicator
Ofsted
Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons
Royal Institute of British Architects
Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain
The Teaching Agency
University and College Union

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