

## **The monitoring process and annual return**

### **Purpose of the monitoring process**

1 Review for Specific Course Designation (RSCD) consists of periodic reviews and an annual return between reviews. The annual return is an integral part of the overall review process; it will serve as a short check on the provider's continuing management of academic standards, the management and enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities, and the information it publishes about its academic provision. The annual return will be an opportunity to reflect on developments made in the management of academic standards and quality by the provider since the previous review, and for QAA to note any matters which will be of particular interest to the team that conducts the provider's next review.

2 The monitoring process has a developmental aspect, in that it will also serve to support providers in working with the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code).<sup>1</sup> The Quality Code gives all higher education providers a shared starting point for setting, describing and assuring the academic standards of their higher education awards and programmes and the quality of the learning opportunities they provide.

3 Significant changes in circumstances, or complaints or concerns raised about the provider, may trigger a monitoring visit or full review, which would incur an additional charge (see paragraphs 16-21).

### **Overview of the monitoring process**

4 All providers should submit an annual return to QAA nine months after the previous QAA visit, or on the anniversary of the previous annual return. QAA will notify providers of the date when the annual return should be submitted.

5 QAA will analyse the annual return to check that the provider is making acceptable progress with implementing the good practice and recommendations from the previous review, and the effectiveness of the provider's actions to support continuous improvement.

6 Providers should publish an updated action plan on their website, which should be updated annually until all actions have been completed. A link to the latest review or monitoring report on QAA's website should also be provided.

### **The annual return**

7 The annual return will normally be submitted nine months after the previous QAA visit. However, QAA should be notified immediately of any material changes of circumstances (see paragraphs 16-17 for details of material changes). In subsequent years, the annual return will be due one year after the previous return.

8 The annual return should be submitted electronically to QAA. Details will be given to providers on how to do this when they are advised of the date for submission.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality)

9 The provider is required to update QAA on:

- current programmes offered, awarding bodies/organisations and student numbers
- any major strategic or material changes since the last QAA team visit (see paragraph 16)
- actions taken to address the good practice and recommendations in the action plan, or subsequent developments
- actions taken to address any recommendations in other external reports since the last full QAA review (such as awarding organisation or professional, statutory or regulatory body reports)
- progress in working with relevant external reference points to meet UK expectations for higher education
- engagement of students in quality assurance processes.

10 The annual return will take the form of a short briefing paper, together with links to key documents that provide evidence of any action taken in response to all previous good practice and recommendations (see the annual return template published separately on QAA's website).

11 In the first year following a full review, the annual return should report in detail on how the provider has effectively implemented the action plan in response to the review report. Providers should supply evidence that the actions have been implemented effectively.

12 Providers should maintain the action plan on an ongoing basis, to ensure continual monitoring, review and enhancement of their higher education provision. In subsequent years, the monitoring visit will assess the effectiveness of the provider's actions to support continuous improvement. The annual return is the main mechanism by which the provider can communicate to QAA that it is continuing to evaluate and enhance its management of academic standards and quality.

13 Providers should consider how their quality assurance policies and processes allow them to meet the UK expectations for higher education. Providers should reflect on their use of relevant external reference points, including the Quality Code, in the annual return.

14 Providers should engage students in their quality assurance processes. Students may be involved in implementing the action plan and/or in measuring the outcomes of actions taken. Providers should reflect on the effectiveness of their processes to support student engagement in the annual return.

15 The provider's annual return and supporting evidence will be read by a QAA Officer. QAA may decide that a monitoring visit or full review is required if:

- there is evidence that material changes in circumstances have occurred (see paragraphs 16-17)
- there is a lack of demonstrable progress against the published action plan
- QAA has received complaints about academic standards or quality issues that are being investigated through the concerns scheme (see paragraphs 18-21)
- there are other serious concerns about the provider's ability to effectively maintain academic standards and/or manage and enhance the quality of learning opportunities or the information the provider publishes about its learning opportunities.

## **Significant changes in circumstances**

16 Any of the following material changes should be reported to QAA in the annual return, and could trigger a monitoring visit at the provider's expense.

- An increase in total student numbers (international and/or domestic) by more than 50 places or 25 per cent, whichever is greater.
- Merger with another college or acquisition of a new branch.
- A change of 50 per cent or more on the type of provision/courses offered, including changes of awarding body/organisation.
- Change of address, acquisition of a new building, or extension of premises with an increase in capacity by 25 per cent or more.
- Change of control, ownership or significant beneficial interest which could be from a change in owners, directors or senior (see further detail in the Change of Ownership and Control section of the Technical Notes to Alternative Providers published on the BIS website in December 2013).
- Change of name.
- Change of 20 per cent or more of permanent teaching staff.
- Change of 30 per cent or more on the type of provision/course offered, including changes of awarding body/organisation.

17 Providers should note that they have similar requirements to report changes to HEFCE under the conditions and criteria of specific course designation (see BIS guidance June 2013).

## **Concerns about the standards and quality of higher education**

18 QAA investigates concerns about the standards and quality of higher education provision raised by students, staff and other people and organisations, where we think these concerns indicate serious systemic or procedural problems.

19 QAA can investigate concerns about:

- academic standards - the level of achievement a student has to reach in order to achieve a particular award or qualification
- academic quality - everything that a university or college provides to ensure its students have the best possible opportunity to achieve the required standard (this includes teaching, learning resources and academic support)
- the accuracy and completeness of the information institutions publish about their higher education provision.

20 Concerns may be followed up through a Review for Specific Course Designation or as a separate process. Further information about the concerns process can be found on the QAA website: [www.qaa.ac.uk/concerns](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/concerns).

21 If a concern is upheld, QAA will refer this to BIS, who will review next steps on a case-by-case basis.

## Annex 1: Conclusions for the Review for Specific Course Designation monitoring process

Teams will draw a conclusion on the progress that has been made by the provider against its action plan and on working with relevant external reference points, following the criteria below. Conclusions reflect the provider's continuing management of academic standards, management and enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities, and the information it produces about the learning opportunities it offers.

| <b>The provider is making acceptable progress</b>  | <b>The provider is making progress but further improvement is required</b>   | <b>The provider is not making acceptable progress</b>   |
|--|--|---|
| The provider is making acceptable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision.                                  | The provider is making some progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision, but further improvement is required.   | The provider is not making acceptable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision. |
| Most actions have led to improvement. Areas that have not been addressed fully do not have the potential to put academic standards or quality at risk.     | Areas that have not been addressed fully or effectively have the potential to put academic standards and/or quality at risk<br><b>and/or</b><br>the provider demonstrates insufficient engagement with relevant external reference points, including the Quality Code<br><b>and/or</b><br>improvement is required to ensure information produced by the provider for its intended audiences about the learning opportunities it offers is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy. | Areas that have not been addressed fully or effectively currently put academic standards and/or quality at risk.              |
| The provider demonstrates appropriate engagement with relevant external reference points, including the Quality Code.                                      |  |   |
| Information produced by the provider for its intended audiences about the learning opportunities it offers is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy. |  |   |

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