



Higher Education Review:

Second Year Findings 2014-15

PHOTO REDACTED DUE TO THIRD PARTY RIGHTS OR OTHER LEGAL ISSUES

Contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Executive summary | 1 |
| Key findings | 1 |
| About Higher Education Review | 2 |
| Judgements | 3 |
| Good practice, recommendations and affirmations | 3 |
| Follow-up actions by providers | 3 |
| The higher education providers reviewed | 4 |
| What students think of their higher education | 5 |
| Academic support and the quality of the learning experience | 6 |
| Assessment and feedback | 6 |
| Communication, including published and public information | 6 |
| Student representation and participation in quality assurance | 6 |
| Findings on all providers | 8 |
| What's working well | 8 |
| What could be improved | 9 |
| Findings on higher education institutions | 11 |
| What's working well | 11 |
| What could be improved | 13 |
| Findings on college higher education | 15 |
| What's working well | 15 |
| What could be improved | 17 |
| Findings: Voluntary subscriber to QAA | 19 |
| Impact and follow-up actions by providers | 20 |
| Conclusions | 21 |
| Appendix 1: Background information | 23 |
| The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education | 23 |
| The UK Quality Code for Higher Education | 23 |
| Appendix 2: Providers reviewed | 24 |
| Higher education institutions and designated institutions | 24 |
| Further education colleges | 24 |
| Voluntary subscriber to QAA | 26 |

Executive summary

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) reviews how providers of UK higher education maintain standards and quality. The reports of our peer reviews inform students and others about the quality of teaching and learning at UK higher education providers.

This report analyses the findings of 87 Higher Education Reviews (HER) conducted in 2014-15. HER is the review method for higher education institutions and further education colleges in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Introduced in 2013-14, HER uses the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code) as the reference point for judgements (see next section and Appendix 1).

HER plays an important role in protecting the interests of students and improving their education, providing public assurance, and guarding the international reputation of UK higher education.

Key findings

Students tell QAA's review teams that they are generally satisfied with their teaching, but areas for improvement include assessment and feedback. College higher education students tell us that dedicated higher education spaces improve their experience.

Employability and engagement with the world of work are areas of strength for the providers reviewed - nearly 20 per cent of the features of good practice relate to students' employability. Educating students in partnership with others (such as, but not limited to, validation and franchise arrangements) remains an area of relative weakness.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) performed well, with eight providers (a third of the cohort) receiving commendations. Of the 24 HEIs reviewed, only one received an unsatisfactory judgement. Areas for development included the delivery of research degrees through partnership arrangements, and the breadth of subject and supervisory expertise available to research students.

Turning to college higher education, as in 2013-14 the outcomes of HER reveal a wide performance range, with 17 out of 62 providers (27 per cent) receiving one or more unsatisfactory judgement(s) and five (eight per cent) attracting one or more commendation(s). Larger colleges tended to perform better than those with fewer than 250 higher education students.

Around 15 per cent of recommendations for improvement related to programmes leading to Pearson awards. One college received an unsatisfactory judgement connected to its management of Pearson Higher Nationals.

We are working to support college providers of higher education. Initiatives include a *College Higher Education Toolkit* to help build colleges' understanding of (and engagement with) the Quality Code.

Five providers that initially 'required improvement' took remedial action, with the result that QAA was subsequently able to amend these review judgements to 'meets UK expectations'.

For a more thorough understanding of each HER, and the learning QAA review offers the provider in question and the higher education sector in general, see the individual review reports.¹

¹ Individual provider review reports are available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports.

About Higher Education Review

Higher Education Review (HER) applies to higher education providers in England and Northern Ireland who subscribe to QAA, or who have access to funding from one of the higher education funding bodies. These providers account for the vast majority of universities and further education colleges in the two nations.

Higher Education Review (Wales) applies to higher education providers in Wales who subscribe to QAA. This accounts for all universities in Wales and a number of further education colleges.

Both methods are based upon peer review.²

Providers gain significant benefits from external review. It helps them to:

- test and benchmark their own processes
- share good practice
- support and encourage staff development
- provide a focus for improvements to the student experience.³

A provider's perspective

University College, London

The benefits of HER are illustrated by the following comments by Professor Michael Arthur, President and Provost of University College London (UCL), which relate to UCL's forthcoming review.⁴

I think we have a strong story to tell here about our commitment to excellence, but we might also want to take a reflective look at our processes to see if they are as efficient and as 'joined-up' as they could be.

If we consider the attention we paid to the Research Excellence Framework in the run up to 2014, I think we would be selling ourselves short if we did not give as much attention to this QAA review process in 2016. In my opinion, it is just as important and, in terms of reputation, the stakes are just as high.

This underlines the important role that review plays in protecting the interests of students, supporting providers developmentally, providing public assurance and guarding the international reputation of UK higher education.

² Further information about HER is available in the HER handbook, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=2963.

³ JM Consulting (2005) *The costs and benefits of external review of quality assurance in higher education*, available at: http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/5492/1/rd17_05.pdf.

⁴ Professor Michael Arthur (2015) *Provost's Long View*, available at: www.ucl.ac.uk/news/staff/staff-news/0515/28052015-provosts-long-view-preparing-for-qaa-review-a-chance-to-showcase-the-best-of-ucl.

Judgements

HER and HER (Wales) share a core element, which involves making judgements on academic standards, the quality of learning opportunities, information, and enhancement.

For academic standards, judgements are expressed as:

- meets UK expectations
- requires improvement to meet UK expectations
- does not meet UK expectations.

For the other three areas the judgements are expressed as:

- commended
- meets UK expectations
- requires improvement to meet UK expectations
- does not meet UK expectations.

Separate review judgements (known as differentiated judgements) can apply to different aspects of a provider's education. For example, a provider may receive a 'meets UK expectations' judgement for the learning opportunities available to undergraduate students, but a different judgement for the learning opportunities available to postgraduates.⁵

In England and Northern Ireland HER also includes a thematic element that reflects issues of particular relevance to the higher education sector. Providers were able to select either **employability** or **student involvement in quality assurance and enhancement** to be included in their review.

Students are at the heart of HER. Students are appointed as full members of peer review teams, and there are also opportunities for students to take part in review by contributing a student submission, meeting the review team, and working with their provider in response to review outcomes.⁶

Good practice, recommendations and affirmations

As well as making judgements, the reviews also identify areas of good practice; make recommendations; and affirm actions that have been, or are being, taken to bring about improvements.

A HER review identifies what the provider is doing well through **good practice**. QAA has developed a database of case studies⁷ that illustrate such practice in more detail.

Recommendations identify areas where improvements are needed, even where the Expectations of the Quality Code have been met.⁸

Affirmations recognise an action that is already taking place to improve a recognised weakness or inadequacy.

Follow-up actions by providers

QAA works with higher education providers to improve students' education. This includes building on what they do well and making changes or innovations to address areas of weakness.

⁵ Differentiated judgements are considered unsatisfactory judgements in the data that follow.

⁶ More information on how to get involved in quality assurance and the enhancement of higher education is available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/partners/students.

⁷ Available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/improving-higher-education/good-practice.

⁸ A full list of recommendations is available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/improving-higher-education/knowledgebase-search.

The higher education providers reviewed

This report considers the findings of reviews, conducted in the academic year 2014–15, of 87 higher education providers subject to HER that were published by QAA by 4 September 2015.⁹ This cohort includes 24 higher education institutions (HEIs)¹⁰; 62 further education colleges (FECs); and one voluntary subscriber to QAA, The Institute of Contemporary Music Performance (ICMP). These providers offer a diverse range of educational provision in terms of size, mission, institutional type and the curriculum offered.

The review reports provide a rich source of qualitative data that enable themes and issues to be identified. This promotes the improvement and enhancement of higher education, in order to protect the student interest and offer public assurance.

QAA also assures quality and standards in other higher education providers by conducting reviews and undertaking risk-based monitoring. These reviews are conducted on behalf of the Home Office and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills for, respectively, the purposes of international student recruitment and course eligibility for student support. These reviews are not included in this analysis.¹¹

Commendation for enhancement

University of Essex

The University of Essex was founded in 1964 and now has over 12,000 students studying within its academic schools and research institutes.

The University has responded positively to its previous successful review in 2008, which highlighted a number of areas of good practice. Taking action to address the recommendations of QAA's peer reviewers, the University of Essex has made further improvements to student feedback and assessment.

The University's HER was published in December 2014. It found the University of Essex had made considerable efforts to implement a new Education Strategy across its departments and partners. This strategy is embedded in planning and quality assurance, something that contributes to six features of good practice identified by the review team.

Improvements to the student experience in general, and the implementation of a new employability strategy in particular (specifically, the University's commitment to embed employer-focused learning in the curriculum), all contribute to a commendation for the enhancement of students' learning opportunities. An employability mentoring programme linking students directly with employers has provided an excellent opportunity for students to get first-hand advice and guidance about the career or industry they are interested in.

⁹ The outcomes of five FECs and one HEI reviewed in 2014–15 are not included as their reports were not published before 4 September 2015.

¹⁰ Included within this cohort are three providers (ifs University College, University Campus Suffolk and the National Film and Television School) that are eligible to receive funding from HEFCE and/or the Student Loans Company but are not HEIs. See the HEFCE register for further details: www.hefce.ac.uk/reg/register.

¹¹ Further information about these providers and risk-based monitoring is available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/en/ReviewsAndReports/Pages/Educational-Oversight-.aspx.

What students think of their higher education

Alongside being full members of HER review teams there are also opportunities for students to take part in a review by contributing a student submission to QAA's reviewers.

The themes that emerged from an earlier analysis of 75 student submissions¹² do not materially differ from the student voice in previous QAA reviews.¹³ Students remain concerned about:

- academic support and the quality of the learning experience
- assessment and feedback
- communication and published information
- student representation and participation in quality assurance.

Inclusive arrangements for student feedback

Walsall College

Walsall College is proudly vocational, with a diverse student body. Its HER report (December 2014) noted the College's good practice in 'the wide range of inclusive student feedback mechanisms which help maintain and enhance the quality of student learning opportunities.'

The College has invested effort and resources to make the student voice central to quality assurance and improvement. Its Student Voice Strategy states its ambition to deliver the best services possible for students by ensuring there are many ways in which they can help shape developments. These are promoted as '7 ways to have your say':

- a two-tier student representation system
- student surveys
- module evaluations
- a student conference
- regular meetings with the Principal
- the Compliments and Complaints Scheme
- focus groups.

The College considers the Student Voice as a cyclical process of collection, review, action, and information. Feedback from students informs an annual Student Voice action plan. The virtual learning environment (VLE) includes a Student Voice site to inform students about changes being made, and this is supplemented by information on posters and noticeboards across the College. Student satisfaction with teaching is high, at 86 per cent, with 91 per cent satisfied with the academic support they receive.

¹² Student submissions for 66 FECs and 9 HEIs were analysed, from reviews undertaken in 2013-15.

¹³ QAA (2014) *What Students Think of Their Higher Education*, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/What-Students-Think-of-Their-Higher-Education.pdf.

Academic support and the quality of the learning experience

Students told us they valued direct contact with their tutors and noted where there were disparities between courses or tutors. The quality of the learning experience was felt to be influenced not just by the quality of academic support but by the quality of other support on offer – whether provided through the students' union, student services or the provider as a whole.

Effective careers services were valued and appreciated. However, there were several cases of inadequate or unpublicised services that were underused.

Assessment and feedback

Students were generally satisfied with their teaching, and most students had opportunities to give feedback beyond the National Student Survey. Some providers offered student-led teaching awards, giving the students' perspective on what is 'good' teaching practice.

While assessment and feedback remain an issue, most students were satisfied overall. The large majority of students who fed back saw assignments becoming more challenging as they progressed, and they generally knew what was expected of them through marking criteria.

Communication, including published and public information

Students were, on the whole, positive about library facilities and learning resources and the staff that managed them. However, the commonest theme for recommendations was for further investment in these areas.

VLEs were commonly used to communicate with students in colleges. This tended to work well, but there was concern that they may not always be used consistently by staff. Part-time students told us that a reliable VLE was essential.

Timetabling was rarely commented on, but when this did happen it was to express students' wish for timetables to be issued earlier. This would help prospective students – who may have caring and other responsibilities – to plan ahead.

Student representation and participation in quality assurance

The submissions included a wide variety of representation models: from the large students' union structures of universities to the higher education or course representatives of the smaller colleges. It is mainly through these representative forums that students are involved in their institution's quality assurance.

The submissions provided evidence that students felt listened to, but that there were variations in the extent to which their voice was acted on.

Several submissions mentioned 'you asked, we acted' campaigns. Providers gave many examples of changes resulting from student feedback, including:

- rewriting an unpopular module
- co-preparation of syllabuses
- student representatives having more responsibility for cross-institutional projects
- a curriculum innovation programme.

Within college higher education, students report a trend towards dedicated higher education resources and spaces. Where that is not the case the student submission often includes it as a recommendation. Students with a dedicated higher education centre highlight how this has improved their experience.

Linking academic and employability skills

South Devon College

South Devon College is a medium-sized general further education college, which was the first such college to be reaccruited with Investors in People Gold status in 2014. Its HER in December 2014 resulted in two commendations and eight features of good practice, including 'initiatives which link academic and employability skills through curriculum design and delivery'.

South Devon is a HEFCE 'cold spot', signifying low participation in higher education. South Devon College is committed to working with local businesses to raise participation, retain local talent, and develop a graduate economy. The College builds close working relationships with local employers, including through focus groups and surveys, and involves them in programme design, approval and delivery.

Many students arrive through vocational entry routes, and pre-entry support is provided for them. This includes a 'Step-up to HE' summer programme and an extended two-week induction programme offering a range of Academic Skills development workshops.

Once enrolled, students have access to support from two officers dedicated to the development of academic and information-related skills, through drop-in sessions.

Some assessment is done through 'real-life' activities supported through links in industry. The Research Showcase, inaugurated in 2013-14, brings together students, academic staff and businesses to present and discuss work-relevant research activity.

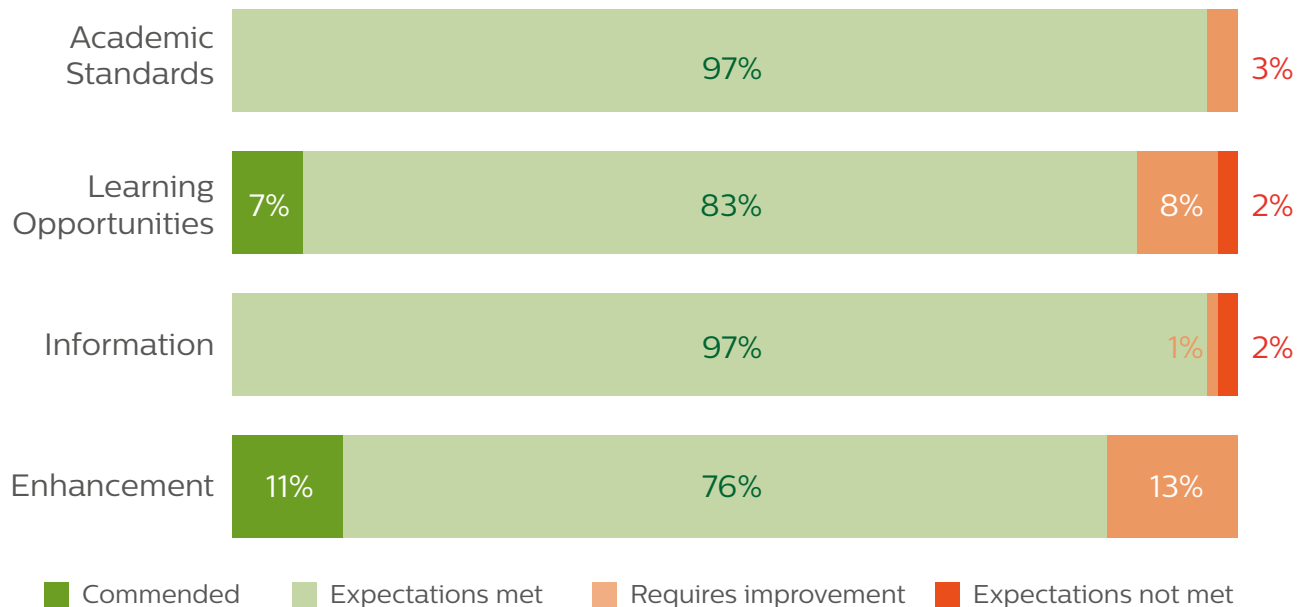
Enhancement initiatives include the competitive Student Research and Employability Scholarships, worth up to £1,000, awarded to final-year students to enhance their academic and/or employability prospects. Successful students will present their achievements at the Research Showcase. Another initiative, the Graduate Training Assistant programme, offers workshop space, materials and resources to creative arts graduates who, in return, support undergraduates with aspects of their practical work.

Key success factors for the good practice include the maintenance of close and current contacts with employers. Student feedback on the Research and Practice modules, combined with an annual work-based learning report, lead to ongoing enhancement.

Findings on all providers

2014-15

Total providers 87



Around 80 per cent of reviews resulted in positive outcomes overall. This section provides an analysis of overall themes and issues from the reviews as a whole. The subsequent sections provide further analysis disaggregated by provider type.

What's working well

A strategic commitment to (and investment in) students' employability comes across clearly in the reviews. Nearly 20 per cent of the good practice related to developing students' employability, relationships with employers and the world of work. There are many examples of vocationally relevant programmes that have benefited from employers being actively involved in the development and delivery of the curriculum. Examples include:

- formally engaging employers in quality assurance procedures
- developing programmes that meet the needs of industry - for example, the construction and pharmaceutical industries and employers such as JCB, Siemens and British Engines
- business development units and other commercial initiatives
- a paid internship or a free postgraduate course for any graduate not in graduate-level employment
- industry professionals who review and comment on the work of each student
- professional networking events
- monitoring research students' employability rates.

While careers services offer advice and guidance, skills development and employment opportunities, some providers report that the uptake of these services can be variable. Yet, on the whole, the world of work is well embedded in students' education, something that is particularly evident in providers that chose the employability theme.

What could be improved

Previous review cycles¹⁴ have identified weaknesses in providers' management of the education offered by their partners.

Managing higher education provision with others is the subject of *Chapter B10* of the Quality Code. *Chapter B10* includes (but is not limited to) joint supervision of research degrees; distance learning and online delivery; franchised programmes and validation arrangements. This chapter makes clear that delivering higher education with and through other organisations takes care, commitment and time. Partnerships are strengthened by a careful approach to collaboration, with both sides exercising due diligence.

The 2014-15 reviews capture the challenges and risks of managing partnerships in general, and within a more competitive environment in particular. While 36 recommendations directly relate to *Chapter B10*, findings in relation to other areas of the Quality Code also have implications for how effectively providers' manage their partnerships. To illustrate this:

- the transition to a new validating partner at Somerset College of Arts affected the student experience
- Nottingham Trent University was recommended to retain responsibility for the appointment and function of external examiners in its validated courses
- Greenwich Community College's main challenge was the end of the long-standing partnership with the University of Greenwich
- the University of South Wales was recommended to increase its scrutiny of overseas partners
- Leeds Trinity University's accreditation agreement with the University of Leeds gave insufficient detail on how students would be safeguarded if the agreement was terminated.

There was also one relevant 'differentiated judgement'. Distance learning programmes required improvement at South and City College Birmingham, whereas learning opportunities for their on-campus provision met UK expectations.

Six HEIs, or a quarter of those reviewed, received recommendations relating to transnational education. Admissions issues, sharing external examiners' reports with students and appropriate diligence with overseas partners are among the themes identified by reviewers. To illustrate this, Coventry University's review found that a dual award with an overseas partner that relied on reputation, rather than due diligence, to mitigate risk and meet UK expectations. The review team recommended that due diligence is always completed to protect students and the university.

¹⁴ See: www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication/?PubID=2882 and www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Findings-From-IRENI-2011-2013.pdf.

Staff networks for promoting effective practice

University of Wolverhampton

Based across campuses in the West Midlands and Shropshire, the University has a vision to promote social mobility and employability for its diverse student population. Its HER of February 2015 noted good practice in the 'embedded culture of enhancement, which fosters the creation of staff networks to promote the exchange and dissemination of effective practice'.

A restructuring has led to the establishment of four faculties in the University's main traditional areas of expertise: the arts, the social sciences, engineering, and education. A 'University of Opportunity Framework' has provided a blueprint for systematic approaches to student support. A distinction is made between central and distributed support, with the aim of placing resources at point of need (within faculties) while also creating space for cross-faculty and cross-University collaboration and opportunities for staff development.

All academic staff are expected to take postgraduate certificates (PGCEs) in Academic Practice and become fellows of the Higher Education Academy. This is also encouraged for support staff.

Staff networking is facilitated through this structure and through key academic and support roles. Each faculty has an Associate Dean; Principal Lecturers with responsibility for learning and teaching, quality management, and the student experience; a professor of pedagogical research; and 10 full-time Graduate Teaching Assistants dedicated to enhancing student learning support and increasing student engagement.

Faculty teams meet regularly to discuss aspects of learning and teaching, while staff with responsibility for quality management liaise across faculties through the University Quality Community of Practice. Similarly, a cross-faculty network led by the office of the Dean of Students promotes enhancement of the student experience.

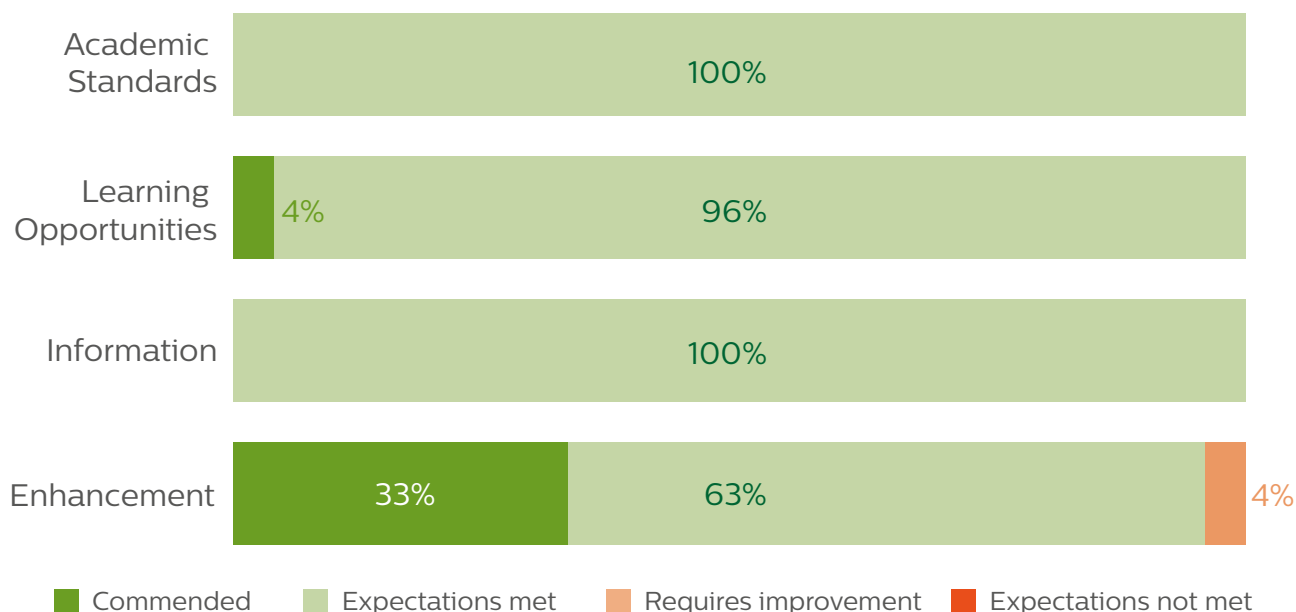
Key staff from the faculties and corporate services receive fortnightly briefings and regular challenge events to promote systematic enhancement and the sharing of good practice.

Course leaders across the University also meet regularly through a dedicated group, giving them the opportunity to share innovations in course development and delivery. This work is supported by an annual course leader conference, six staff development days and an annual two-day summit.

Findings on higher education institutions

2014-15

Total higher education institutions 24



What's working well

Eight higher education institutions (HEIs) - a third of the total reviewed - received commendations for enhancement: De Montfort and Bedfordshire universities; the Royal Veterinary College and Goldsmiths' College; and the universities of Essex, Southampton, Wolverhampton and Gloucestershire. The National Film and Television School also received a commendation for learning opportunities. With the exception of St Mary's University (considered later), every HEI met UK expectations for all four judgement areas.

The enhancement commendations capture a range of excellent practice that systematically improves the student experience. Examples reflect a broad and embedded culture of enhancement, a strategic commitment to employability, a systematic approach to raising student achievement and aspiration, and the extensive use of external expertise across all aspects of standards and quality.

The National Film and Television School's commendation for learning opportunities is reflected in the following commentary from its report:

No recommendations were made in this judgement area. Five features of good practice were identified, covering four of the 10 applicable Expectations in this judgement area, and five affirmations were made to actions the School is already taking to improve provision offered to students.

Good practice was most frequently found in learning and teaching (23 features of good practice). The following examples illustrate the range of findings:

- courses at Rose Bruford College embed professional practice through placements, internships and practice-based learning with specialist practitioners
- the University of Southampton's Welcome Project provides a consistent set of information for all new students, which ensures a smoother transition and induction into higher education
- individualised support at the London Business School enables students to develop as independent learners and enhance their capacity for analytical and creative thinking
- research-informed teaching and learning projects enhance the student experience at Nottingham Trent University.

Students as leaders of enhancement

University of Southampton

In its HER of February 2015, the University of Southampton demonstrated good practice in 'the use of students to lead enhancement projects, which has a demonstrable impact on both staff practice and the student experience'.

Its Student Champions scheme is part of a wider initiative to support student development.

There are four teams of Student Champions focusing on:

- innovation and digital literacy in the curriculum (iChamps)
- feedback and assessment (Feedback Champs)
- student development opportunities (OPUS Champs)
- enterprise (eChamps).

Every faculty is working with Champions from each of these four teams, which are coordinated by a senior academic staff member with relevant expertise. The initiative is overseen by a steering group chaired by the Associate Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education) and has been recognised by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) as part of its strategic enhancement programme for Engaged Student Learning.

Student Champions work in partnership with academic staff to:

- guide and support innovation and enhancement
- make their peers more aware of learning and development opportunities within and alongside the curriculum
- make it easier to share good practice and engage with students.

Student Champions are encouraged to share and take ownership of their ideas. They are asked to regularly reflect on what they are gaining from the role and the impact they feel they are making:

Being an iChamp has allowed me to get involved in innovative and engaging projects... It has boosted my confidence, communication and technological skills, and I've been given a unique insight into the UK university education system which has allowed me to make a change at my own university.

What could be improved

Within otherwise satisfactory judgements, six (or a quarter) of the HEIs received moderate or serious risk ratings against some of the Expectations of the Quality Code. To illustrate this:

- programme monitoring at the London Business School was not sufficiently robust to ensure student learning opportunities were effectively monitored
- while the University of Portsmouth met the enabling student development and achievement Expectation overall, provision for combined honours students was not always of the same quality as for single honours students
- ifs University College received four moderate risk ratings.

St Mary's University was the only HEI to receive a 'requires improvement' judgement (for enhancement). There was some evidence of enhancement at a local level but this did not link up at University level.

Research degrees and the research environment

Two HEIs were reviewed in 2013-14. In an otherwise successful review, the University of Bradford received a 'requires improvement' judgement for research students' learning opportunities, while Leeds Beckett University's review team in 2013-14 affirmed work in hand to enhance the research environment.

In 2014-15 the recommendations relating to research degrees covered:

- research degrees delivered in partnership with others (Coventry University, University of Essex)
- the need to clarify, in academic regulations, the contribution that the taught element makes to the award of a master's by research or of a professional doctorate (University of South Wales)
- the breadth of subject and supervisory expertise (University Campus Suffolk)
- the need to collect and respond to feedback from research students (London Business School)
- the need for individuals involved in the review of a student's progress to a PhD to be independent of their research supervisors (University of Southampton)
- the introduction of annual review of student performance data for research degree programmes (Royal Veterinary College).

Reviewers also affirmed action being taken by Nottingham Trent University (NTU) to ensure research students' performance was consistent at partner institutions. This followed a review, led by the University, of programmes leading to its research awards at collaborative partners. While the research degrees Expectation was met, NTU received a moderate risk rating because of weaknesses in its partnership arrangements. The universities of South Wales, Bedfordshire and Southampton also received moderate risk ratings for *Chapter B11: Research Degrees*.

Set against these recommendations, there were seven features of good practice in relation to research degrees and the research environment. Reviewers praised the high quality research environment at several HEIs, including the Royal Veterinary College and the universities of Essex and Kent. University of Kent doctoral students also have the opportunity to study in Europe: students met by the review team commented on the richness that this brought to their experience. The integrated approach to student support was also praised at the Royal Veterinary College.

QAA review improving research students' experience

De Montfort University

Since QAA's last review in 2009, De Montfort University (DMU) has made significant changes to the management of research degree programmes and support for research students.

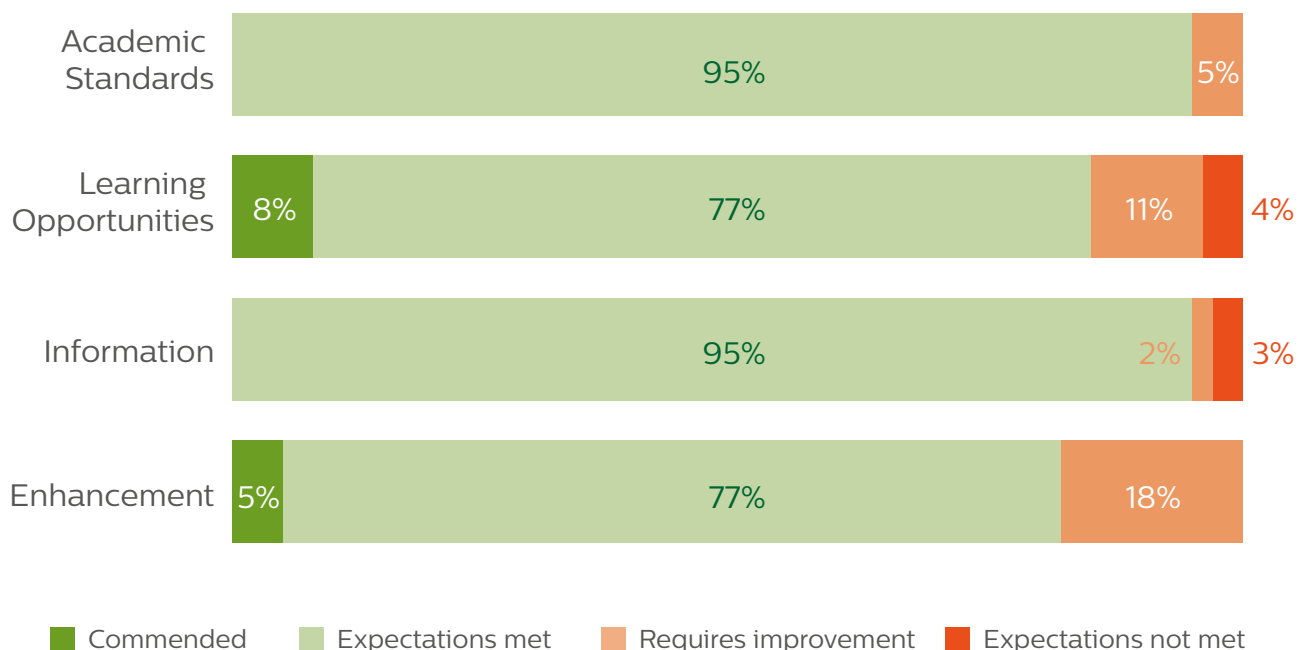
The establishment of the Graduate School, followed by the relocation of faculty-based research degree administrative staff to the Graduate School Office, has significantly changed the landscape for research degree provision and been instrumental in the University's response to the recommendations of the last review.

The University carried out a review of the Graduate School in 2013 with external input and is working to implement the recommendations from its report. QAA reviewers find that 'It is evident that DMU has given increased priority to enhancing the quality of its research degree provision in response to both the previous QAA review, which resulted in recommendations in this area, and in response to the outcomes of its own reviews and surveys.'

Findings on college higher education

2014-15

Total further education colleges 62



What's working well

Five college higher education providers (or eight per cent of the cohort) received one or more commended judgements in a single review, compared with 23 per cent in 2013-14. They are:

- Derby College (learning opportunities and enhancement)
- Hugh Baird College (learning opportunities and enhancement)
- South Devon College (learning opportunities and enhancement)
- Hereford College of Arts (learning opportunities only)
- Walsall College (learning opportunities only).

In the two years of HER only colleges have received more than one commendation. Characteristics common to all college providers commended under HER include: a strategic approach to higher education; integration or coordination of teaching and student support services; partnership with students, employers and awarding bodies; strategic and holistic approaches to managing and enhancing higher education provision; and evidence of some dedicated higher education systems and processes, for example for staff development, scholarship, professional engagement and research.

Nearly 60 per cent of the colleges reviewed in 2014-15 received more than one feature of good practice. The most common area was the learning opportunities judgement (over a quarter of all good practice) and, within this, the Expectations of *Chapter B3: Learning and Teaching* and *Chapter B4: Enabling Student Development and Achievement*.

The following examples illustrate the range of findings:

- Tameside College's responsiveness to the needs of part-time students, thereby facilitating their progression and achievement
- the academic and pastoral support that enhances the learning experience and achievement for students at Lancaster and Morecombe College
- Walsall College's positive response to the recommendations and good practice from its previous QAA review (there are no actions outstanding and some the areas attracting recommendations have been turned into strengths)
- Derby College's rigorous internal programme design and monitoring, which enables the College to design programmes to meet the needs of learners and local, regional and national employers (such as JCB and Rolls Royce)
- Hereford College of Arts' features of good practice, which are 'cultural as well as organisational, permeating the ethos as well as the management of higher education'
- Hugh Baird College's strategic approach to enhancement, which is embedded throughout the College.

The learner transition to higher education

Myerscough College

Myerscough College is one of the largest UK colleges providing higher education in land-based and sports subjects. Its review of May 2014 noted its good practice in 'the comprehensive support for learners in their transition to higher education.'

The College has invested in an Applicant Information Officer specifically to provide a direct point of contact during the application cycle. New students receive extensive information and advice through a range of mechanisms. The VLE in particular provides a one-stop shop for details about enrolment and practicalities, academic information, profiles of tutors, news stories and other support materials. Students are thus encouraged to develop an early habit of using the VLE.

An extended induction period combines both centrally organised and subject-specific activities. Tutors tailor content for each student group, which includes seminars on study skills, personal development, and use of digital resources. There is also a 'My Mentor' scheme offering peer-to-peer support and accredited by the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation.

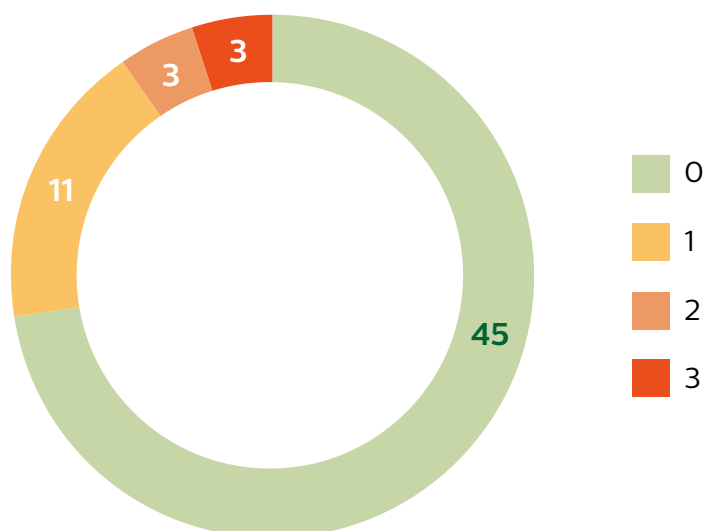
Centrally organised induction activities take place at the Higher Education Centre, fostering a shared identity for the College's higher education students. At subject level, the induction includes a field study trip for each group and an early introduction to research activities in their subject area.

Student and staff representatives from the awarding university are in attendance at induction events to promote awareness of the facilities the university provides; students are also offered a tour to visit the university library and learn about other key resources, and are invited to university 'welcome events'.

Key strengths of this system include the provision of timely and accessible information and the effective use of technology and dedicated staff resources.

In the 2014 student induction survey, 97 per cent of students stated that following induction they felt more confident about their course and 98 per cent that they knew where to get help if they needed it.

Number of unsatisfactory judgements received by further education colleges



What could be improved

Set against the good practice and commendations, as in 2013-14 the outcomes of HER indicate a wide performance range, with 17 colleges (27 per cent) receiving one or more unsatisfactory judgement(s). Unsatisfactory judgements were commonest in the area of enhancement, followed by quality of learning opportunities, information, and academic standards (in that order). Three colleges received unsatisfactory judgements in three out of four judgement areas. Three others received two unsatisfactory judgements.

The number of recommendations per provider ranged from 13 (Wirral Metropolitan College) to zero (Derby College). Operational approaches to students' learning - reflected in weak academic infrastructures that are more likely to reflect the norms and expectations associated with Level 3 study - typify providers with large volumes of recommendations and/or one or more unsatisfactory judgement(s).

Within the learning opportunities judgement colleges generally performed poorly against *Chapter B5: Student Engagement* and *Chapter B8: Programme Monitoring and Review*. The enhancement judgement also remains an area of weakness. These three areas will be considered in turn.

Student engagement, programme monitoring and review

Student engagement recommendations (some 15 per cent of learning opportunities recommendations) centre mainly on the need to ensure that formal systems of student engagement exist and are accessible to higher education students. City of Bristol College (for example) did not have an agreed and understood definition of student engagement; had gaps in student feedback and student participation; and had quality systems that were not fully effective. Sunderland Sixth Form College was recommended to establish formal processes to engage students as partners in the management of learning opportunities.

While programme monitoring recommendations tend to mirror those relating to *Chapter B5* (particularly the need to formalise processes) they extend beyond this. Issues raised included the need to involve employers in programme review; the need to ensure that each course addresses expectations for academic standards, quality and enhancement; and the need to support the representation of students on internal validation panels.

Enhancement

Fewer colleges received unsatisfactory judgements for enhancement in 2014-15 than in 2013-14 (18 per cent compared with nearly 30 per cent).

Where an unsatisfactory judgement was received the review team found that the lack of a strategic approach to higher education was a contributory factor. At South Downs College (to illustrate this) there is no formal consideration of the distinctive requirements of higher education.

The 47 enhancement recommendations received are variations on the need to:

- formalise informal processes to systematically enhance students' learning
- adhere to the Quality Code's definition of enhancement in higher education - 'systematically improving the quality of provision and the ways in which students' learning is supported' (rather than applying sixth-form and college norms and reference points to higher-level learning)
- monitor the impact of enhancement initiatives.

Programmes leading to Pearson Higher Nationals

There was one differentiated judgement relating to courses leading to awards validated by Pearson Education Ltd. Southampton City College's academic standards for programmes leading to Middlesex University awards met UK expectations, while the College's academic standards for programmes leading to Pearson qualifications required improvement. The review team found there was a lack of an effective and consistent approach to assessment across the College's Higher National provision.

Across college higher education, Pearson-awarded qualifications were the focus of around 15 per cent of recommendations. In response to this we have published guidance for providers without degree awarding powers and for their awarding organisations.¹⁵ The guidance helps providers distinguish between their own, and their awarding bodies', management responsibilities (for example in relation to complaints and appeals or to periodic review).

¹⁵ The checklist is available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/en/AboutUs/Documents/Responsibilities-Checklist-Pearson.pdf.

Findings: Voluntary subscriber to QAA

Publicly funded HEIs and FECs providing higher education that is directly funded by HEFCE are required to subscribe to QAA. Non-publicly funded bodies that hold renewable UK degree-awarding powers are also required to subscribe to QAA.

Outside these categories, one voluntary subscriber was reviewed through HER in 2014-15. The Institute of Contemporary Music Performance (ICMP) provides courses in contemporary music, such as a BMus (Hons) in Popular Music Performance validated by the University of East London. In a positive review overall, reviewers identified five features of good practice and made two recommendations for improvement. One was for the Institute to periodically review the performance of its Pearson validated programmes, in line with those validated by its university partners.

Impact and follow-up actions by providers

Regardless of the outcome of the review, all providers undergoing HER must publish an action plan setting out how they will respond to the recommendations (and so improve students' education).

Where the judgements are unsatisfactory, the provider must satisfy the review team that it has implemented the recommendations from the review within 12 months of the publication of the review report.

Once the review team is satisfied that remedial action has been carried out, the QAA Board decides whether a judgement can be amended to 'meets UK expectations'.

In 2014-15 Alton College, Aylesbury College, Cambridge Regional College and Chichester College had previously unsatisfactory judgements overturned following action by the provider. Henley College Coventry had its judgement on the quality of information amended to 'meets UK expectations', but its other unsatisfactory judgement remains: the enhancement of learning opportunities still requires improvement. The college will now face a full QAA re-review.

The case study illustrates the impact of QAA review through implementation of an action plan.

QAA review enhances students' learning opportunities

Aylesbury College

Aylesbury College underwent a HER review in March 2014. In an otherwise successful review, it also received a judgement of 'requires improvement' for the enhancement of student learning opportunities.

Unsatisfactory judgements are formally followed up by QAA. The College was required to produce an action plan in September 2014 setting out how it intended to address the recommendations.

A follow-up visit by QAA confirmed that the recommendations related to the enhancement opportunities judgement had been successfully addressed. Among the changes put in place by the College as a direct result of the review are:

- improving students' access to Buckinghamshire New University's VLE
- up-to-date library resources and bespoke library inductions - staff and students can now make full and effective use of the library.

The QAA Board accepted the team's recommendation to formally amend the judgement: the enhancement of learning opportunities at Aylesbury College now meets UK expectations.

Conclusions

Unlike in 2013-14, when only two universities were reviewed, 24 HEIs were reviewed in 2014-15. That remains a relatively small cohort, but it is clear that:

- commendations were received by a third of HEIs reviewed
- academic standards, the learning experience and the provision of information are being well managed among HEIs
- with the exception of St Mary's University, these are successful reviews with recommendations that aim to improve the student experience.

While this allows us to conclude that HEIs perform well in HER, further reviews in 2015-16 will provide a more secure basis for any wider conclusions.

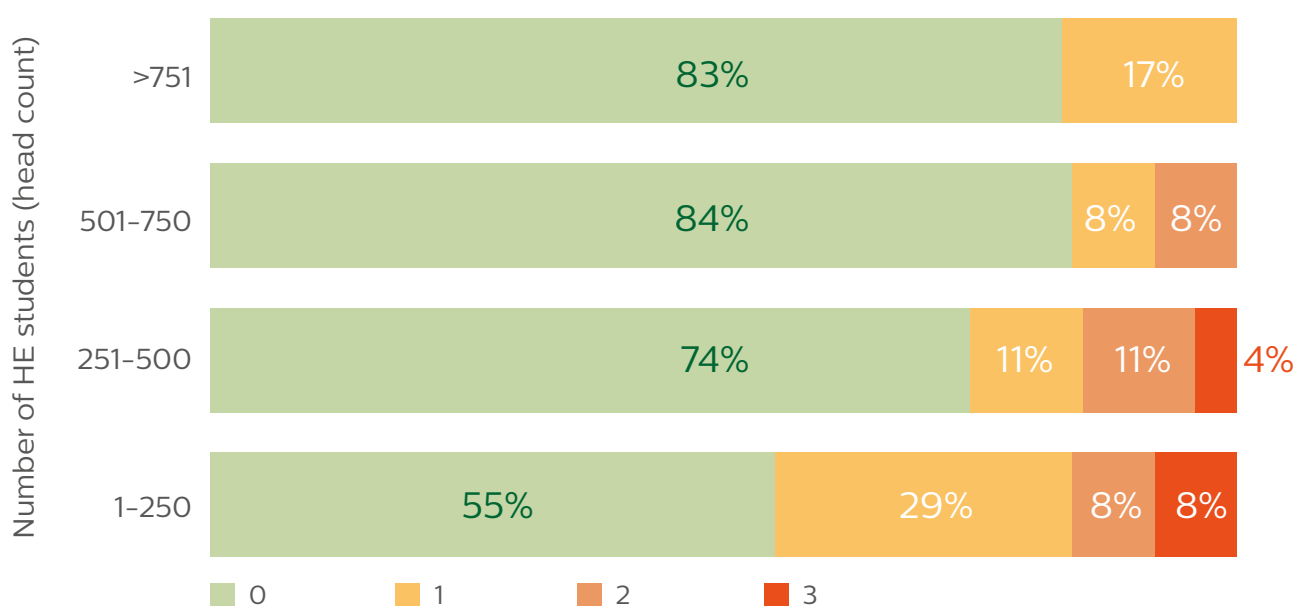
The 62 further education colleges reviewed in 2014-15, combined with the earlier cohort of 45 colleges reviewed in 2013-14, provide a large enough sample to enable us to understand the effect of a college-based setting on quality and standards and the student experience.

On the one hand, just over 70 per cent of colleges reviewed in 2014-15 received satisfactory outcomes and eight per cent received more than one commendation. As in 2013-14, the reviews find that, at its best, college higher education continues to provide a learning experience that exceeds UK expectations.

Yet, as in 2013-14, around 30 per cent of colleges reviewed received one or more unsatisfactory judgement(s) in at least one area. Common themes and issues included a limited engagement with, or understanding of, the Quality Code or of what constitutes a higher education ethos. Although further education dominates colleges' missions (as, indeed, is quite appropriate when that is the main focus of their business), it is important for their higher education operations to be embedded in their strategies, governance and management.

The chart below shows that there is some relationship between a college's HER outcome and its volume of higher education students: as the size of provision increases there is, on average, some improvement in HER outcomes. While there are examples of both large and small providers that do gain good or satisfactory outcomes from HER review, those that are struggling are more likely to have fewer students.

Percentage of providers receiving 1, 2 or 3 unsatisfactory judgements, by size of provision



The reviews also give an early indication about the impact of a more competitive policy environment. While a number of colleges are facing recruitment challenges the market also allows successful colleges to grow: Derby College, for example, has seen student numbers increase, as has Hugh Baird College.

Clearly, some college higher education providers need to improve their performance if they are to meet UK expectations. This is important as behind the reviews and the data there are students who are entitled to excellent teaching and a great student experience. In this context, we are supporting and developing college higher education in the following ways:

- we are working with the Association of Colleges (AoC) to embed a culture of scholarship in further education colleges¹⁶
- our Quality Enhancement Network helps subscribers to learn from each other and the higher education sector about what works well (so helping to improve the student experience)
- we have published a College Higher Education Toolkit¹⁷ to help build colleges' understanding of (and engagement with) the Quality Code¹⁸
- we have engaged with colleges across England to build their capacity and capability in relation to the enhancement judgement.

Alongside this support and development, our reviews serve to improve teaching and the wider student experience through sharing best practice; provide a focus for staff development; and help providers test and benchmark their own quality processes.

¹⁶ Further details are available at: www.aoc.co.uk/news/the-aocchefce-scholarship-catalyst-fund-project-now-and-running.

¹⁷ Available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/guidance-for-colleges

¹⁸ QAA (2015) *College Higher Education Toolkit: Engaging with the UK Quality Code for Higher Education*, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/College-Higher-Education-Toolkit-0515.pdf.

Appendix 1: Background information

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is the independent agency dedicated to safeguarding standards and improving the quality of UK higher education wherever it is delivered around the world. We act in the public interest for the benefit of students, and support universities and colleges in providing the best possible student learning experience. We publish reports on higher education providers,¹⁹ the Quality Code, and other guidance.

The UK Quality Code for Higher Education

QAA owns, maintains and publishes the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code), which has been developed with the higher education community to give all providers a shared starting point for setting and maintaining academic standards, assuring and enhancing academic quality, and providing public information about their programmes. It ensures that higher education is comparable and consistent at a threshold level across the UK.

QAA review teams use the Quality Code as a benchmark for judging whether a higher education provider meets UK expectations for the core elements of the review. A judgement that a provider 'does not meet' or 'requires improvement to meet' UK expectations for academic standards (for example) means that the provider is deemed to have failed the review. In arriving at their judgements for the core elements of the review, the review teams also judge whether each individual expectation of the Quality Code is met or not met, and whether the associated risk in this area is low, moderate or serious.

The Quality Code is grouped into three parts, with each of these subdivided into chapters covering specific themes.²⁰ We refer to the latest chapter titles of the Quality Code throughout this report.

¹⁹ Review reports are available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports.

²⁰ A full list of all parts and chapters can be found at: www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code.

Appendix 2: Providers reviewed*

Higher education institutions

- 1 Aston University
- 2 Coventry University
- 3 De Montfort University
- 4 Goldsmiths' College
- 5 ifs University College
- 6 Leeds Trinity University
- 7 Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts
- 8 London Business School
- 9 National Film and Television School (The)
- 10 Nottingham Trent University
- 11 Rose Bruford College of Theatre and Performance Ltd
- 12 Royal Veterinary College (The)
- 13 St Mary's University, Twickenham
- 14 University Campus Suffolk
- 15 University of Bedfordshire
- 16 University of Central Lancashire
- 17 University of Essex
- 18 University of Gloucestershire
- 19 University of Greenwich
- 20 University of Kent (The)
- 21 University of Portsmouth
- 22 University of South Wales
- 23 University of Southampton (The)
- 24 University of Wolverhampton (The)

Further education colleges

- 1 Amersham & Wycombe College
- 2 Ashton Sixth Form College
- 3 Barking and Dagenham College
- 4 Barnet and Southgate College
- 5 Basingstoke College of Technology
- 6 Bexley College
- 7 Birkenhead Sixth Form College
- 8 Bishop Burton College
- 9 Blackburn College
- 10 Bournville College

- 11 Bracknell and Wokingham College
- 12 Brooksby Melton College
- 13 Burnley College
- 14 Cambridge Regional College
- 15 City College Coventry
- 16 City College Norwich
- 17 City College Plymouth
- 18 City of Bristol College
- 19 Derby College
- 20 East Berkshire College
- 21 East Durham College
- 22 Exeter College
- 23 Fareham College
- 24 Greenwich Community College
- 25 Guildford College of Further and Higher Education
- 26 Hackney Community College
- 27 Hadlow College
- 28 Hartlepool Sixth Form College
- 29 Hereford College of Arts
- 30 Hertford Regional College
- 31 Highbury College Portsmouth
- 32 Hugh Baird College
- 33 Kendal College
- 34 Kensington and Chelsea College
- 35 Kidderminster College
- 36 Knowsley Community College
- 37 Lancaster and Morecambe College
- 38 Leeds College of Building
- 39 LeSoCo
- 40 Lincoln College
- 41 New College Swindon
- 42 New College, Telford
- 43 North West Kent College of Technology
- 44 Petroc
- 45 Salford City College
- 46 Somerset College of Arts and Technology
- 47 South & City College Birmingham
- 48 South Devon College
- 49 South Downs College

- 50 South Leicestershire College
- 51 South Thames College
- 52 Southampton City College
- 53 St Vincent College
- 54 Tameside College
- 55 College of North West London
- 56 College of West Anglia (The)
- 57 Sheffield College (The)
- 58 Tyne Metropolitan College
- 59 Vision West Nottinghamshire College
- 60 Walsall College
- 61 Westminster Kingsway College
- 62 Wirral Metropolitan College

Voluntary subscriber to QAA

- 1 The Institute of Contemporary Music Performance

* Includes providers subject to HER with reports published by QAA before 4 September 2015.

QAA 1354 - Oct 2015

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2015
Southgate House, Southgate Street, Gloucester GL1 1UB

Tel: 01452 557 000
Email: enquiries@qaa.ac.uk
Website: www.qaa.ac.uk

Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786