

## Cylchlythyr | Circular

# Changes to external quality assurance reviews in 2021/22 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic

**Date:** 15 February 2021  
**Reference:** W21/05HE  
**To:** Heads of higher education institutions in Wales  
Principals of directly-funded further education colleges in Wales  
Governing bodies of regulated institutions  
**Response by:** No response required  
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This circular provides a summary of changes to external quality assurance review requirements in 2021/22 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

If you require this document in an alternative accessible format, please email [info@hefcw.ac.uk](mailto:info@hefcw.ac.uk).



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## Introduction

1. This circular provides a summary of changes to external quality assurance review requirements in 2021/22 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

## Background

2. The Covid-19 pandemic has caused substantial disruption in regulated institutions in Wales from March 2020.
3. A number of Welsh institutions were scheduled to commission external quality assurance reviews in 2020/21 and 2021/22. Two institutions scheduled for review in 2019/20 had their reviews deferred to 2020/21 as a result of the pandemic. Other institutions scheduled for review in 2020/21 asked that the reviews be deferred to 2021/22 to enable them to accommodate the additional workload as a result of Covid-19. Subsequently we were approached by institutions due to be reviewed in 2021/22 with a request that we reconsider the timing and scope of reviews, to take further account of the disruption caused by the pandemic.

## Proposals

4. HEFCW considered the request and developed proposals to take account of the request from institutions regarding the timing and scope of reviews. We proposed that:
  - All institutions should complete their review within a maximum seven year interval;
  - For 2021/22 only, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) would engage separately with institutions regarding quality enhancement, and therefore the scope of the reviews in this year would be reduced to focus solely on quality assurance.

## Consultation

5. We consulted on these changes with institutions and their governing bodies. We received six responses. Respondents are listed at **Annex A**.
6. Five respondents agreed with the proposal to amend the review method for one year. One respondent identified a concern that decoupling enhancement from assurance might disestablish the premise of the Quality Enhancement Review; identified issues around consistency and credibility should a different team carry out the enhancement work; and noted a risk of the process becoming purely transactional, rather than a genuine vehicle for institutional and sector enhancement. A number of respondents also raised concerns that any parallel engagement on enhancement should not generate a disproportionate workload.

7. We recognise the concerns raised and have engaged with the QAA and Universities Wales regarding maintaining the explicit link between the reduced scope of quality assurance reviews in 2021/22 and the parallel quality engagement processes.
8. One response identified the importance of seeking feedback from students regarding the changes. We confirm that we have engaged with NUS Wales regarding the proposals, both via the consultation, and through their role as Member of our Quality Assessment Committee, and Observer on our Council.
9. Respondents noted the importance of the revised process being sufficiently robust to withstand external scrutiny and give stakeholders continuing confidence in institutions' abilities to deliver a high quality academic experience for students and protect academic standards, together with the need for parity between institutions which had undergone reviews in the current cycle. It is inevitable that the pandemic has impacted on reviews in Wales – for example, two reviews were deferred from 2019/20 to 2021/22 and were carried out virtually. HEFCW has considered this with our Quality Assessment Committee, and concluded that, as the judgements remained consistent between in person and virtual reviews, and will be consistent in the reduced scope review, there is sufficient assurance for stakeholders that institutions have been accountable to common standards.
10. One respondent noted the importance of ensuring that the revised process continued to meet the Home Office requirements for Educational Oversight, in particular recognising that some institutions now have, or will have, review cycles of seven years rather than six. We have liaised with the Home Office, who have confirmed that they are content with our operation of Educational Oversight in light of the pandemic, and the adaptations that we are making in response. The Home Office has set out [concessions](#) to provide further reassurance to sponsors, which includes recognition that some reviews will have been delayed.

### **Changes to external quality assurance review requirements**

11. In response to the consultation, we will therefore amend the review requirements for 2021/22 as set out below. These amendments will be in place for that year only, although we will keep them under review.
12. If institutions would prefer not to benefit from the adjustments to the method for 2021/22 then they should liaise with the QAA, copied to HEFCW, to confirm this.

#### Review interval

13. We have agreed that all institutions should complete their review within a maximum 7 year review interval. Once the current cycle of reviews has

been completed we will consider the timings and cycle with the QAA, and redistribute reviews in order to ensure that clustering across the sector is reduced. This may mean that for some institutions the next review interval may be shorter than 6 years.

14. Concurrently we plan to work with the QAA to ensure that institutions are encouraged to focus their review preparation activity effectively, to minimise any burden of over-preparation.

#### Review scope

15. The visits will be streamlined to focus on HEFCW's statutory responsibilities. This means that there will be scope for a shorter visit, potentially smaller review teams, and potentially fewer meetings.
16. There will be no reported outcomes or recommendations regarding quality enhancement of the student experience and of learning and teaching in 2021/22.
17. The QAA will produce an addendum to the review handbook to set out the adaptations to be made. They will cover these in a briefing for institutions, which will enable QAA to present the revised model and discuss any adaptations necessary.
18. Institutions will need to consider how to scale down their self-evaluation documents as appropriate. This provides an opportunity for institutions collectively and separately to consider how they can minimise burden of review preparation, by ensuring the focus is on business as usual, rather than on 'gold-plating.'

#### Quality enhancement

19. We will continue to maintain a focus on quality enhancement within the Quality Assessment Framework.
20. In order to ensure that the focus on enhancement as a key priority in Wales is maintained, this area will form part of the regular discussions between QAA and institutions. The liaison will not result in any published outcome or judgement.
21. In addition, quality enhancement projects from all institutions, funded by the QAA via the Wales Quality Network, will be presented to that Network in 2021/22. In this way, Wales will continue to be able to demonstrate that quality enhancement remains a priority, despite the disruption to reviews.

#### Review timing

22. All review visits scheduled to be carried out in 2020/21 and 2021/22 will be completed by July 2022.

### **Reviews from 2022/23 onwards**

23. The reviews scheduled for 2021/22 are the last to be carried out in the current cycle. HEFCW intends to consult on changes to the review method, taking account of lessons learned from the current cycle, and with a view to embedding quality enhancement further within the method.

### **Further information**

24. For further information, contact Dr Cliona O'Neill (tel 029 2085 9731; email [cliona.oneill@hefcw.ac.uk](mailto:cliona.oneill@hefcw.ac.uk)).

### **Assessing the impact of our policies**

25. We have carried out an impact assessment to help safeguard against discrimination and promote equality. We also considered the impact of policies on the Welsh language, and Welsh language provision within the HE sector in Wales and potential impacts towards the goals set out in the Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 including our Well-Being Objectives. Contact [equality@hefcw.ac.uk](mailto:equality@hefcw.ac.uk) for more information about impact assessments.

## **Annex A: Respondents**

Aberystwyth University  
Grŵp Llandrillo Menai  
Neath Port Talbot Group  
University of South Wales  
University of Wales Trinity Saint David  
Wrexham Glyndŵr University