

# QAA Viewpoint

## Reform of Degree Awarding Powers and University Title in England

July 2016

*\*Note: the criteria for achieving degree awarding powers and university title are set by governments and are a devolved matter. This briefing relates only to England, where reforms are proposed.*

### Background

There are substantial reputational and financial benefits for providers which gain the power to award their own degrees.

For some, it can mean saving millions previously spent on validation fees with their degree awarding partners. For others, it can provide important opportunities to grow income.

During the winter of 2015-16, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) held a [Green Paper consultation](#) on a wide range of proposals to reshape the higher education landscape. The outcomes of that consultation and the government's policy decisions were set out in the subsequent [White Paper](#). Many of these will be taken forward through the draft [Higher Education and Research Bill](#), which is currently progressing through parliament.

Within all this are a number of reforms which aim to provide faster, more flexible approaches for a greater range of high quality providers in England to gain degree awarding powers (DAPs) and the right to call themselves a university.

The proposals have been particularly [welcomed by Independent Higher Education \(formerly Study UK\)](#), the national association for independent higher education, professional training and higher education preparation, which described the White Paper as “the most favourable set of proposals for independent higher education seen to date.”

Other sector bodies have been more reserved. Universities UK, for example, argued in its [Green Paper response](#) for the continued requirement for a minimum four year track record of high quality delivery, before a provider can apply for DAPs. It also set out arguments for a three-pronged public interest test as the basis for the granting of university title.

### What are the current requirements for applicants?

Currently, the overarching [requirement](#) for a provider wishing to gain Taught Degree Awarding Powers (TDAPs) in England is that it should be ‘a self-critical, cohesive academic community, with a proven commitment to quality assurance’, able to meet the expectations on standards and quality as set out in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.

A provider is required to have a four year track record of offering higher education at Level 6 or above, with the majority of students studying at that level. In addition, three years of audited accounts are required.

The right to use the title of ‘university’ can currently only be granted to providers which have TDAPs, can demonstrate good governance and have over 1,000 students.

## QAA's role in the scrutiny of applications

At present, the process for a provider seeking DAPs in England is to submit an application to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). That application is then passed to QAA for scrutiny.

A scrutiny team of academic experts will then assess the applicant's critical self-analysis and documentary evidence, and conduct a series of visits and observations to gather first-hand evidence. The report of the scrutiny team is considered by the Advisory Committee on Degree Awarding Powers (ACDAP), following which the QAA Board makes a recommendation to the Privy Council via HEFCE. Powers are then granted by an Order of Council.

Since 2004, ACDAP has overseen 77 successful applications for degree awarding powers and/or university title. During the same period, 22 applications did not proceed to detailed scrutiny, were unsuccessful or were withdrawn. A further 10 applications were going through the scrutiny process at the time of publication of this briefing.

## QAA's position

QAA supports the transition to a more flexible, risk-based approach to awarding DAPs and university title, which will help underpin the government's policy objectives to open the sector to new high quality providers, encourage innovation and offer more choice to students. On specific issues:

- There should be a quality review for any provider seeking degree awarding powers. BIS has indicated that this should be the case - no degree awarding powers would be given without due diligence in terms of quality assurance
- QAA supports the new flexible routes proposed for high quality providers to achieve degree awarding powers at bachelor's and subject level. Indeed, this was proposed by QAA in its [response to the Green Paper](#)
- Enabling providers to enter a probationary period of restricted DAPs on a three year basis could be helpful, while they demonstrate in practice that they are managing their newly granted responsibilities well. However, to protect students, readiness for entry to the probationary period should be dependent on robust quality checks and due diligence. Students' qualifications gained during the probationary period should be protected even if the provider does not pass probation. The holders of probationary DAPs should be monitored appropriately, to provide public confidence that standards are being maintained and students' interests protected
- Combining the probationary DAPs period with the scrutiny for full DAPs is an innovative proposal, allowing providers to build up their required track record and to demonstrate that they fully meet the DAPs requirements. In considering the design of the scrutiny process, thought should be given to the potential need, in some instances, for more direct intervention than has previously been the case
- Student protection remains paramount in a more open market and QAA supports the measures proposed to protect students' interests in the event of a provider failing, or being unsuccessful in obtaining full DAPs, by the end of the probationary period. We believe there should be a new permanent, publicly accessible record of providers and the qualifications they offer, to protect graduates and inform employers.

For QAA, the protection of students' interests and safeguarding the UK's world-leading reputation for higher education, are of primary importance.