

QAA Viewpoint

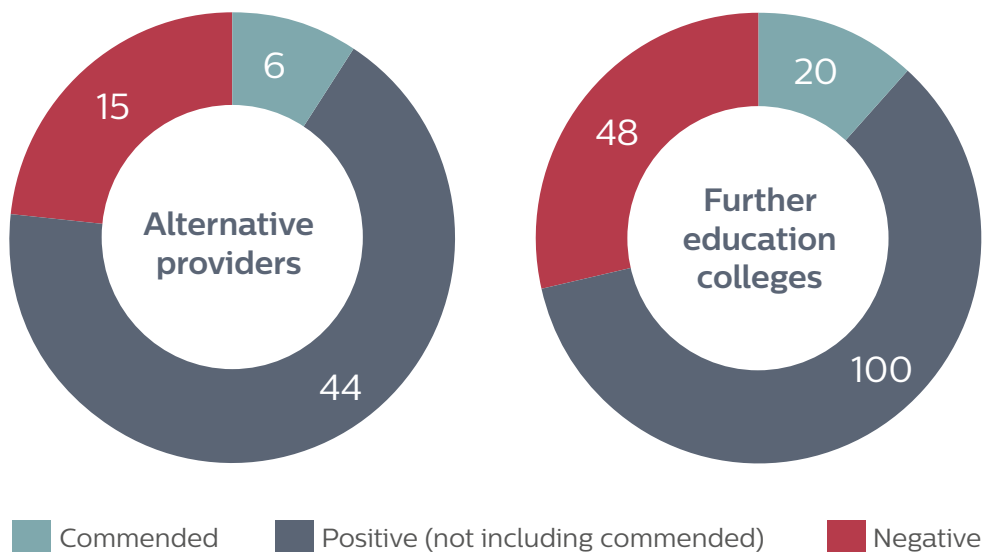
Risk-based monitoring or capacity building: a reflection on what works

June 2017

Over the last two years, alternative providers and further education colleges delivering higher education have been reviewed by QAA through the same core method - Higher Education Review (HER)¹ - for the first time.

While the same review method has been used, the approach to improvement and capacity building has differed. This Viewpoint outlines what has been learned from the different approaches to improving the performance of providers in these two groups: risk-based monitoring and capacity building. It also considers the role universities have been shown to play in high-performing alternative and college providers.

Alternative provider and further education college review results 2013-14 to 2015-16



Although this Viewpoint focuses on improving the performance of weaker providers, we should stress that colleges and alternative providers can and do perform very well in review: 12 per cent of colleges and 9 per cent of alternative providers reviewed between 2013 and 2015 received one or more commendation.

Alternative providers: risk-based monitoring

QAA reviews are one of the requirements for a Tier 4 licence from the Home Office, which enables providers to recruit international students. Similarly, QAA's reviews for the Department for Education are a requirement for course designation purposes.

In contrast to [Higher Education Review](#) for colleges, the [method for alternative providers](#) includes annual monitoring, and a check on financial sustainability, management and governance. It also includes a desk-based review to assess how well the provider has addressed the recommendations made by QAA's team of peer reviewers. Poorer performers

¹ Note that Higher Education Review for publicly funded providers ended in July 2016, replaced by the revised operating model for quality assessment. Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) continues.

will either be subject to an extended monitoring visit or undergo another full review. A material change to circumstances – such as a change of ownership, significant fluctuations in recruitment or a concern raised with QAA – can also trigger enhanced scrutiny. Those providers performing very well are not required to undergo a monitoring visit to check their progress.

College higher education: capacity building

QAA's work with colleges providing higher education has focused on guidance and enhancement activities to improve performance, rather than risk-based monitoring. Overall, this work has included [guidance for colleges](#) on the Quality Code, a research programme and tailored events at QAA's [Quality Enhancement Network](#).

Outcomes and learning

In [2013-15](#), 30 per cent of alternative providers reviewed by QAA received one or more negative judgement. By 2015-16, however, this number reduced to around a fifth of the alternative providers reviewed. Across the same period ([2013-14](#) and [2014-15](#)) around 30 per cent of colleges consistently received one or more negative judgement.

These data indicate that the two different approaches taken to supporting improvement in these providers may have contributed to different outcomes. Some caution is needed when interpreting these data, however, as the sample sizes differ (170 further education colleges versus 70 alternative providers) and the samples were not identical year on year. A further caveat is that annual monitoring is mandatory for alternative providers, unlike our enhancement work for colleges, so not all participate.

Colleges and alternative providers with universities as their awarding bodies tended to perform better than those with non-university awarding bodies. To illustrate this, around a quarter of the recommendations received by further education colleges in 2014-15 and 2015-16 concerned Pearson Education Ltd. This is an under-researched area, but we believe that universities may have a more direct relationship with their partners than other awarding bodies. A paper from the Centre for Global Higher Education² supports this conclusion, where partnerships between public and private higher education providers in Australia have benefited from 'oversight by the university on quality assurance processes'.

It was for this reason that university partnerships were central to the Higher Education Funding Council for England's [policy for college higher education](#), prior to the Government's 2011 higher education reforms. Rather than deal with separate funding, quality and data collection systems, a university partner was considered the best way to secure quality and standards in smaller colleges. Students also benefitted from opportunities to progress to higher levels of learning in a structured manner.

Conclusions

QAA's experience suggests that intelligent regulation needs to walk a fine line between enhancement and monitoring. A reasonable conclusion would be that the two are not mutually exclusive – there is a valid place for capacity building and enhancement, but monitoring can reveal issues that could require intervention. Our experience suggests, however, that weaker providers tend not to engage with capacity building and enhancement.

In that context, the presence of annual monitoring within the [revised operating model for quality assessment](#) (PDF, 628KB), which becomes fully operational from 2017-18, is a positive development.

² The Entry and Experience of Private Providers of Higher Education in Six Countries (Centre for Global Higher Education), p 40, available at: www.researchcghe.org/perch/resources/publications/ppreport.pdf (PDF, 1.38MB).