An English higher education quality system fit for the future - policy briefing

Background

UK higher education enjoys a world-leading reputation thanks to the strengths of the Scottish, Welsh, Northern Irish and English sectors in securing the quality of their provision and student experience.

The English sector is particularly large and diverse, and the wide range of providers sets it apart from other higher education sectors both in the UK and internationally. It continues to attract increasing numbers of domestic students, and its quality and enduring reputation mean it also attracts an increasingly large international student body.

The Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (HERA) made significant changes to the English quality system. Since then, the debate has continued about how the legislation should be implemented and how the sector should consequently be funded, regulated and operate.

At the heart of that debate has been discussion about the most appropriate and effective way to assure and assess quality. Given the English sector's size, diversity and fixed unit of resource, it is imperative that robust quality assurance and regulatory burden are appropriately balanced. As the quality of higher education provision has become of increasing interest to ministers, policymakers and students themselves, attention has turned to the system that oversees, assures and seeks to improve that quality.

The English quality system has its challenges. The English sector, in many respects because of its particular characteristics, has diverged from the rest of the UK in how quality is overseen.

In the Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish sectors, the quality system focuses on continuous improvement - also known as quality enhancement. This is reinforced by periodic quality assurance reviews of all providers, carried out by an independent body (QAA). This approach is consistent with international good practice that the UK government has committed to.[1]

---

[1] The European Higher Education Area is a group of countries that cooperate to achieve comparable and compatible higher education systems throughout Europe. They follow the directives of the Bologna Process to achieve these goals. There are currently 49 countries/states in the European Higher Education Area. It is a distinct entity from the European Union.

In contrast, English providers are now subject to a regulatory requirement to meet a baseline level of quality. This is combined with the [Teaching Excellence Framework exercise](#) which intends 'to encourage providers to improve and deliver excellence'.

While Scotland and Wales move towards a more integrated tertiary system to bring together further and higher education, in England such realignment appears further away, although progress in this direction should be achieved through the Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE).

Whereas the other UK nations continue to adopt approaches to their quality systems that align with internationally agreed good practice, England has diverged from this in its quality arrangements (although not in the quality of its provision). This can be seen most notably in the English quality system's approach to independence of quality assessment, student engagement, transparency and periodic review of providers. These principles are the foundation of a robust quality system and were pioneered by the UK as best practice. If unaddressed, over time this position risks undermining the international reputation of the English - and by proxy, the UK's - higher education sector.

The English higher education policy landscape has changed significantly since the adoption of HERA in 2017. The government's lifelong learning ambitions and the introduction of the LLE are designed to allow for a wider variety of learning experiences through higher education. The increased focus on vocational qualifications and skills to support the economy demands a rethink of traditional expectations of higher education, and the rapid rise of generative artificial intelligence tools (AI) calls into question the very nature of learning and higher education's purpose. In addition, the English sector's growth in size and diversity and the freezing of tuition fee funding continue to shape the need for a quality system that is fit for the future.

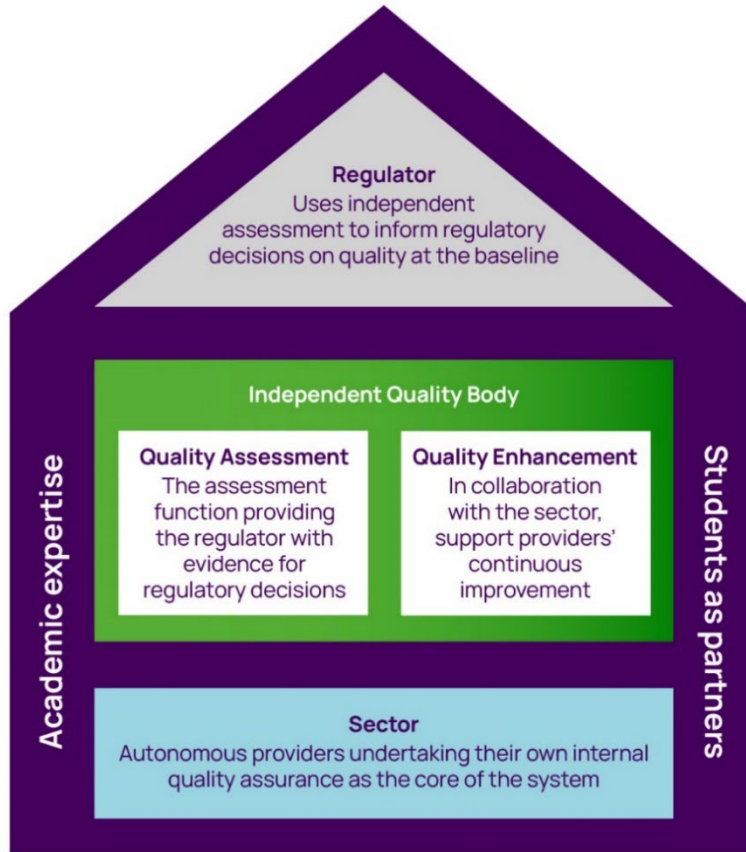## The future of quality in England

As the sector's independent, expert quality body in the UK, QAA has unmatched expertise and insight in the design and operation of effective quality systems. Over the past 26 years, we have held varied roles across the UK nations and internationally, supporting providers, quality agencies and governments to develop, deliver, assure, assess and enhance high quality provision for students.

Ahead of a UK general election, there is a unique opportunity to reflect anew on how to ensure the quality system in England is fit for the future. It must be able to assure and assess that provision can meet the demands of the modern world.

This policy briefing outlines a system in England that successfully assures, assesses and enhances quality, maintains its strong international reputation and is responsive to an evolving policy landscape, ensuring it is fit for the future. Its focus is on the English sector, though much of the content will apply across all good external quality systems. It will be followed by deep-dive briefings on the emerging opportunities and challenges that the sector must respond to and prepare for.

Many of the elements outlined in this briefing are already present in the English quality system. Others will need to be introduced or strengthened to ensure that England's system is robust, rigorous and fair, can meet future labour market demands, and works to benefit students and wider society. Policy recommendations regarding realignment with internationally agreed good practice, recognising the role of continuous improvement and streamlining the requirements of the various oversight bodies, are detailed at the end of this briefing.

What does an English quality system fit for the future look like?

Regulator
Uses independent assessment to inform regulatory decisions on quality at the baseline

Independent Quality Body

Quality Assessment
The assessment function providing the regulator with evidence for regulatory decisions

Quality Enhancement
In collaboration with the sector, support providers' continuous improvement

Academic expertise

Students as partners

Sector
Autonomous providers undertaking their own internal quality assurance as the core of the system

What should the system do?

A robust quality system combines quality assurance with quality enhancement.
This ensures that all providers are meeting a necessary baseline in what they deliver for students, while actively encouraging them to improve beyond this.

Quality assurance	Quality enhancement
The guarantee that providers meet a baseline level of quality, based on the assessment of quality by an expert independent body.	The dynamic exercise of continuous improvement that providers undertake to improve their provision beyond the baseline.

The ultimate public assurance of quality at the baseline, carried out by the regulator, should be based on an expert assessment of quality undertaken by an independent quality body. It is also important that a quality system fit for the future formally recognises the role of quality enhancement.

A system that is too heavily focused on quality assurance at the expense of enhancement risks failing to incentivise providers to improve provision once the baseline is met. A system that is too heavily focused on quality enhancement at the expense of assurance loses confidence in the guarantee that every provider reaches a baseline expectation of quality. A good quality system integrates assurance with enhancement to cover all bases.

How should quality assurance and enhancement be delivered?

A risk-based and proportionate system is appropriate for the English sector, but embedding some form of proportionate, periodic touchpoint is crucial to retaining trust, especially among international stakeholders.

A risk-based, proportionate approach to quality regulation is appropriate for a sector as diverse and complex as England. It allows providers to avoid unnecessary burden or expense, focuses on where problems are most likely to occur and can be tailored to the context and needs of individual providers.

However, in this approach, it is typically the *absence* of recent public regulatory information about the quality of a provider that denotes high quality provision. More detailed, comprehensive information is generally only available when a provider has been subject to regulatory investigation or intervention.

This is at odds with most other higher education quality systems and prevents stakeholders from accessing clear, up-to-date information from an authoritative source about an individual provider's quality. International stakeholders in particular frequently require publicly available information about a provider's quality to proceed with international student sponsorship or UK partnerships.

A periodic touchpoint with providers - an element of internationally agreed good practice - presents a solution to this problem and can be very light touch in a risk-based and proportionate system. The touchpoint enables the regulator to make decisions about a provider's ability to continue to meet the baseline, and transparent publication of this helps to instil domestic and international confidence in the provider and trust in the wider system. It can also provide a regular opportunity for quality enhancement, enabling providers to identify areas of their provision that work well and areas that might benefit from early intervention to prevent future risks to the learning experience and student outcomes.

The details of the periodic touchpoint should be co-designed in consultation with the sector, but should be proportionate to the level of risk a provider poses, varying from light touch check-in to a full site visit. The touchpoint should be holistic, looking at what the data and outcomes show, how the data and outcomes are being produced, how good data and outcomes can be replicated in the future and how any areas of concern should be addressed. This should be balanced with relationships and contextual understanding of the provider informed by deep knowledge and trust. Importantly, this enables it to be led by independent, expert assessment of a provider's quality, rather than driven by self-assessment.

Who should play a role in the assurance and enhancement of quality?

The regulator and an independent quality body

The regulator should have a clearly defined role in relation to quality that works in collaboration with other oversight bodies and with non-regulatory bodies better suited to deliver aspects of the quality system.

Due to its size, diversity and number of new providers, it is right that the English sector has a regulator. While it should be the role of the regulator to give assurances of quality at the

baseline, the assessment and enhancement of quality are best delivered through the existence of an independent body to maintain independence from:

- the providers undergoing assessment, so that assessments are rigorous, fair and impartial
- the body making regulatory decisions, to prevent conflicts of interest with other regulatory demands and relationships
- government, so that assessments are not influenced by political objectives or bias and remain consistent during any governmental changes.

Enhancement should also be delivered in collaboration with an independent body to enable:

- agility to convene the sector
- timely response to external developments
- full cooperation from, and collaboration with and between, providers, which could be jeopardised by delivery from a body with punitive powers.

While the English sector has a designated regulator, there are multiple bodies that oversee various aspects of provision and its quality, particularly for colleges that straddle further and higher education delivery. Depending on what a provider delivers, it can expect to engage with the Office for Students, but potentially also Ofsted, Ofqual, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, the Education and Skills Funding Agency and relevant professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs). All these bodies have various reporting requirements which are often duplicative in nature but require data to be submitted in different formats and at different times. Taken together, this increases the burden and resource providers must dedicate to regulatory activity to unreasonable levels.

The principle of proportionality must extend across the regulatory landscape to free up the quality system to focus on supporting high quality provision, and coordinate and share learnings across quality assessments. In keeping with this - and the principles of the Regulators Code, in particular the concept of 'collect once, use many times' - the bodies who are collectively responsible for higher education should be aligned in their requirements. This will not only enable providers to operate in a cohesive environment, but the regulatory landscape more broadly to be tailored to the strategic ambitions the sector is expected to deliver on.

Academic experts from the sector

A robust and trusted quality system recognises existing expertise within the sector and embeds that expertise to increase confidence and credibility in decision-making.

With institutional autonomy - a core principle of the UK higher education sector - comes the assumption that higher education providers are the experts in what they do, and that quality is first and foremost the responsibility of providers themselves. Therefore, external quality judgements intrinsically rely upon the expertise and experience of those within the sector.

One way of embedding this expertise in the quality system is by using academic expertise in quality assessments. Only those who have developed academic expertise through studying, teaching or research are qualified to make judgements about academic quality. This notion is comparable to the peer review that takes place within academic research.

This expertise is also embedded in the reference points that have been developed by the sector itself such as the credit frameworks in each UK nation and the UK Quality Code. Where

providers have been given the opportunity to co-create reference points that embody agreed principles, their trust in the expertise and understanding used to create them is much higher, generating greater commitment and engagement.

Students

As key partners in the learning experience, students hold academic expertise that must be utilised to protect and improve its quality.

Deep partnership with students is the most effective way to deliver higher education. Assuring, assessing and enhancing quality is no exception. As partners in the academic experience, students hold vital understanding of the quality of provision and are uniquely qualified to judge from this perspective. This is complemented by the academic expertise they gain in their subject area. Students contribute extensively across internal quality assurance processes in English higher education providers, representing the views of their peers, contributing to institutional surveys on student opinion, sitting on faculty committees that design and review courses, and working with staff at a departmental level to improve teaching.

A robust quality system should embed student partnership at every level, including through participation on quality assessment teams, contributing to thematic analysis and developing understanding of what high quality provision looks like. The quality system should also expect and require higher education providers to demonstrate their own involvement of students in decision-making and quality assurance, and how this leads to tangible improvements to the student experience.

How should a quality system fit for the future operate?

A robust quality system will operate without fear or favour, is data-informed but contextualised to make evidence-based judgements, operates transparently to enable learning and improvement, and responds with agility to emerging challenges and opportunities.

The quality system should be agile and responsive, allowing it to evolve alongside the policy landscape and operating environment. The system should allow for independent, ad-hoc investigation or analysis on emerging issues and trends, enabling providers to gain insight into issues emerging in the sector and act preventatively before impacts arise.

The quality system should appropriately contextualise a provider's information about the quality of its provision and its outcomes. Quality assessments should explore *why* and *how* data is being produced, in addition to *what* it shows, in order to make judgements which are proportionate to the provider's risk and wider context. Contextualisation is best achieved by building a deep understanding through relationships alongside data and analysis and this, rather than taking a purely punitive approach, would enable them to address and improve areas of concern, to the benefit of students, other providers and wider society more generally.

An effective quality system should have the trust of those whose interests it seeks to protect. To earn that trust, the system - and those who deliver it - must be transparent about how it identifies, investigates and rectifies poor quality provision.

Transparency enables regulatory intervention on a single provider to present a learning opportunity for all. When providers have access to information on risks, solutions and good practice, and understand why and how regulatory decisions have been made, they can preventatively seek out and rectify pockets of poor provision in their own contexts. This

transparency in turn signals to stakeholders outside of the sector that higher education is consistently seeking to improve, rather than defensively protecting itself from external scrutiny.

For international stakeholders, when combined with periodic review, transparency instils trust in the system which is required for fruitful international partnerships and mobility - both of which contribute to the financial sustainability of the sector.

What needs to be done?

This briefing sets out the characteristics of an English quality system that is robust, fair and fit for the future. Some of these elements are already present in the current system but may require development or strengthening. Others might need to be introduced to ensure the quality system supports providers to prepare students adequately for life after study.

With this in mind, policymakers should commit to:

1   **Realign the English quality system with internationally agreed good practice.** This should include honouring the UK's commitment to the European Higher Education Area by working with QAA and the sector to develop a pathway to alignment that maintains and strengthens international trust while recognising the distinct characteristics of the English sector. This would involve addressing:

- the **independence** of quality assessment so that the system operates without fear or favour
- a **periodic touchpoint** with all providers to secure up-to-date assessments of their provision
- **student engagement** across the full quality system, including as full members of assessment teams
- the **transparency** of data, thematic analysis and assessments.

2   **Formally recognise enhancement as part of the quality system** to encourage an approach of continuous improvement where providers are supported by an independent body, such as QAA.

3   **Streamline regulatory requirements from the various bodies with oversight of higher education** (Office for Students, Ofsted, Ofqual, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, the Education and Skills Funding Agency and relevant PSRBs) by convening them to align requirements in terms of data requested, format required and relevant deadlines, following the Regulator's Code principle of 'collect once, use many times'. This should be achieved through reconvening the Higher Education Data Reduction Taskforce and ensuring all relevant oversight bodies are represented.

Published - 18 September 2023