We ended the financial year in unprecedented times, following the profound impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the higher education sector. In March 2020, we moved to an operating model with all staff based at home and refocused our work programme to meet the sector’s needs arising from the pandemic. Our priority was to support our members to meet the challenges of COVID-19 and help them continue to provide a quality education for their students.

Outside our COVID-19 response, QAA’s principle purpose remains the same – to safeguard academic standards and ensure the quality and global reputation of UK higher education. In this, we have much to celebrate. In 2019-20, we saw the first year of QAA Membership, with 275 QAA Members benefiting from QAA’s work to enhance the quality and standards of their provision across the UK.

QAA works with our members, governments, regulators and students across the UK and this report highlights some of our key activity over the year with each nation. Outside the UK, our international work has seen engagement with governments and partners across the globe.

We remain particularly proud of our stewardship of the Access to HE Diploma, which prepares people without traditional qualifications for university study. Over 23,000 Access students were accepted into universities in the 2019 intake.

Our work supporting the sector in maintaining quality and standards is funded through QAA Membership, and we would like to thank all our members for making this possible.

I hope you find this review of interest, and look forward to our future work with QAA Members and other sector colleagues.
Between March and August 2020, QAA published 9 guidance documents to support providers’ response to COVID-19, along with over 20 additional supporting resources. We have worked in partnership with our members to maintain quality and standards in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Our COVID-19 guidance is funded by our member subscriptions, but publicly available for the benefit of the sector in recognition of the extraordinary pressures arising from the pandemic.

On 25 March, QAA launched the Quality Discussion Forum for our members, which now has over 400 users. This interactive platform provides a virtual meeting space for discussions and knowledge exchange between peers, direct access to QAA expertise on key topics, and exclusive access to quality assurance resources.

QAA has delivered regular member webinars to support the sector in sharing practice; as of September 2020 - a series of 28 webinars and online briefings with over 2,000 delegates from 276 organisations attending.

60 PSRBs responded to a QAA survey giving insight into policies and operational changes arising from COVID-19, which formed the basis of a report for our members with analysis supported by a wider desktop review of published statements from professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs).

QAA successfully developed and implemented an Extraordinary Regulatory Framework for the Access to Higher Education Diploma ensuring more than 20,000 students successfully transitioned into university.
QAA Membership

We worked on a range of key policy issues affecting our members and the wider higher education sector:

**Essay mills**
- we updated the second edition guidance for the higher education sector on combatting essay mills.

**Grade descriptors for 1st, 2:1, 2:2 and 3rd class honours**
- these were included for the first time as an annex to the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications.

**Degree algorithms and degree outcomes statements**
- we worked with the sector and in partnership with Universities UK and GuildHE to develop tools for the sector on behalf of the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment.

**UK Quality Code for Higher Education**
- we continued to manage and develop the UK Quality Code for Higher Education on behalf of the sector. The Quality Code is a key reference point for UK higher education, protecting the public and student interest, and championing UK higher education's world-leading reputation for quality.

**Working with students**
- we delivered two student-focused events this year: Quality Matters and Evolving Student Engagement.

**Credit Framework for England**
- we started a review of the higher education credit framework for England. The framework serves as a benchmark for providers to reference when designing programmes.

**Characteristic Statements**
- we drafted new reference documents including five new/updated Characteristic Statements and 55 updated Subject Benchmark Statements.

**4.25/5**
- a high overall satisfaction rating for the quality of the content delivered to members through resources, events and training.
Our members

275 providers across the UK signed up for QAA Membership in 2019-20

Members benefitted from access to exclusive resources, training and events:

127 exclusive resources for members

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<th>Members</th>
<th>Delegates</th>
<th>Organisations</th>
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<tr>
<td>Webinars</td>
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<td>Training Programmes</td>
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</table>

*members, PSRBs and other invited sector organisations

I was really happy and I was able to take away some really valuable insights and ideas, and feed them back to colleagues and senior leadership to look at how we could use the examples of good practice.

QAA Member
Scotland:
- The 2017-20 Enhancement Theme ‘Evidence for Enhancement’ concluded successfully with a range of legacy resources produced.
- Students made an active contribution towards resources, notably the highly regarded ‘Student Guide to Using Evidence’ report.
- An International Enhancement Conference was held online, bringing together nearly 400 delegates from around 20 countries.
- Two Enhancement-led Institutional Reviews (ELIR) were completed and four others underway.

Northern Ireland
- Following the restoration of the Northern Ireland Executive in January, we are working with the sector to develop a new enhancement orientated review method.

Wales:
- The Handbook for Quality Enhancement Review (QER) was revised to reflect the updated Quality Assurance Framework and other continuing developments in the QER method.
- The Wales Quality Network rapidly established itself as a valuable practitioner-led forum for discussion among sector stakeholders.
- Two Gateway Reviews, a Quality Enhancement Review and an Annual Monitoring Review were completed.

England:
As the designated quality body (DQB) in England, QAA undertakes the role of assessing the quality of, and the standards applied to, higher education programmes.
- In 2019-20, we received 63 assessment referrals, of which 55 were completed during the year.
- We made positive recommendations on three providers in England for degree awarding powers under the Department for Education (DfE)’s criteria.
QAA Global

QAA works globally on behalf of our members to build strong partnerships and to promote UK higher education and maintain its world-class reputation.

2019–20 timeline:

- **Nov 2019**: Published Ukraine Country Report
- **Nov 2019**: Launched the International Quality Review, a new global accreditation mark
- **International Quality Assurance Programme (IQAP), London with 24 delegates from across the world**
- **April 2020**: Published a new assessment report on TNE in Malaysia
- **July 2020**: Following sector consultation, QAA was commissioned by UUKi and GuildHE to review and enhance the quality of UK TNE
- **Oct 2019**: Launched consultation on ‘Future Approaches to the External Quality Enhancement of UK Higher Education Transnational Education’
- **Jan 2020**: International Networking Event at the Education World Forum with ministers and officials from 11 countries
- **May 2020**: Hosted the International Partners Forum with 25 overseas agencies
- **Aug 2020**: Published Sri Lanka Country Report

Did you know...

In 2018–19:

- **142** UK universities reported TNE activity
- **226** countries and territories operating TNE
- **over 660,000** students studying for UK awards outside of the UK

We also promoted UK higher education and transnational education (TNE) through international liaison and events across the globe including USA, UAE, Turkey, Nigeria, North Africa and the UK.

1 This figure includes totals from the three main providers of distance, flexible and blended TNE: Oxford Brookes University, University of London and The Open University. These three providers make up more than 330,000 of the total.
Accreditation

In response to demand from institutions, we launched a new global accreditation mark in November 2019. This provides a route for international institutions to be accredited through our International Quality Review (IQR) process, which is mapped against the European Standards and Guidelines. We published three IQR reports in 2019–20 and have a number currently in train.

Partnerships

We have also strengthened partnerships with UK and international government departments and agencies, such as the British Council, Department of International Trade, and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. Building on the strength of our relationship with the British Council, we have developed partnerships working in China, Sri Lanka, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, Central and South America, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Ukraine and Pakistan, as well as the HE commission for Tunisia. We signed a new Memorandum of Understanding with the Commission for Academy Accreditation (CAA) in the UAE. QAA actively participates in international quality networks across the globe (see below) and has contributed to international policy discussions around TNE, mutual qualifications recognition agreements, and the negotiation of free trade agreements, as well as recognition of online learning.
The Access to Higher Education Diploma is a qualification which prepares people without traditional qualifications for study at universities in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. QAA has managed the scheme for the recognition and quality assurance of Access to HE courses since 1997.

There are currently 11 Access Validating Agencies (AVAs) licensed by QAA to approve Access to HE courses and to award QAA-recognised Access to HE qualifications to students - which apply to approximately 1,400 courses. On behalf of our members, QAA works closely with UK governments, UCAS, Ofqual, Qualifications Wales and higher education providers to ensure the Diploma continues to help widen participation in higher education.

- 350 providers of Access to HE delivered courses
- 37,240 students registered onto an Access to HE Diploma
- 23,310 Access to HE students entered higher education in 2019

- 93% of students completing the programme were awarded the diploma
- 77% of Access to HE students stayed in their local area to study in higher education
- 22.9% of Access to HE learners graduated from university with a first-class honours degree

To help support the implementation of the Extraordinary Regulatory Framework introduced in response to COVID-19

- 34 information webinars with over 1,500 attendees
- 40 online clinics for AVAs
- Responded to over 500 queries from students
Our new strategy launched in 2020 defines three strategic purposes around:

- Supporting regulation and enhancement
- Strengthening the global reputation of UK higher education
- Providing expert advice around quality and standards

The theme for our membership programme in 2020–21 is ‘Resilience, Innovation, Enhancement’. We will also continue to provide support, advice and guidance to our UK members during these uncertain times.

We will deliver a comprehensive programme of international development and partnership work.

We will work with politicians, policy makers and regulators, engaging with proposed reforms in all nations of the UK.

For information on the financial review, please see our Annual Report and Financial Statements 2019–20

The advice and guidance offered by QAA is always qualified through the collaboration undertaken with the sector to offer re-assurance in these challenging times. The opportunities to share practice with colleagues offers diversity of thought as well as reassurance that you are not isolated.

QAA Member

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