

QAA Viewpoint

Quality and value for money August 2018

Background

Value for money is high on the political and policy agenda for UK higher education. There are differing interpretations of what is meant by value for money: for students, graduates, taxpayers, employers, the economy and wider society.

Although higher education systems differ across the four UK nations, there is a strong collective focus on the responsibility to deliver value. In its [2018 consultation](#) on a reformed post-compulsory education and training system (PCET), the Welsh Government proposes:

‘The [quality] framework should evaluate how well the PCET system is securing value for money and achieving sustainable outcomes for learners, employers, the Welsh economy and society.’ (paragraph 171)

Universities Scotland, in its 2017 written evidence to the House of Commons Education Select Committee’s [inquiry into value for money in higher education](#), noted:

‘Scottish higher education operates in a different context to that of higher education institutions in England. However, we are acutely aware of our responsibility to deliver value for money for the public investment we receive.’

The impact of higher fees in England on students’ expectations of quality and value for money has been significant, with value for money now one of the [four primary regulatory objectives](#) for the Office for Students in England.

Recent developments

As the UK’s independent quality body, delivering quality assurance that meets the distinctive needs of each nation, QAA is committed to ensuring that all students receive value for money through high-quality academic experiences.

From a quality perspective, value for money can be demonstrated both through student academic experiences and student outcomes. More broadly, it can encompass areas such as learning gain or ‘distance travelled’ – the improvement in knowledge, skills, work-readiness and personal development that a student can show between two points in time during their studies. Social mobility and widening participation are also factors in delivering value for money.

For students, significant indicators of value for money are the quality and standards of the teaching, learning and assessment practices in their academic experiences. A [2018 report commissioned by the Office for Students](#) and produced by a consortium of students’ unions, found provider quality measures – quality of teaching, fair assessment and feedback, and learning resources – are the top three factors in demonstrating that a provider offers good value for money. These measures come ahead of those directly focused on student outcomes, such as access to industry connections or higher earnings than non-graduates.

The [2018 HEPI/ Advance HE Student Academic Experience Survey](#) mirrors these findings:

‘The results are revealing, in that the factors that have influenced poor compared with good value are broadly different, with price dominating the list for poor value and quality dominating the list for good value.’ (page 15)

QAA introduced student written submissions to its review methods in 2002. Evidence suggests that they had an immediate impact, with providers accepting them as an important source of information in the work of enhancing their quality management and academic standards arrangements. Today, student engagement in quality assurance and viewing students as partners in their education, is the norm for most UK providers.

QAA's 2017 longitudinal analysis of these submissions, [*Taking the long view of the student voice*](#), found that students have consistently remained concerned about contact time, assessment and the need for timely feedback. More recently, the overarching issues for students have been value for money and inconsistencies in the student experience. Students tend to have an even greater awareness of differences in the levels of contact with staff and the provision of resources between disciplines. In addition, they are more concerned about hidden costs and the accuracy (or otherwise) of published information.

The influence of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) is also worth considering in discussions about value for money, particularly looking ahead to the outcomes of the second year of [piloting at subject level](#) (2018-19), providing more granular information for students.

QAA's view

The research evidence shows that the quality of the academic experience – notably teaching quality – is a key determinant of student perceptions of value for money.

Although approaches to external quality assurance and enhancement are diversifying across the nations, there remains a long-standing, UK-wide sector commitment to enhancement, which QAA and the new [Advance HE](#) will continue to facilitate and support. This commitment is a key part of what sets the UK sector apart from most international comparators and competitors.

The expectations of the [revised UK Quality Code](#) – relating to quality and standards – require providers to ensure high-quality academic experiences for their students, underpinned by a range of core and common practices, and advice and guidance (currently in development). The two relevant expectations are:

- courses are well-designed, provide a high-quality academic experience for all students and enable a student's achievement to be reliably assessed
- from admission through to completion, all students are provided with the support that they need to succeed in and benefit from higher education.

QAA is working with other bodies on a range of innovative activities to enhance quality for students across the sector. In Wales, a distinctive new [Quality Enhancement approach](#) commenced in 2017-18, delivering both assurance and enhancement. In Scotland, the current Enhancement Theme is [Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the Student Experience](#) and runs until 2020. It aims to identify, prioritise and evaluate interventions to improve the student experience. In England, QAA's [Quality Enhancement Network](#) and regional networks bring together quality practitioners to learn from new approaches and share experience. QAA is also working with the Office for Students to develop a new outcomes-focused quality approach for the [regulatory framework in England](#).

Providing value for money is equally important for students studying overseas with a UK provider (transnational education or TNE). The 'UK brand' matters for UK TNE and, as quality approaches diversify in the UK, it is timely to reflect on how the sector will continue to project the 'UK brand' in relation to quality assurance, to maintain international confidence and ensure high quality experiences for all students.

Perceptions of value continue to change, and it is important that UK higher education collectively continues to test and respond to those perceptions, in an evolving sector.