

A brief student guide to Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers)



What is the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)?

Higher education providers are independent and are responsible for making sure that the education they provide is of a high quality and reaches the right academic standards.

QAA is an organisation that is independent of both government and of higher education providers and is the designated quality body in England. We undertake visits to providers on behalf of the Office for Students (OfS) and also work directly with providers who are not eligible to register with the OfS to review how well they are fulfilling their responsibilities for the quality and standards of the higher education they provide. This guidance and the Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) method relates to providers that are not eligible to register with the OfS.

What is Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers)?

Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) is the way that QAA checks how well alternative providers make sure their students' education is of a high enough quality and reaches the right academic standards. The Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) method has two stages:

Stage 1

Reviewers look at information about the higher education provider. What they think about that information will decide how long the review visit is and what is looked at in the second stage.

Stage 2

This is a visit to the university or college provider by the review team, where they meet staff and students, and investigate further what the university or college provider is doing.

The Financial Sustainability, Management and Governance of the provider is also checked, but this is completed independently of the review method.

What does the review actually mean for me as a student?

This review process checks that your higher education provider meets the required standards. Having high quality and standards means you can have confidence in your higher education provider and course. All of this ultimately makes the educational experience for you and your fellow students better.

Who carries out the review?

Review teams are made up of staff and students from other higher education providers in the UK, and have between three and five members. All review teams will include a student member.

How long is the review visit?

Review visits can last from one to five days. If the team thinks that the evidence provided shows that the higher education provider is doing well and will continue to do well, then the visit will be fairly short. If they can't be completely sure from the evidence, then the visit will be longer so that they can investigate further.

What is the outcome of a review?

The outcome of the review is a report in which the team makes two judgements. The team makes these judgements by looking to see whether national requirements for quality and standards have been met. They also check the processes that are in use, and how much staff and students are involved in these processes.

The two judgements are:

- **the setting/maintaining of academic standards** - academic standards are the standards that individual degree awarding bodies set and maintain for the award of their academic credit or qualifications - the Quality Code sets out Expectations and associated Core/Common Practices that higher education providers are required to meet to ensure that academic standards are set and maintained
- **the quality of student learning opportunities** - how well the higher education provider helps students to achieve their award - review teams look at whether appropriate and effective teaching, support, assessment and opportunities to learn are provided.

What evidence does the team look at during the review?

Evidence provided by the higher education provider

The provider submits a self-evaluation document that tells the review team about themselves, describes their approach to making sure that the education they provide is of a high quality and reaches the right standards, and explains how they know that their approach is working and how it could be improved.

This document will also include data from surveys about how satisfied students were with their education and what they do when they leave, and data on how many students make it through their courses successfully.

Evidence provided by students

Students at the higher education provider are invited to make a student submission to the review to help the review team understand what it is like to be a student at that provider and how students' views are considered.

If the student submission indicates significant problems, this may lead to the review team spending longer visiting the provider. The submission can be written, but can also make use of videos, interviews, focus groups and other forms of presentation. Most importantly, the submission needs to be based on evidence and needs to represent the views of as many students as possible.

Evidence available to QAA

QAA review teams consider any recent QAA reports on the higher education provider and any other recent published reports from other organisations that work with the provider. This covers organisations like Ofsted, the Education and Skills Funding Agency, and other international and professional quality assurance agencies.

What happens after the review?

Within three months of the review visit, a report will be published that explains what the review team found and gives the team's judgements. The higher education provider then has to produce a plan of action that shows how they will make the most of any good practice that the review team has found, what they will do with any recommendations for improvement, or how they will continue to work on any affirmations (where the team has recognised that the provider is already working on areas for improvement).

If a higher education provider is given a judgement of 'requires improvement' or 'does not meet UK expectations', then the provider will usually be able to apply for another review and have a second chance to make improvements that ensure it does meet the required standards.

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