



Review of International Foundation and Year One Programmes

Scoping document for Universities UK

22 February 2024

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Overview

1 Universities UK (UUK) will commission QAA to undertake a review in relation to International Pathway Programmes.

2 This document sets out the objectives, review questions, scope, deliverables, assumptions and seeks to confirm an agreed set of timescales. It outlines the activity QAA will undertake to deliver the objectives identified by UUK to ensure there is a common understanding of the purpose and scope of the work involved.

3 QAA notes that within the UK higher education sector, some providers offer either, or both of, International Foundation Programmes (broadly, level 3 programmes designed to prepare students for undergraduate study) and International Year One Programmes (level 4 programmes designed to be the equivalent of year one of an undergraduate programme, but tailored to the needs of an international audience). QAA considers both types of programme to be in scope. For the purposes of the review, in order to draw comparisons, it will also be necessary for QAA to consider materials relevant to domestic foundation and level 4 provision.

Process and deliverables

4 QAA will design and undertake a review of International Foundation Programmes (IFPs) and International Year One Programmes delivered across the United Kingdom. It should not include programmes where they are delivered outside of the UK. The review will address issues identified following the focus on recruitment practices relating to international students in recent weeks. UUK will seek the participation of its members to identify a suitable cohort of up to 40 providers (approximately 25% of UUK's membership) to engage with the review process in liaison with other stakeholders. If there are greater than 40 providers expressing interest in participating QAA will select the sample from that cohort. In doing so, it will endeavour to ensure the participating providers represent a reasonable sample of university providers operating across the UK.

5 This will be a desk-based exercise. Participating providers will need to commit to providing evidence and information to QAA in line with the QAA's requirements and expectations (i.e. through the completion of any template QAA may specify). If QAA is unable to make conclusions based on the level or quality of evidence received, we will note this in our reporting. Similarly, if institutions decline to comply once they have agreed to participation, QAA will note this (in an anonymised form) in its operational reporting (see below) and highlight this in the thematic findings report. QAA notes that some higher education providers work with organisations commonly known as "pathway providers". Should a university opt to participate, but its pathway provider declines, we will note this (in an anonymised form) in the operational reporting, and also report findings accordingly in the final report.

6 Ahead of commencing work, QAA and UUK will agree a communications plan.

7 QAA will provide a detailed, anonymised, thematic report on the outcomes of the review to UUK, and the Quality Council for UK Higher Education, in advance of publication. QAA, as the UK's independent quality body, will publish the report. QAA intends to complete the report by the end of spring 2024. QAA will not produce individual institutional reports as part of this exercise.

8 QAA will provide confidential **operational** progress reports at relevant milestone points

to UUK and the Quality Council for UK Higher Education (i.e. reports that detail the progress being made in collecting evidence, engagement from providers, stage of report drafting etc.). To preserve independence, the findings and judgements will not be published or shared until the final report is available.

9 QAA recognises the need to balance provider anonymity in a thematic report, with the real risk that practice may be identified that falls below the relevant standards set by funders or regulators. Should QAA identify issues that we consider could indicate practice in the sector that would not meet the expectations of the relevant regulatory or funding bodies relating to the standards or quality of the programmes under review we will note this explicitly in our reporting to the Quality Council for UK Higher Education, although will not identify the individual institutions. It will then be for the funders and regulators to decide how to respond once the review findings are concluded (which could, in Scotland, Wales, or Northern Ireland, including commissioning the QAA to undertake a Concerns Scheme review under the arrangements that already exist in those nations). QAA will offer opportunities for institutions to receive feedback after the report has been finalised; noting this is not an institutional review this will be limited and is likely be offered in a verbal form only.

Review questions

10 QAA has identified three areas to be explored in the review. Included are subsections highlighting the various considerations for each question in respect to review process, evidence requirements and assessment against external reference points where appropriate.

1) Entry requirements for International Foundation Programmes (IFPs) and International Year One Programmes (IYOs)

- a. Are entry requirements for IFPs and IYOs equivalent to the entry requirements for domestic (UK) students onto equivalent level 3 and level 4 programmes in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, and equivalent level 6 and 7 programmes in Scotland?
 - i. *Providers will be asked to submit their entry requirements for IFPs and IYOs and domestic foundation programmes and undergraduate study programmes for equivalent subject areas for QAA to analyse. QAA will consider any observable differences, and also the relevant Core Practices of the UK Quality Code (2018 version).*
 - ii. *Providers will be given the opportunity to provide an optional written commentary to explain any differences that they are aware of in their existing entry requirements that QAA will consider in its analysis.*
- b. Are the entry requirements applied consistently for all entry points?
 - i. *QAA will request a sample of evidence of actual student entry grades for IFPs and IYOs and equivalent domestic programmes.*

2) International Foundation Programmes

- a. Is the academic standard of IFPs equivalent to domestic level 3 requirements in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, and domestic level 6 requirements in Scotland?
 - i. *QAA will undertake a review of samples of course documentation and learning and teaching materials, to determine whether or not they meet the standard of level 3 education in line with Ofqual's published level descriptor in England and Northern Ireland, the level 3 descriptor of the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales, and the level 6 descriptor of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework.*
 - ii. *QAA will undertake a review of assessment materials, to determine whether assessment is in line with the levels set out above as appropriate.*
- b. Are the standards achieved by students on IFPs equivalent to those of domestic students and on similar terms?
 - i. *QAA will undertake a review of assessment regulations, to identify whether students are offered similar attempts at success as available to A-level students or Scottish Higher students (for Scottish institutions).*
 - ii. *QAA will undertake a review of samples of assessed student work to*

determine whether standards are being achieved in practice.

- c. Do students on IFPs progress onto higher education on equivalent terms to students on domestic foundation programmes?
 - i. *Providers will be asked to submit information regarding the proportion of students that successfully complete IFPs and domestic foundation programmes for QAA to analyse.*

3) International Year One Programmes

- a. Is the standard of IYOs being appropriately set at level 4 of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications or level 7 of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework?
 - i. *QAA will undertake a review of samples of course documentation and learning and teaching materials, to determine whether or not they meet the standard of level 4 (FHEQ) or level 7 (SCQF) education as appropriate.*
 - ii. *QAA will undertake a review of assessment materials, to determine whether assessment is in line with level 4 education (FHEQ) or level 7 (SCQF) education as appropriate.*
- b. Are the standards achieved by students on these international programmes equivalent to those of the domestic students, and on similar terms?
 - i. *If IYO programmes are subject to different academic regulations QAA will undertake a review of assessment regulations, to identify whether students are offered similar attempts at success as entrants to other level 4 (FHEQ) or level 7 (SCQF) study. QAA will consider the relevant Core Practices of the UK Quality Code (2018 version).*
 - ii. *QAA will undertake a review of samples of assessed student work to determine whether standards are being achieved in practice.*
- c. In terms of progression, how do IYO programmes compare to domestic first years of undergraduate degrees?
 - i. *Providers will be asked to submit information regarding the proportion of students that successfully complete IYOs and equivalent level 4 (FHEQ) or level 7 (SCQF) activity for QAA to analyse.*

Indicative timescales

11 We intend that the below schedule should be appended to the commissioning letter.

Review Milestones	Start date	End Date
UUK agrees Review Questions and issues formal commissioning letter	22/2/2024	23/2/2024
QAA appoints officers to lead review and begins preparatory work	21/2/2024	1/3/2024
UUK contacts member institutions to seek participation and provides information (contact details) to QAA	23/2/2024	1/3/2024
QAA holds two briefing events for providers	11/3/2024	15/3/2024
Providers submit evidence electronically as required for Review Question 1	25/3/2024	28/3/2024
Providers submit evidence electronically as required for Review Question 2 and 3	25/3/2024	12/4/2024
QAA conducts desk-based analysis (review evidence)	25/3/2024	End May 2024
QAA draft report based on findings	May/June 2024	May/June 2024
Report sent to UUK and Quality Council for UK Higher Education	June 2024	June 2024
QAA publishes report	One week after above	

Assessment

12 QAA will appoint a review team for this work. This will consist of two QAA officers, who will undertake some of the assessment activity set out above (particularly that which requires data collection and analysis). QAA will also appoint a team of assessors from its assessor pool to conduct standards assessment of materials and assessed student work. The QAA officers will produce the reports based on the findings of the assessors. QAA staff and reviewers working on the review will have no personal connection when reviewing a provider.

13 As this is a review of a sample of providers, QAA does not intend to make conclusions with regard to individual higher education providers. The review team may highlight, anonymously, examples of any good or innovative practice in order to support future sector led enhancement activity. Further, in addition to reporting on the review questions above, QAA will also make conclusions regarding to what extent providers appear to have had regard to the Characteristics Statement for International Pathway Courses, in order to guide the sector on future areas for development. QAA will make recommendations in this context – where it considers sector practice could be improved, both in terms of the content and delivery of the programmes and in terms of practices surrounding them (most notably in relation to admissions). In doing so, QAA will draw upon existing sector reference points such as the Characteristics Statement and UK Quality Code to avoid a proliferation of other materials being developed.

Assumptions

- 14 Assumptions linked to the above, that are contingent on successful delivery of the review are:
- a. The timely agreement between QAA and UUK of this scoping document and sign-off on the deliverables, to allow QAA to implement the process and deliver the report in the required timescales.
 - b. UUK will request participation from all its members delivering these programmes, relying on institutions to self-identify and self-select. With the institutions' subsequent consent, QAA will be provided the details of the institutions within that cohort. This will form the basis of a sampling frame. QAA will select the sample from within that cohort if it is a number greater than 40.
 - c. QAA and UUK will agree a communications plan. This will include publishing the commissioning letter. UUK will communicate the scope of the review to their members and have agreement from the institutions to ensure that the QAA review team will have full cooperation and access to evidence. Where individual institutions work with separate organisations (commonly known as pathway providers) to deliver programmes in scope, agreements reached with the UUK member organisation will normally mean assumed cooperation from the pathway provider.
 - d. That UUK work to ensure that providers engaged with this process deliver the evidence to the timescales agreed for the project.
 - e. That individual institutions will not be identified in the report or be identifiable based on the information included in the report.
 - f. That the institutions will not have any right of reply or opportunity to comment on the report as they are not being named and will not be identifiable.

- g. That the review team will include QAA officers and independent assessors.
- h. That the review will use a desk-based analysis methodology.
- i. For certain evidence requirements, QAA will produce templates that providers will complete in order to ensure consistency of approach.
- j. The review will include opportunities for online engagement (either individually or collectively) with participating providers to ensure clear communication of the scope and activities to be undertaken. QAA anticipates these will take place early in the assessment process and will not be needed later in the process (which could have the effect of delaying the timeline for report delivery).
- k. That there will be no requests for significant additional evidence and any additional communication with institutions, after the initial provision of evidence, will be focused on clarifications.
- l. The evidence and the work of the review team will be treated with the highest level of confidentiality.

Independence

- 15 As with all QAA's review work, our independence and impartiality as an expert quality body are paramount. Our internal policies and procedures ensure that QAA staff and reviewers working on the review will have no personal connection when reviewing a provider, and that there will be complete separation of information between the review and any work undertaken elsewhere within QAA in support of the sector, including in relation to issues covered within the review. QAA's findings will not be influenced by UUK nor by any provider or third party. QAA will publish its report regardless of the findings.

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