Revising the UK Quality Code 2023-24: Context and Background

November 2023

Introduction

This document provides context and background to the work QAA is undertaking to review and revise the UK Quality Code. It offers information on the nature of the Quality Code and how it is used, along with information on the sector discussions held to date. It concludes by outlining the next steps towards publishing a refreshed Quality Code.

The UK Quality Code articulates the principles of UK higher education for securing academic standards and assuring and enhancing quality. QAA facilitates its development and implementation for, and on behalf of, the sector.

The current version of the Quality Code was published in 2018. Since that date, the regulatory position in England has changed significantly and there have been developments in the other UK nations that mean it is timely to consider the future scope and structure of the Quality Code. In particular, this provides an opportunity for all of the nations to consider how the Quality Code will continue to be used by providers, students and key stakeholders across the UK.

QAA has engaged in a series of sector-wide discussions about the structure, content and value of the Quality Code. The current feedback survey is the latest step in that set of discussions.

Background to the Quality Code

The UK Quality Code is based on decades of reflection by the sector as a whole - including staff, students and other stakeholders such as employers and professional bodies - on the essential nature of UK higher education. The current version of the Quality Code is its third iteration, the original Code of Practice having its origins in the Dearing Inquiry. The Quality Code is recognised internationally and, as such, supports the positive global reputation of UK higher education.

The Quality Code remains a key reference point in the quality frameworks for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In England, providers need to comply with the Office for Students' Regulatory Framework and Conditions of Registration. Engaging with the Quality Code is voluntary for providers based in England, except for those providers reviewed against the Quality Code using QAA's Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) method.

All providers across the UK can use the Quality Code to satisfy themselves, external stakeholders and international partners that their quality processes support enhancement above the baseline. Because the Code aligns to the European Standards and Guidelines

(ESG), it offers providers an internationally-recognised framework through which they can demonstrate their delivery of a high-quality student experience, enabling students to succeed in their studies and progress their personal and professional goals.

From our discussions with the sector, we know the Quality Code is used in a variety of important ways. These include by providers to evaluate their strategies, policies and practices; by reviewers to underpin peer review processes; and by students to support their engagement with institutions on the nature of their learning experience. It also acts as an important source of advice and guidance for providers when they are developing their policies and practices. For example, it is evident from our discussions that some elements of the guidance contained in the second edition of the Quality Code are still used actively by providers and by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs).

Changes from the 2018 edition of the Quality Code

The 2018 Quality Code comprises four high level Expectations for Standards and Quality, underpinned by Core and Common Practices. In addition, but not a formal part of the Code, there are 12 Advice and Guidance themes which are designed to support providers in developing and maintaining effective quality assurance practices.

The proposed 2023 version of the Quality Code comprises 12 Sector-Agreed Principles identifying the features that are fundamental to securing academic standards and offering a high-quality student learning experience in the UK. These Principles are supported by Key Practices that set out the ways in which a provider can demonstrate they are adhering to the Sector-Agreed Principles.

The Sector-Agreed Principles and Key Practices will be accompanied by underpinning Advice and Guidance topics. The Advice and Guidance is not part of the current feedback survey, but we will begin discussions to revise those topics once the Quality Code survey outcomes have been analysed. Our intention is to engage QAA Members and sector colleagues extensively in the revisions to the Advice and Guidance.

Sector discussions

We have engaged a wide range of sector bodies and networks in discussing the future scope, structure and content of the Quality Code. Annex 1 shows those we have met and continue to engage with including three roundtable events we held during January-March 2023. These roundtables were online and open to QAA Members and other sector colleagues.

A digest of the feedback received through these conversations was presented at our in-person Member Network Conference on 20 April 2023 at which we lead a half-day workshop focused on the Quality Code. This in-person event was followed by an online version of the workshop, to which QAA Members and other sector colleagues were invited. These two workshops engaged nearly 200 delegates.

Once we had a preferred structure and some early views on how the Quality Code could adapt to provide most value to the sector, we held a series of eight consultative events over summer 2023, each focused on one or two of sector-agreed principles within the Code plus the associated Key Practices. Annex 1 details attendance at those events.

Feedback on the structure of the Quality Code

Feedback gathered on the structure of the Quality Code highlighted:

- The importance of the refreshed Quality Code linking to other frameworks including the European Standards and Guidelines.

- Considerable support for sector-led principles to be included in the Quality Code, with a clear link between the introductory part of the Quality Code and the Advice and Guidance.

- The importance of being explicit about the value and relevance of the Quality Code across the UK.

Opinion was divided on the extent to which there was an appetite for the Quality Code changing significantly, with some feeling there had already been enough change and others indicating we should not lose the opportunity to be more radical.

Overall, a model with the following features gained the most support:

- Alignment to the European Standards and Guidelines.

- A whole UK approach rather than leaning towards any national framework.

- A brief overview of the features that UK higher education values most, which could act as a useful introduction for those who are not quality specialists.

- Navigation between the constituent parts of the Quality Code and the underpinning Advice and Guidance.

Feedback on the content of the Quality Code

The summer series of events provided detailed feedback on the Sector-Agreed Principles and Key Practices that we outlined. Key elements of that feedback included:

- There was overall support for the proposed structure of the Quality Code and participants thought the principles represented what was important to UK higher education and aligned well to the European Standards and Guidelines.

- There was widespread support for the increased emphasis on student engagement and partnership.

- There was strong support for the new principles on strategic leadership, resourcing and the use of data.

- There was support for the refreshed Quality Code having an enhancement focus, although in the early discussions there were differing views of where enhancement should sit within the Quality Code. Feedback at the workshops tended to favour enhancement being articulated as a set of practices or an approach, as opposed to particular outcomes. By the time of the summer series, most participants believed that the Principles and Key Practices included a focus on enhancement which could then be addressed in more detail in the accompanying Advice and Guidance. Opinion was divided over whether the Principles as drafted at that time offered enough stretch for the sector. Several participants thought that it was for providers individually to build on the Principles and identify enhancement based on their context and stage of development.

- In the early discussions there were mixed views on the Quality Code being extended to include a tertiary focus. There was support for the Quality Code addressing student transitions but less clarity on the value of the Code applying to levels of study other than higher education. There may be different views in the different UK nations.

- It was considered that equality, diversity and inclusion should have greater prominence in the Principles and potentially in the introductory text of the Quality Code. This could usefully address the applicability of the Principles to students with different characteristics, different modes of study, and a diversity of provision.

- It was also highlighted that there should be a Principle added to directly address learning, teaching and assessment.

- There was support for including a glossary of key terms.

Current draft version

We are now presenting a full version of the Quality Code for feedback from the sector. We invite comment on all aspects of the document, but with particular focus on:

- the detailed content and wording of the Principles and Key Practices of the proposed Quality Code

- the proposed structure and design of the Quality Code.

We have not yet revised the Advice and Guidance. We will begin work on that once the outcomes of the current sector survey on the Quality Code are known. Our intention is to create a schedule for reviewing the current 12 sections of the Advice and Guidance over a three-year period, inviting QAA Members and sector colleagues to form an advisory group for each section. The aim is to facilitate deep reflection and broad applicability of the Advice and Guidance.

Next steps

Responses are invited through a UK-wide online survey which will remain open until **Friday 19 January 2024 at 5pm**. We are also holding a number of online events which provide a further opportunity for QAA Members and other sector colleagues to engage with QAA and each other to discuss the proposed version of the Quality Code.

Online feedback events

Book your place via our dedicated web page.

- Monday 27 November 2023 - 11:00-12:30 (Scotland only)
- Wednesday 29 November 2023 - 11:00-12:30 (Open to all)
- Tuesday 5 December 2023 - 10:00-11:30 (Northern Ireland only)
- Tuesday 12 December 2023 - 10:00-11:30 (Wales only)
- Wednesday 13 December 2023 - 11:00-12:30 (Open to all)

Annex 1

This appendix shows engagement in the discussions on the Quality Code so far. The data does not include those who attended the in-person workshop (held in April 2023) as part of the QAA Member Network Conference or the online version of that workshop (May 2023). These two workshops attracted nearly 200 delegates.

Sector bodies

- Association of Colleges
- GuildHE (Quality Managers)
- Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW)
- Scottish Funding Council (SFC)
- QAA (Staff)

Sector groups and committees

- Academic Registrars' Council (ARC) and ARC Quality Practitioners' Group
- Quality Strategy Network (Executive)
- Quality Arrangements in Scottish HE (QASHE)
- Russell Group Quality Practitioners
- Independent HE

Roundtable sessions (January-March 2023)

- England - 95 institutions
- Scotland - 9 institutions
- Wales - 3 institutions
- Northern Ireland - 11 institutions
- Colleges - 15 colleges
- Sector bodies/agencies - 5

QAA groups and networks

- PVC Network
- College HE Policy and Practice Network
- Specialist and Independent Provider Network
- Student Quality Network
- PSRB Forum
- Student Strategic Advisory Committee
- International Partnership, Policy and Practice Network
- Wales Quality Network
- The Quality Forum (TQF) Scotland

Attendance at the Getting it Right: The UK Quality Code Summer Series

	England	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland	Sector bodies
A strategic approach to managing quality and standards Resources to deliver a high-quality learning experience 23/08/2023	52	8	4	3	4
Supporting students as they transition through higher education 24/08/2023	34	5	1	2	3
Engaging students as partners in quality and standards 29/08/2023	42	3	1	0	4
Using data to inform and evaluate quality and support enhancement Monitoring and evaluation of programmes, practices and processes 30/08/2023	50	7	3	1	4
Partnership working 31/08/2023	47	8	3	1	4
Programme design, development and approval Concerns, Complaints and appeals 05/09/2023	50	4	3	1	3
Information, recruitment, selection and admission 06/09/2023	16	2	0	0	3
External quality review 11/09/2023	43	9	1	2	3