



# **Scottish Quality Concerns Scheme**

**June 2022**

## Contents

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>What is the Scottish Quality Concerns Scheme?</b> ..... | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>What can quality concerns be raised about?</b> .....    | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>How to raise a quality concern</b> .....                | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>How we consider quality concerns raised</b> .....       | <b>5</b>  |
| <b>No surprises</b> .....                                  | <b>5</b>  |
| <b>Outline of process</b> .....                            | <b>6</b>  |
| Eligibility review.....                                    | 6         |
| Concern Assessment.....                                    | 7         |
| Note and record the information .....                      | 8         |
| Referral .....   | 8         |
| Ongoing monitoring.....                                    | 9         |
| Action plan .....  | 9         |
| Targeted peer review .....                                 | 9         |
| Information sharing, data and record keeping .....         | 9         |
| <b>Appendix 1</b> .....                                    | <b>11</b> |

## What is the Scottish Quality Concerns Scheme?

1 The Scheme provides an opportunity for students, staff and other parties to raise concerns about the quality and standards of Scottish higher education to the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA, 'we', 'us', 'our') Scotland. QAA is the UK's independent higher education quality assurance agency and QAA Scotland works in partnership with the sector to assure and enhance the quality of higher education in Scotland.

2 The aim of the Scheme is to promote confidence in the Scottish higher education sector by offering a responsive means for exploring issues brought to QAA Scotland's attention outside regular review arrangements. The process is designed to be proportionate and to allow for issues to be resolved as early as possible.

## What can quality concerns be raised about?

3 Quality concerns raised under this Scheme relate to how higher education institutions (HEIs) in Scotland manage their academic standards, the quality of learning opportunities, and the information that they make available about their provision. QAA Scotland considers concerns raised under the Scheme to safeguard and improve the overall quality of Scottish higher education by addressing weaknesses within a particular HEI. **We do not resolve individual complaints against HEIs and we are unable to provide redress or compensation to any individual submitting a concern to us** (see paragraph 18 for information on how to raise such complaints). The Scheme looks at systemic issues and, accordingly, potential outcomes of the Scheme include the initiation of process changes and improvements rather than individual redress.

4 We can only consider quality concerns raised about academic standards and quality of:

- HEIs in Scotland
- programmes/courses provided by the Scottish sector HEIs, whether delivered by the HEIs directly or through working with other organisations and partners in the UK or overseas
- HEIs in Scotland that have entered the detailed scrutiny stage of an application for degree awarding powers or university title.

5 This means that we cannot investigate potential quality concerns about alternative providers that do not subscribe to QAA and have not applied to us for educational oversight or reviews for specific course designation (unless they are involved in delivering learning opportunities with a partner HEI that does subscribe to QAA) or courses that do not lead to higher education awards or to specific credit towards higher education awards.

6 We can only consider quality concerns about academic standards and quality and the information HEIs make available about their provision. Information about academic standards and quality is provided below and includes definitions, expectations as defined by the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#) (the Quality Code) and outlines indicative examples of where quality concerns can be raised which reflect the Core and Common practices outlined in the Quality Code. In addition, quality concerns can be raised in respect of sector reference points including [Subject Benchmark Statements](#), [Qualifications Frameworks](#), [Scottish Funding Council \(SFC\) guidance on quality](#), and the [UK Professional Standards Framework for teaching and supporting learning in higher education](#), which provide supporting context to the Expectations of the Quality Code outlined in Figures 1 and 2 below.

7 Some matters relating to concerns or complaints about the information HEIs publish, including in prospectuses, might be able to be investigated by the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA). Additional information about CMA can be found on the [Government website](#).

**Figure 1: Academic standards**

**Academic standards definition:**

The standards set and maintained by HEIs for their courses (programmes and modules) and expected for their awards. The threshold academic standard is the minimum acceptable level of achievement that a student has to demonstrate to be eligible for an academic award.

**Expectations for standards are that:**

- the academic standards of courses meet the requirements of the relevant national qualifications framework
- the value of qualifications awarded to students at the point of qualifications and over time is in line with sector-recognised standards.

**Concerns can be raised where:**

- the provider does not ensure that threshold standards are consistent with the relevant national qualifications frameworks
- the provider does not ensure that students who are awarded qualifications have the opportunity to achieve standards beyond the threshold level that are reasonably comparable with those achieved in other UK providers
- where a provider works in partnership with other organisations, it does not have in place effective arrangements to ensure that the standards of its awards are credible and secure irrespective of where or how courses are delivered or who delivers them
- the provider does not use external expertise, assessment and classification processes that are reliable, fair and transparent
- the provider does not review its Core practices for standards regularly and uses the outcomes to drive improvement and enhancement.

**Examples of concerns relating to standards that can be raised:**

- inadequate guidance for examiners on marking of examination scripts
- systemic failure to follow assessment regulations
- systemic weaknesses in the management of academic standards when delivering learning opportunities with others.

## Figure 2: Academic quality

### Quality definition:

A comprehensive term referring to how, and how well, HEIs manage teaching and learning opportunities to help students progress and succeed.

### Expectations for quality are that:

- 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.

### Concerns can be raised where:

- the provider does not have a reliable, fair and inclusive admissions system
- the provider does not design and/or deliver high-quality courses
- the provider does not have sufficiently appropriately qualified and skilled staff to deliver a high-quality academic experience
- the provider does not have sufficient and appropriate facilities, learning resources and student support services to deliver a high-quality academic experience
- the provider does not actively engage students, individually and collectively, in the quality of their educational experience
- the provider does not have fair and transparent procedures for handling complaints and appeals which are accessible to all students
- where the provider offers research degrees, it does not deliver these in appropriate and supportive research environments
- where a provider works in partnership with other organisations, it does not have in place effective arrangements to ensure that the academic experience is high-quality irrespective of where or how courses are delivered and who delivers them
- the provider does not support all students to achieve successful academic and professional outcomes
- the provider does not review its Core practices for quality regularly and use the outcomes to drive improvement and enhancement
- the provider's approach to managing quality does not take account of external expertise
- the provider does not engage students individually and collectively in the development, assurance and enhancement of the quality of their educational experience.

### Examples of concerns relating to quality that can be raised:

- systemic inadequate support for placement or distance learning
- systemic weaknesses in the management of academic quality when delivering learning opportunities with others
- inadequate processes and regulations to meet quality and standards requirements.

8 Following submission of a quality concern, we will consider whether matters identified raise broader issues about the management of quality and standards and this will determine the action taken. Information about isolated mistakes or occurrences of bad practice, or unverified anecdotes or hearsay, will not normally be sufficient to trigger further action but will be kept on record to enable trends to be monitored. Although we will not investigate individual complaints, we can consider issues raised where these provide evidence of broader failings in the management of academic standards and/or quality. We therefore will consider issues which indicate that there are possible serious systemic or procedural issues and whether the circumstances described have the potential to be repeated.

9 QAA Scotland will only consider quality concerns that are serious and systemic in nature and that relate to, affect, or have the potential to affect:

- a number of students, including where the student academic experience does not meet the reasonable expectations of a group of students
- the collective student interest
- the reputation of the sector as a whole.

10 We cannot consider quality concerns linked to:

- matters of academic judgement, such as assessment results and assessment board decisions, and requests for assessed work to be re-marked
- individual cases and requests for remedy or tuition fee refunds
- grievances against individual staff
- problems that the HEI has already rectified
- isolated mistakes or occurrences of bad practice
- historic issues where there is no evidence in relation to ongoing impact or repeat concerns raised by the same individual on the same issue.

11 Where a matter raised as part of a concern is being dealt with by formal legal proceedings, the Concerns process will be suspended pending the outcome of the legal proceedings.

## How to raise a quality concern

12 Before making a submission, you must first raise the issue(s) directly with the higher education institution (HEI) through its internal procedures which gives institutions the chance to resolve the matter with you to your mutual satisfaction. As a result, any concern submitted should only focus on outstanding issues. As the process will not provide redress or consideration of individual complaints, you will be asked to indicate the potential wider implications of the issue raised.

13 Anyone wishing to raise a concern should make a submission to us. We will decide whether the issues raised provide evidence of broader quality concerns about the management of academic standards, quality and/or the information HEIs make available about their provision. This will likely be a consideration of the history of quality concerns raised related to a particular issue, alongside other intelligence. Consequently, quality concerns raised may not result in immediate action but may be noted and potentially inform future action as outlined in the section on Concerns Assessment (paragraphs 28-30).

14 Submissions to the Scottish Quality Concerns Scheme should be made using the Quality Concerns Submission Form and **must be accompanied by supporting documentary evidence** to justify any inquiries to the HEI concerned. Those raising quality concerns could consider making a request under the *Freedom of Information Act* or by

means of a Subject Access Request to the HEI to obtain information to support their submission.

15 Your completed and signed form should be returned by email to [ARCAAdmin@gaa.ac.uk](mailto:ARCAAdmin@gaa.ac.uk) or, where email is not possible, by post to:

Scottish Quality Concerns Scheme  
QAA Scotland  
18 Bothwell Street  
Glasgow  
G2 6NU

16 If you require us to communicate in a particular way, such as due to a disability, please contact us at [ARCAAdmin@gaa.ac.uk](mailto:ARCAAdmin@gaa.ac.uk) or telephone 0141 572 3420.

17 Quality concerns about academic standards and quality are not regarded as qualifying disclosures under the *Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998*. Those submitting quality concerns to QAA are therefore not offered legal protection under the Act, so if you wish to remain anonymous you need to make this clear on the Quality Concerns Submission Form. Please bear in mind, however, that the provider may be able to identify those raising quality concerns from the nature of the issues raised.

## How we consider quality concerns raised

18 The Scheme forms part of the Scottish sector enhancement-led approach to quality. This means that the Scheme will support early identification and resolution of issues raised.

19 The Scheme is not intended to address isolated occurrences and therefore issues will normally only be taken forward when supported by broader evidence received by QAA Scotland. This may include information received through several mechanisms including reporting on institution-led review, institutional liaison meetings and external institutional peer review. The Scheme outlines the process for providing information regarding quality concerns and how QAA Scotland will use that information.

20 The Scheme serves to respond to the issue rather than the individual; it is not a complaints process and QAA Scotland will not provide detailed responses to individuals about action taken as a result of quality concerns raised. Individual complaints should be raised through the appropriate HEI complaints process or if the HEI's process has already been exhausted, with the [Scottish Public Services Ombudsman \(SPSO\)](#). These processes are in place to enable individual remedy to complaints raised. By contrast, information gained by QAA Scotland through this Scheme is used to identify where the issues raised indicate serious systemic or procedural problems. As such, it is not appropriate to share detailed outcomes with those raising quality concerns as the matter will go beyond the individual issue raised. QAA Scotland is, however, committed to a transparent approach and accordingly publishes all reports where a targeted peer review is initiated as well as publishing an annual summary report of quality concerns. The person raising the concern will also be updated as to the action taken at the eligibility review and concern assessment process stages but for the reasons outlined above, no further updates will be provided.

## No surprises

21 Since the introduction of the enhancement-led approach in 2003, the Scottish HE sector has adopted an informal protocol for sharing information often referred to as 'no surprises'. Under the 'no surprises' arrangements, Scottish HEIs have regularly sought

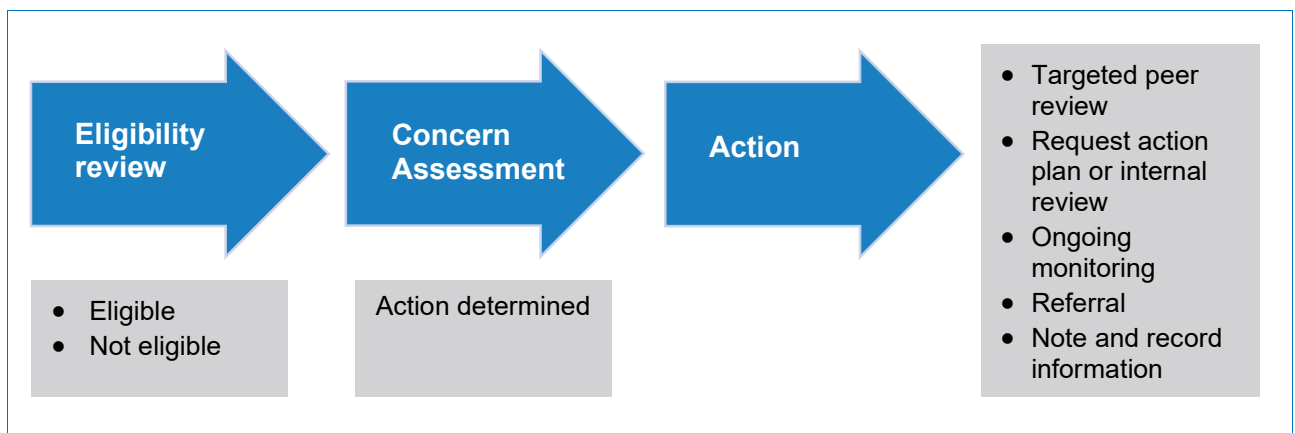
advice from QAA Scotland about approaches they might adopt to avoid potential risks to quality and standards, often in respect of new developments such as collaborative activity. Equally, HEIs have informed QAA Scotland of any potentially adverse outcome in relation to quality and/or academic standards - for example, critical outcomes arising from institution-led review processes or from professional body engagements. Early sharing of such information is a welcome and constructive aspect of the relationship between QAA Scotland and the HEIs. The 'no surprises' arrangements operate on a basis of transparency and openness, and this will continue to underpin our work. QAA will conduct concerns with courtesy, respect and fairness. Quality concerns will be considered by senior QAA Scotland staff who are in regular contact with institutions and may fulfil the role of institutional liaison. In order to ensure that there are no conflicts of interest, the Concern Assessment process ensures involvement of at least one additional senior staff member when actions are determined.

## Outline of process

22 The process is intended to enable early resolution of potential systemic issues raised and to support the enhancement approach, as well as effective follow-up and consideration of lessons learnt. As such, the information received from quality concerns may be used in different ways and may not result in immediate action.

23 Upon submission of the form, you will receive an acknowledgement within five working days and there is the potential that you may subsequently be contacted for more information. The quality concerns process consists of three main stages: eligibility review, concern assessment and the follow-up action.

**Figure 3: Scottish Quality Concerns Scheme process outline**



## Eligibility review

24 Following the acknowledgement of a concern, the matter will be referred to a senior QAA Officer who will manage the concern and may be supported by other QAA staff. The senior QAA Officer will conduct an eligibility review to determine whether the issues raised can be considered under the Scheme. The eligibility review will consider:

- whether the concern is about a subject and provider that we can look at. This will include considering the case against the expectations of the Quality Code
- whether it has gone through all internal procedures operated by the HEI - for example, academic appeals and complaints



- whether it has been submitted on the appropriate form and is accompanied by documentary evidence
- whether there is enough detail and information in the submission; where further clarity will facilitate the consideration of the information received, additional information may be requested or a meeting with the person raising the concern may be arranged.

25 QAA Scotland will not routinely contact the HEI where cases are outside of the remit of the Scheme. Where the above criteria have not been met, QAA Scotland will contact the person raising the concern to advise that the concern is not eligible. In all cases where the above eligibility criteria have been met, the QAA Officer will summarise the matter(s) being raised and will provide this, along with a full copy of the concern (anonymised where requested) and the supporting evidence to the quality contact(s) at the institution who will be asked to provide a written response outlining:

- information about institutional processes and approaches to the issue raised and any supporting evidence.
- any enhancement, learning or changes in progress or proposed.

26 Given the 'no surprises' approach that operates in the Scottish higher education sector, it is expected that HEIs will cooperate openly and constructively with any requests for further information including providing additional documentation in order to provide information on the institution's approach and to enable early resolution.

27 The eligibility review outcome will be informed by both the quality concern submission and the written response from the institution. The QAA Officer will use this information to consider the final eligibility criterion of 'whether there is the potential for the matter raised to be systemic'. If this is the case, the person raising the concern will be notified and the matter will proceed to a Concern Assessment.

## Concern Assessment

28 A Concern Assessment meeting will be held between the QAA Officer, staff supporting the concern and an additional senior member of QAA Scotland staff who has not been involved in the matter. The QAA Officer will provide a summary of the issue and summary of evidence provided by the person raising the concern and the HEI, as well as recommendations for proposed action. The purpose of the Concern Assessment is to determine the action that will be taken. Factors that will be taken into consideration will include:

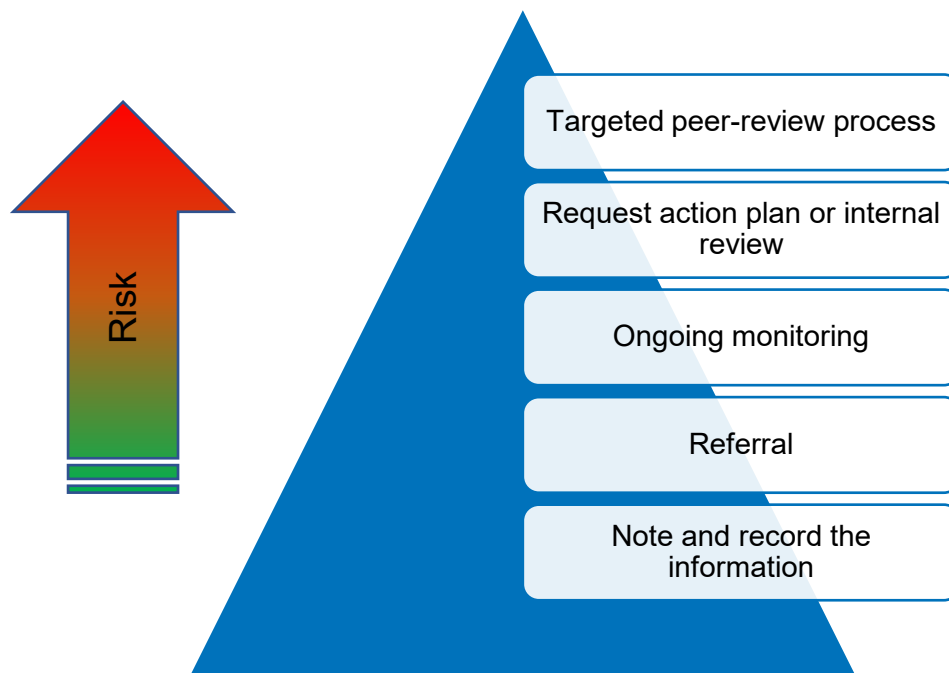
- the timelier means of addressing the issue
- the extent to which the matter(s) raised puts quality and/or academic standards at risk currently or potentially in the future
- the action taken or being undertaken by the HEI to address the matter(s) including whether the HEI has resolved the issue or is likely to resolve the matter by the action it is in the process of taking (careful consideration will be given to the timeframe within which the HEI intends to complete action)
- whether the issues raised have been identified separately through other quality processes or quality concerns and whether the concern adds new information to a known issue.

29 The process is intended to provide the HEI with the opportunity to address any shortcoming providing the interests of other parties are protected in the meantime. In most

cases, the effective operation of the 'no surprises' approach will mean that QAA Scotland would already have been alerted to an issue and would be aware of the action the HEI was taking to address it before being contacted by an individual or other organisation. In most cases this would remove the need to proceed to a targeted peer review. QAA retains the right to seek independent specialist external expertise to support the consideration of quality concerns.

30 A Concern Assessment will also be held to confirm if a matter should be escalated or de-escalated (for example, following the submission of an action plan, a matter may be reclassified to the 'ongoing monitoring' category or if an action plan is not completed, a matter may be referred to a 'targeted peer review'.) We will record actions taken under each category as part of our annual reporting. The following outcomes may arise from a Concern Assessment:

**Figure 4: Concern Assessment Outcomes**



### Note and record the information

31 In all instances where an issue reaches a Concern Assessment, the information will be retained on record in accordance with QAA data protection and retention policies outlined in the section on Information sharing, data and record keeping (paragraphs 38-43). Such information may be used to inform future quality concerns and intelligence in respect of the HEI and will be shared as part of the evidence for a HEI review.

### Referral

32 QAA may refer quality concerns externally if components of the matter relate to the jurisdictions of other bodies as appropriate - for example, to the Consumer Markets Authority.

## Ongoing monitoring

33 In cases of ongoing monitoring, the case will be referred to the QAA Scotland institutional liaison contact for the HEI concerned, to initiate discussions with the institution about the matter (which may include providing advice or guidance). Ongoing action and progress will be monitored through the institution liaison visits and external institutional peer review as appropriate. Such items will become standing items on institution liaison visit agendas and information relating to the concern will be shared with review teams. Where issues remain ongoing, they may be escalated.

## Action plan

34 Where the HEI recognises that action is required in respect of the matters raised, but has not yet taken action to resolve it, QAA may (where this would enable timely resolution) request an action plan, HEI internal or commissioned review or alternative proposal to be completed by a date agreed with the HEI.

## Targeted peer review

35 Where a concern proceeds to a targeted peer review, QAA Scotland will adopt an approach through which the scale and nature of any peer review can be tailored to the circumstances of the issue under consideration on a case-by-case basis. A targeted peer review will normally be undertaken where there is an accumulation of evidence in respect of the matter raised and in relation to the level of risk identified to quality and standards. The process for a targeted peer review is outlined in Appendix 1 and will include provision of documentation, analysis of data and documentation, and a review visit including meetings with staff and students as appropriate.

36 QAA Scotland will contact the HEI to arrange a targeted peer-review visit. A review visit will typically last between one and two days depending on a number of factors including the complexity of the issue(s), the number of programmes affected, and whether the provider has additional delivery partners. Requests for additional information will be tailored to minimise the burden on the institution. The HEI will also be invited to identify and provide any further evidence that it considers relevant.

37 HEIs subject to a targeted peer review are unable to appeal against the recommendations but can make representations on grounds of flawed procedure on our part. A complaint of this nature should be raised through [QAA's Complaints procedure](#).

## Information sharing, data and record keeping

38 The person raising the quality concern will receive an initial acknowledgement and there may be a request for further information but there will not be ongoing communication with or provision of information to the person raising the concern beyond the process stage updates outlined in paragraph 20. This is because concerns will, by nature, go beyond the specifics of the issues identified in the initial submission. Annual reporting on quality concerns and full reports of any concerns that result in targeted peer review will be published.

39 We will keep the submission and correspondence on file for six years as per our retention policy and retain a log of quality concerns. It is important to record suitable data to enable us to fully review the concern, as well as using our concern information to track themes and trends. We process the personal information of individuals who submit quality

concerns to the Scheme on the basis of legitimate interest - the promotion and maintenance of quality and standards in higher education. Where we share quality concern information with other bodies (as described in the process), we will not share personal data (including name and contact details) relating to the person raising the quality concern if they have asked to remain anonymous. Where the person has asked to remain anonymous, we will either anonymise or pseudonymise the details we share, making every effort to protect the individual's identity. The personal details provided by individuals who submit quality concerns will be stored securely on our internal systems, with restricted access permissions applied. We retain information about the concern for six years following publication, before securely destroying it as per our document retention schedule and process personal information in accordance with our [Privacy Notice](#).

40 Where a submission to the Scottish Quality Concerns Scheme relates to a programme delivered by a third party (for example, through a collaborative arrangement with a degree-awarding body that subscribes to us), we will normally contact the provider and the awarding body will be informed that a concern has been received. If a case involves a targeted peer review, QAA Scotland will notify the awarding body in addition to the provider and the SFC.

41 SFC will be provided with information about the issues raised under the Scheme as part of regular liaison and will specifically be informed in cases where there is an intention to proceed to targeted peer review.

42 We may need to collect and share information with a number of sources including independent specialist expertise and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) when considering the concern and we may do this orally, in hard copy or by email. Information and intelligence from concerns may also be shared with teams conducting the next review of the HEI.

43 QAA Scotland will publish an annual report on quality concerns received. Quality concerns that proceed to targeted peer review will result in full reports being published on QAA's website.

# Appendix 1

## Targeted peer-review process

A targeted peer-review process provides the opportunity to examine the evidence relating to specific issues identified under the Scottish Quality Concerns Scheme and to make recommendations where it is determined that the issue raised reflects serious systemic or procedural shortcomings by the HEI.

## Operational Guidance

This process is accompanied by Operational Guidance, which is intended to support institutions and reviewers participating with the method.

## External reference points

In formulating a response to the issues raised, the institution is expected to make use of a variety of external reference points. Some of these reference points will be common to all Scottish institutions, such as the [Scottish Funding Council \(SFC\) guidance to institutions on quality](#) and the [Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework \(SCQF\)](#). Some reference points will be UK-wide, such as the [UK Quality Code](#), and others will be international, such as those developed through the [Bologna process](#). There are a number of specific references that Scottish higher education institutions are expected to address. These include the [UK Quality Code](#), incorporating [Subject Benchmark Statements](#), and the higher education qualifications framework that, in Scotland, is established within the [SCQF](#). Institutions will also have regard to the [UK Professional Standards Framework for Teaching and Supporting Learning](#).

## Nature and scope of targeted peer review

The targeted peer-review method seeks to:

- be open and transparent, forward-looking and conducted in a collaborative spirit
- support enhancement where issues are identified
- support the sector to secure academic standards and enhance the student learning experience
- target identified areas identified and ensure requests for additional information will be tailored to minimise the burden on the institution
- relate to the wider [Quality Enhancement Framework in Scotland](#).

The scope of the targeted peer review is determined by the issue raised in respect of academic standards and quality and the information HEIs make available about their provision. By nature, the review will be targeted and is likely to focus on matters relating to assurance or the management of standards rather than being enhancement-led. Where issues raised relate to enhancement activity, the targeted peer-review process will focus on the management of change and the steps taken by the institution to mitigate risk in relation to quality, academic standards and the student experience.

## Targeted peer-review method

We will write to the HEI setting out the scope and nature of the quality concern and asking for a (further) response and copies of relevant evidence. This response should be reflective, evaluative and evidence-based, identifying and addressing potential risks to quality and academic standards, as well as outlining strengths. QAA Scotland will liaise with the

institution in relation to timescales for the submission of documentation and the review. It may be necessary for this visit to take place at short notice and we would expect the provider to make reasonable efforts to facilitate this. SFC will also be notified that a targeted peer review is taking place.

The targeted peer review will be managed by a senior member of QAA Scotland staff and will include a team of at least three peer reviewers as outlined below. In addition, the team may be supported by independent specialist expertise depending on the nature of the issue and its complexity. We will check to make sure no one involved in the review has a conflict of interest with the HEI concerned as per the QAA policy.

The targeted peer-review team will consider all evidence and intelligence received by QAA in respect of the matter and the responses and evidence submitted by the institution at each stage of the quality concerns process. The team may request further information. The review visit will typically last between one and two days, depending on the scope of the matter(s) raised. During the visit, the team will hold meetings with staff (from the HEI and partners), students and graduates as appropriate and the process will include opportunities for the team and the main contact from the institution to clarify matters relating to the progress of the review.

Following the review visit, the team will meet with the QAA Officer managing the review to agree its conclusions.

A targeted peer review will result in QAA Scotland producing and publishing a full report of the findings. The report will identify: the nature of the matters considered; the evidence considered; the findings of the review and any recommendations and action the HEI is asked to take. The team will recommend to the HEI how they may ensure that the problems identified do not reoccur and will comment on the steps the HEI is taking, or intends to take, to remedy the situation for current students. The HEI will have the opportunity to comment on the factual accuracy of the report. The information from full reports may be incorporated into [thematic reporting](#) undertaken by QAA to support learning at the sector level.

### **Targeted peer-review team**

QAA Scotland allocates reviewers to targeted peer-review teams. The precise composition of the team is flexible and should address the nature of the matter raised. The minimum team size is three peer reviewers, to include: a student reviewer, one UK-based reviewer and a coordinating reviewer as outlined in Reviewer roles below. The maximum team size is four and could include additional UK-based reviewers. The team may additionally be supported by independent subject expertise. Reviewers would not be allocated to the team if they are currently employed by the institution or with which they have a conflict of interest.

### **Reviewer roles**

Some reviewer roles have specific responsibilities for gathering and analysing information during the targeted review visits but the conclusions are evidence-based and represent the collective view of the targeted peer-review team.

All reviewers have responsibility for:

- reading and analysing the documentation provided
- participating in the review visits
- reaching conclusions on the basis of the information gathered during the review

- contributing to and commenting on the review reports (and action plan as appropriate).

The **Student Reviewer** brings a learner perspective to the review.

The **Coordinating Reviewer** has responsibility for maintaining an overview of the targeted review progress and its outcomes. They have particular responsibility for proactively managing the review and the team. This will involve:

- liaising with QAA Scotland throughout the review and with the institution during the review visit
- maintaining a record of the team's decisions, and its discussions with staff and students
- supporting the team in identifying the evidence on which its views and conclusions are based.

Independent specialist expertise within or outwith higher education may additionally be identified to support the team in an advisory capacity to reflect the nature of the matter raised.

Reviewers have responsibility for preparing text for the draft report. All reviewers have responsibility for supporting the QAA Officer in editing the review report, providing additional information and evidence as necessary.

Each targeted peer review is managed by a senior QAA Officer who provides advice to the institution on its preparations for the review and supports the team in its initial analysis of documentation. The QAA Officer reserves the right to accompany the team during the review visit providing advice as appropriate. The QAA Officer, supported by the coordinating reviewer, is responsible for testing that the team's findings are based on adequate and identifiable evidence, and for editing the report.

### **Selection criteria for reviewers**

All members of review teams are selected by QAA Scotland according to the criteria identified in the external review method. QAA Scotland seeks student reviewer nominations from students' associations and Scottish higher education institutions. Student reviewers are eligible to undertake reviews for as long as they continue to meet the selection criteria, in particular provided it is not more than three years since they undertook study or held a sabbatical position in a Scottish higher education institution. QAA Scotland considers nominations from all UK higher education institutions for reviewers and coordinating reviewers. Independent specialist expertise may be drawn from specialist networks.

### **Reviewer training**

All targeted peer reviewers are required to undertake training for review methods that operate in Scotland and will additionally attend a briefing in respect of targeted peer review. In instances where independent specialist expertise is required in respect of the issues raised, such individuals will not form part of the review team but will be available to the team to provide advice and guidance on the areas to explore with the institution and in establishing recommendations. To support those recruited to teams for independent subject expertise, 'orientation' materials are provided in advance. These include: information on the characteristics of the Scottish higher education sector, the Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework, and the Quality Code.

## Outcomes

At the end of the targeted peer review, the team will normally make recommendations to the HEI. The recommendations will be evidenced-based and formed from analysis of the documentation and discussions with staff and students/graduates. Recommendations will be made to identify and address:

- development areas or weaknesses in the institution's arrangements for managing the quality of the student learning experience and/or securing the academic standards such that the quality of the student learning experience and/or the academic standards would be or are placed at risk if the institution did not take action
- development areas of weaknesses in the institution's capacity and/or commitment to identify and address potential risks to the quality of the student learning experience or the academic standards of its award
- development areas of weaknesses in meeting the full range of sector expectations in respect of external reference points.

QAA Scotland will inform SFC of recommendations or further action the HEI is asked to take. A full report of the review will be published on the QAA website.

Following a targeted peer review, the institution will be required to complete an action plan, with deadlines specified to support the implementation of the recommendations. In consultation with SFC, QAA Scotland will decide if the HEI's next external institutional peer review should be brought forward.<sup>1</sup>

The institution can make use of the QAA complaints procedure available on the [QAA website](#).

## Reporting

At the end of the targeted peer review we will report the findings on the QAA website, regardless of the outcome. The HEI concerned has the opportunity to comment on the report before it is published.

## Follow-up activity

The HEI action plan and identified timescales for completing action must be agreed with QAA Scotland and must fully address the recommendations. The HEI must ensure that it completes the action plan in a timely manner. QAA Scotland will monitor the HEI's progress towards completing the action plan and will require evidence of its completion. QAA Scotland will also report on progress to SFC. Delays in completing the action plan may result in the HEI's next review being brought forward.

The action plan procedure is as follows:

- i The HEI submits an action plan with timescales for completing action, which is agreed as fit-for-purpose by QAA Scotland, or returned to the HEI for further work.
- ii A senior member of QAA Scotland staff maintains contact with the HEI to monitor progress; timescales for such contact will be agreed between QAA and the HEI

---

<sup>1</sup> This will consist of the current review method operating in Scotland or where a review method is in the development stage, will revert to the previous iteration of the method.



- iii The HEI will contact QAA Scotland to indicate that the actions are complete, with evidence to support this view and QAA Scotland may meet with the HEI to confirm this.
- iv Depending on the nature of the actions, the QAA Scotland Officer may seek a view from other members of the targeted peer-review team on the extent to which the action plan has been completed - if the HEI's next external review is due to take place in the next nine months, QAA Scotland may ask the review team to comment on the extent to which the action plan has been addressed.
- v If QAA Scotland determines that actions remain to be completed, the QAA Scotland Officer will contact the HEI indicating what remains to be completed.
- vi Once QAA Scotland and the HEI are satisfied that the action plan has been implemented in full, the QAA Scotland Officer will write to the HEI, copied to SFC, confirming that the action plan has been completed and the recommendations addressed.
- vii A statement will be added to the QAA website outlining the context of the review and confirming that the action plan required has been implemented.

## Evaluation

QAA Scotland monitors the operation of targeted peer review on an ongoing basis, and undertakes regular evaluation of the effectiveness of the method, including our own role in its implementation and provides higher education institutions and reviewers the opportunity to provide structured feedback.

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2023  
Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

Tel: 0141 572 3420  
Web: [www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland)