

Substantive Change Report

by Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)

Register Committee

Decision of: 02/11/2020
 Report received on: 12/08/2020
 Agency registered since: 23/10/2013
 Last external review report: 21/06/2018
 Registration until: 30/06/2023
 Absented themselves from decision-making: Not applicable

Ref. RC28/C56

Ver. 1.0

Date 2020-11-20

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Attachments:

1. [Substantive Change Report & Annex by QAA](#)
2. [Clarification request of 20/10/20](#)
3. [Clarification response of 29/10/20](#)
4. [QAA response to further report of 01/3/21](#)
5. [EQAR extension of the response time, 25/3/21](#)

1. The Register Committee considered the Substantive Change Report of 12/08/2020.
2. The Register Committee noted that since its last external review (June 2018) QAA has introduced the following new external quality assurance activities:
 - *Quality and Standards Review (QSR)* in England
 - *Quality and Standards Review Monitoring and Intervention (QSR MI)* in England

The following QA activities have been changed:

 - *Gateway Quality Review Programme* in Wales (**GQRW**) replaced *Higher Education Review* (Wales)
 - the *New Degree Awarding Powers Test (New DAP's Test)* in England

The following QA activity was discontinued:

 - the *Quality Review Visit programme* in England and Northern Ireland
3. The Committee further noted that QAA has recently initiated a consultation process on a new external QA activity that will replace its Transnational Education review. The Register Committee thus invites QAA to submit a further change report to EQAR once the new Transnational Education review procedure has been adopted.

Gateway Quality Review Programme in Wales (GQRW)

4. The Committee understood that the GQRW largely follows the former Quality Review Visit (QRV) methodology for England/Northern Ireland which has been considered as part of QAA's 2018 external review. Through GQRW, QAA considers higher education institutions'

compliance with the baseline quality requirements set out by the regulatory body in Wales.

5. Based on the last external review of QAA and the detailed information provided in the Substantive Change Report, the Register Committee had no concerns that the ESG are complied with in the case of GQRW. The Committee nevertheless expects that this activity will be analysed in full as part of QAA's next renewal of registration.

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QAA Activities in England

6. The Committee understood that the changes in QAA's activity in England follow the adoption of the Higher Education Research Act in 2017 and QAA's appointment as the designated quality body by the Office for Students.
7. The Committee took note of the changes in QAA's funding arrangement in England, and in particular its impact on its staffing, which has dropped to more than half (in full time equivalent) in the past four years. While the panel's analysis of 2018 commended QAA for managing well through uncertain times, the Register Committee considered that the recent shift from governmental grants to commercial oriented activities is a major change that should be analysed in-depth in the next external review of QAA.
8. Considering the changes in the external QA activities carried out in England, the Committee noted the following concerns related to QSR, QSR MI and New DAP Test as follows:
 - I. Regarding the involvement of students in these three reviews, QAA stated that "where appropriate the team will include [expertise in subject areas relevant to the provider's provision and] student reviewers". As this wording left open the actual extent to which students were involved in these reviews, the Committee sought further clarifications from the agency.

In its response letter, the agency explained that students are included in these assessments "wherever possible", which was the case for approximately a third of the reviews carried out to date. The agency added that in cases where a student was not appointed to a team, at least one of the team members had to have a "current student engagement role".

The Register Committee concluded that this approach does not fully meet the requirement of the standard; the Committee considered that the standard seeks to assure a first-hand student perspective being present on the panel, which cannot be fully replaced by an academic or administrator in a student engagement role (ESG 2.4).

- II. The Register Committee noted that the reports resulting from the Quality and Standards Review Monitoring and Intervention (QSR MI) and some of the reports of the DAP Revocation and Variation

assessments are not published. While the Committee understands that such reports may include sensitive issues that are investigated on behalf of the regulator, the Committee underlined that the standard (ESG 2.6) clearly requires the publication of all reports and does not include such exceptions.

The Committee considers the agency's lack of publication of these reports particularly concerning since QSR MI reviews amount to a quarter of the total external activities carried out by QAA in England.

The Committee considers that the ESG seek to ensure full transparency due to the important public role of higher education. The Committee agrees that it can be necessary and justified to redact certain parts of a report in specific cases, e.g. where financial or personal information is concerned. In the view of the Committee this does, however, not justify a general decision not to publish any reports.

The Committee further underlined that the agency retains the responsibility for publishing all its reports, even if its work follows third-party processes and criteria.

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9. The Committee concluded that the lack of publication of external QA reports (in the case of QSR MI reports and the DAP Revocation and Variation assessment) and the lack of systematic involvement of students in QSR, QSR MI and DAP is not in compliance with standards 2.4 and 2.6.
10. **The Register Committee therefore requests QAA to publish all reports and to ensure the involvement of students in all reviews. The Register Committee expects QAA to make a further report by 15 February 2021 detailing its course of actions to ensure compliance with ESG 2.4 and 2.6 in its new activities.**

Higher education review of alternative providers and its derivatives

11. The Register Committee took note of a number of newly published handbooks on the agency's website and has sought further clarifications from QAA on the nature of these changes.
12. The agency explained that the published handbooks concern existing external QA activities that were addressed in QAA's previous review against the ESG. QAA added that these changes have been in fact minor updates or short-term responses to the Covid 19 situation. The agency added that in case it will carry out any "substantive" changes to its activities then QAA would submit a change report to EQAR.

Unsatisfactory Quality Schemes/Concerns

13. Considering the activity Unsatisfactory Quality Schemes/Concerns, the Committee remarked that, while this activity was covered within QAA's

last external review, that the activity was not presented, similarly to the other mentioned activities on its website.

14. The agency explained that QAA continues to undertake this activity and that these investigations follow a distinct contractual agreement with the tree regulators in Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland.
15. The Committee took note of the agency's explanations.

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EQAR Substantive Change Report

Agency #1	The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)
Expiry date #1	30/06/2023
Contact #1	Alastair Delaney
Phone #1	07824 122527
Email #1	a.delaney@qaa.ac.uk
Other organisations?	No
A. Has the organisational identity of the registered agency changed?	No
B. Has the organisational structure changed?	Yes

Description

1. Establishment or discontinuing of governing or managing bodies

No changes to the top level of governance, but a new committee of the Board has been established to oversee QAA's work as the DQB in England. This body has delegated responsibility from the board to undertake this work.

2. Major/dramatic changes in the staffing or financial situation

QAA has recognised, and is proactively responding to, the changing needs of the sector. It is working through a critical shift in the way it operates as an organisation to ensure it thrives in a more commercial world. As a result of the programme, QAA is even more customer focused and able to offer a wider range of relevant and valued products and services. In England, QAA has moved from being in receipt of a direct grant from government to deriving income through membership and other sources. Funding arrangements have not changed in Northern Ireland, Wales or Scotland. In the current academic year, the majority of higher education establishments in the UK are voluntary members of QAA. However, the changes to funding arrangements have seen QAA staffing drop from 192 FTE in 2016 to 82 FTE currently.

QAA also reviewed and revised its internal structure, including its leadership team, to ensure it had access to a wide range of diverse skills, knowledge and experiences. The new leadership team is profiled here: <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us/how-we're-run/our-senior-leadership-team>

C.i. Are there new types of activities?	Yes
C.ii. Are there changes in existing activities?	Yes
C.iii. Have some or all existing activities been discontinued?	Yes

Description new/changed

** Please note: the information provided here is also contained within an attachment.

The attachment allows for hyperlinks to relevant documents on the QAA website. **

ENGLAND:

The UK government passed new legislation (HERA 2017) which created a new regulatory body for the HE sector in England. This regulatory body, the Office for Students (OfS), published a new regulatory framework in February 2018 against which all providers of HE in England need to adhere (if they want to be registered). HERA 2017 required an independent designated quality body to be appointed to provide advice to the OfS on quality and standards in HE.

Since 2018 QAA has been the Designated Quality Body (DQB) for England which has impacted on our work. This has led to the development of three new external review activities in England:

- Quality and Standards Review (QSR)
- Quality and Standards Review, Monitoring and Intervention (QSRMI)
- New Degree Awarding Powers Test (New DAPs Test)

DETAILED RESPONSE AGAINST EQAR QUESTIONS: QSR and QSRMI

a.purposes and development of the activity, involvement of stakeholders (ESG 2.2)

- The aims and objectives of these activities are clear. They need to assess providers against the regulatory framework in England (as outlined by the OfS) and provide advice to the regulator as to whether the threshold level of the framework is being reached by the provider.
 - The clear aims are outlined in the Designation Agreement between the QAA and the OfS which is publicly available and can be found on the QAA website.
 - As the key stakeholder the OfS were consulted extensively during the method
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development and implementation period.

- The methods were designed to minimise the burden on providers, leading to methods of review that were efficient, focussed and targeted and limited regulatory burden.

- Each review involves QAA formally asking for feedback from the provider as to their impression of the review, what went well, and what can be improved. QAA therefore is continually getting feedback from providers about the methods of review.

- The initial tranche of work has been undertaken and QAA is now in a period of consultation with key stakeholders (including OfS, HE sector bodies and individual providers) to undertake a thorough lessons learned process and develop the review methods to ensure that they are fit for purpose. This project is due to complete in Autumn 2020.

b.criteria used, how they were developed, measures implemented to ensure consistency, how ESG 1.1 – 1.10 are reflected in the criteria (ESG 2.1 & 2.5)

- The criteria used for review is the OfS regulatory conditions, which are aligned with the sector agreed standards in the UK Quality Code (2018) and developed to take account of ESG 1.1-1.10. The UK Quality code is publicly available and used throughout the UK to assess the quality of higher education provision.

- The methods, as developed, have annexes in the published guidance which guide assessment teams in the evidence they should consider against each of the core practices of the UK quality code. This develops a consistency in the type of evidence seen by the teams and provides a clear framework for consistent decision making.

c.review team composition, selection, appointment and training of reviewers (ESG 2.4)

- The size and composition of each review team is in line with published guidance and as

such is comprised of experts with significant experience and expertise across the higher education sector. The team will always include members with experience of a similar provider to the institution, knowledge of the academic awards offered and included academics with subject expertise. Where appropriate the team will include expertise in subject areas relevant to the provider's provision and student reviewers. Each team will collectively have experience of the management and delivery of programmes from academic and professional services perspectives, included members with regulatory and investigative experience, and had at least one member able to represent the interests of students. The team includes at least one senior academic leader qualified to doctoral level.

- For each review the details of the team members are shared with the provider prior to the assessment to identify and resolve any possible conflicts of interest.

- Each QAA reviewer has been trained in the new methodology of the reviews and has to have undergone this training prior to undertaking a review. The skills and abilities of the reviewers is regularly reviewed by a dedicated team, who offer training and support.

- A performance review for all reviewers is currently in development alongside a dedicated virtual learning environment which will enable QAA to provide tailored training to specific reviewers and reviewer groups based on their knowledge, skills and past performance.

d.site visits (ESG 2.3)

- Each review involves the following stages: a self-assessment or equivalent (submitted at the start of each review); an external assessment (normally including a site visit, but also including a desk based analysis of documentary evidence); - a report resulting from the external assessment and a consistent follow-up, in terms of requesting and receiving feedback from the provider and submitting the

report to them.

e. publication of reports (ESG 2.6)

- For QSR reviews (those which determine if a provider meets the quality requirements to be placed on the OfS register) QAA does not make any formal registration decisions as this is the responsibility of the OfS. Once a formal decision has been taken by the regulator the report will be published on the QAA website alongside the link to any formal decision notice on the regulator's website.

- A concerted effort has been undertaken by QAA to ensure that when these reports are written that they are clear, and accessible to members of the academic community, students, external stakeholders and lay readers.

- Each report contains a context description of the provider; a description of the review process; details of the team undertaking the review; details of the evidence considered, the analysis undertaken as well as the findings of the team.

- For QSR MI reviews, because these are targeted reviews based on issues that have been raised by the regulator (who may have one or multiple areas that they would like investigated), these reports remain confidential between the provider and the regulator. QAA does not make any formal registration decisions from these reports.

f. follow-up (ESG 2.3) as applicable

- Each review involves QAA formally asking for feedback from the provider as to their impression of the review, what went well, and what can be improved. QAA therefore is continually getting feedback from providers about the methods of review.

- It is anticipated that sectoral interventions will also become a feature of QAAs work as the DQB. When this occurs, it is anticipated that the outcomes of the reviews undertaken will form the basis of thematic reviews which will determine how key challenges in the sector are being identified, considered and met. It is

anticipated that QAA will be expected to make recommendations to the OfS as to the purpose of the follow up work, using it's experience of the QSR and QSRMI review as basis for those recommendations.

g.appeals system (ESG 2.7)

- There has been little change to this aspect of the review methods as the new methods use and utilise the representations against review outcomes process to ensure that providers (which have been subject to review) can appeal a determination made by a QAA review team.

- QAA also has a complaints process which any provider can utilise to state its dissatisfaction about the conduct of the or those who carried it out.

h.embedding in thematic analyses and internal quality assurance of the agency (ESG 3.4 & 3.6)

- As part of QAA's work as the DQB we will be undertaking thematic analysis of the review work that has been undertaken. This will be a review of the outcomes of reviews, the judgements made, and link between the advice provided to OfS and any subsequent regulatory interventions.

- It is anticipated that this thematic analysis will form the basis of QAA's advice to the OfS on sector interventions and random sampling. However, this work has not yet started. When this work is commenced the QAA will undertake the required thematic analysis to provide appropriate advice.

- Having only recently undertaken the initial tranche of work for the QSRs and the QSRMI reviews, QAA are undertaking a comprehensive lesson learned project to understand what has worked well and what needs to be improved in the delivery of the methods. It is anticipated a report from this project will be written and that changes to the methods or review will be explained and disseminated publicly.

DETAILED RESPONSE AGAINST EQAR QUESTIONS: DEGREE AWARDING POWERS

QAA provides advice to OfS about Providers' applications for Degree Awarding Powers (DAPs) in England.

a.purposes and development of the activity, involvement of stakeholders (ESG 2.2)

- The aims and objectives of these assessment activities are clear, they need to assess providers against the regulatory framework in England (as outlined by the OfS) and provide advice to the regulator as to whether the threshold level of the framework is being reached by the provider.
 - The clear aims are outlined in the Designation Agreement between the QAA and the OfS which is publicly available and can be found on the QAA website.
 - The key stakeholder in this development is the OfS and they were consulted extensively during the method development and implementation period.
 - The methods were designed to minimise the burden on providers, leading to methods of review that were efficient, focussed and targeted and limited regulatory burden.
 - Each review involves QAA formally asking for feedback from the provider as to their impression of the review, what went well, and what can be improved. QAA therefore is continually getting feedback from providers about the methods of review.
 - The initial tranche of work has been undertaken and QAA is now in a period of consultation with key stakeholders (including OfS, HE sector bodies and individual providers) to undertake a thorough lessons learned process and develop the QSR and QSR MI review methods to ensure that they are fit for purpose. This project is due to complete in Autumn 2020. It is anticipated this review will then continue after this point to consider how the DAPs assessments have been implemented.
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b.criteria used, how they were developed, measures implemented to ensure consistency, how ESG 1.1 – 1.10 are reflected in the criteria (ESG 2.1 & 2.5)

- The criteria used for review is the 'Criteria for authorisation of degree awarding powers' set out by the OfS and embedded in the regulatory framework which is publicly available.
- The criteria for authorisation for DAPs are designed to ensure that a provider with DAPs has demonstrated a firm guardianship of academic standards, a firm and systematic approach to the assurance of the quality of the higher education that it provides, and the capacity to contribute to the continued good standing of English higher education.
- When developing the DAPs criteria, the OfS built on the previous criteria used in England and also integrated the principles of the core practices outlined in the UK Quality Code (2018) (which was developed to take account of ESG 1.1-1.10).
- The methods for DAPs assessments, as developed, have annexes in the published guidance which guide assessment teams in the evidence they should consider against each of the core practices of the UK quality code. This develops a consistency in the type of evidence seen by the teams and provides a clear framework for consistent decision making.

c.review team composition, selection, appointment and training of reviewers (ESG 2.4)

- The size and composition of each assessment team is in line with published guidance and as such is comprised of experts with significant experience and expertise across the higher education sector. The team will always include members with experience of a similar provider to the institution, knowledge of the academic awards offered and included academics with subject expertise. Where appropriate the team will
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include expertise in subject areas relevant to the provider's provision and student reviewers. Each team will collectively have experience of the management and delivery of programmes from academic and professional services perspectives, included members with regulatory and investigative experience, and had at least one member able to represent the interests of students. The team included at least one senior academic leader qualified to doctoral level.

- For each assessment the details of the team members were shared with the provider prior to the assessment to identify and resolve any possible conflicts of interest.

- Each QAA assessor has been trained in the new methodology of the assessments and has to have undergone this training prior to undertaking an assessment. The skills and abilities of the assessors is regularly reviewed by a dedicated team, who offer training and support.

- A performance review for all assessors is currently in development alongside a dedicated virtual learning environment which will enable QAA to provide tailored training to specific assessors and assessor groups based on their knowledge, skills and past performance.

d.site visits (ESG 2.3)

- Each DAPs assessment involves the following stages: a self-assessment or equivalent (submitted at the start of each assessment); an external assessment (normally including a site visit, but also including a desk based analysis of documentary evidence); a report resulting from the external assessment and a consistent follow-up, in terms of requesting and receiving feedback from the provider and submitting the report to them.

- Site visits will be mandatory for all Full DAPs assessments and New DAPs assessments. Site visits will occur on a case-by-case basis for Revocation and Variation DAPs when simply a desk-based analysis may be

sufficient for the team to make determinations against the DAPs criteria.

e. publication of reports (ESG 2.6)

- For all DAPs assessments reviews QAA does make formal decisions, as the power to confer DAPs sits with OfS. It is anticipated that once a formal decision has been taken by the regulator the report will be published on the QAA website alongside the link to any formal decision notice on the regulator's website.

- A concerted effort has been undertaken by QAA to ensure that when these reports are written that they are clear, and accessible to members of the academic community, external stakeholders and lay readers.

- Each report contains a context description of the provider; a description of the review process; details of the team undertaking the review; details of the evidence considered, the analysis undertaken as well as the findings of the team.

- For some Revocation and Variation DAPs assessments it may be the case that some assessments are based on issues that have been raised by the regulator (who may have one or multiple areas that they would like investigated), these reports remain confidential between the provider and the regulator. This will be determined on a case-by-case basis.

f. follow-up (ESG 2.3) as applicable

- Each DAPs assessment involves QAA formally asking for feedback from the provider as to their impression of the assessment, what went well, and what can be improved. QAA therefore is continually getting feedback from providers about the methods of assessment.

- For New DAPs tests, when OfS grants Degree Awarding Powers to a provider, a programme of follow up assessments will be agreed between the OfS and QAA. The outcomes of the New DAPs tests can mean that providers are 'working toward' meeting the DAPs criteria, and do not need to have met all of the criteria at the point of the assessment. To ensure that the assessment team's

judgement was correct QAA will periodically assess the provider over a period of time (usually three years) to determine the progress of the provider against the plan(s) it had in place to demonstrate how it would eventually meet all of the DAPs criteria. QAA will write a report on the findings of these follow up assessments at least annually to the OfS.

g.appeals system (ESG 2.7)

- There has been little change to this aspect of the review methods as the new methods use and utilise the representations against assessment outcomes process to ensure that providers (which have been subject to a DAPs assessment) can appeal a determination made by a QAA review team.

- QAA also has a complaints process which any provider can utilise to state its dissatisfaction about the conduct of the or those who carried it out.

h.embedding in thematic analyses and internal quality assurance of the agency (ESG 3.4 & 3.6)

- At the time of completing this report only two DAPs assessments have been completed, with advice being provided to OfS. Therefore, there is insufficient assessment work that has been completed currently for QAA to be able to undertake a thematic analysis of the findings of the DAPs assessments. It is anticipated that QAA will undertake a thematic analysis once there is a sufficient body of evidence from DAPs assessments to enable QAA to provide advice to the OfS about potential future work.

WALES

Gateway Quality Review Wales

Based on the Quality Review Visit (QRV) method used from 2016-18 in England and Northern Ireland to test a provider's readiness to enter publicly funded higher education with additional elements to meet the requirements of the Higher Education Funding Council for

Wales. The first GQRW was published in June 2019.

- i. The Gateway Quality Review Wales method handbook is published on the QAA website
 - ii. Substantial change in existing activities: the review method replaces Higher Education Review (Wales) and operates on the same four-year interval for those institutions wishing to progress to regulated status. The method is based on the Quality Review Visit (QRV) method using the baseline regulatory requirements set out by the regulatory body in Wales to assess quality in higher education and to provide a single gateway for entry to publicly funded higher education. The principal requirements are UK-wide and there are some additional Wales only baseline requirements: Welsh language requirements and alignment with the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales but this is not a substantial additional requirement.
 - iii. The method is largely based on the QRV method considered in the 2018 ENQA Review. It applies the same methodology and reviews institutions against the same regulatory requirements with the additional Wales only regulatory requirements.
 - iv. The Gateway Review process has been designed by consideration of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). The purpose of the review is to provide institutions with evidence of the quality assurance of their HE provision (ESG 2.2) for their subsequent application to the regulator to receive public funding. The review incorporates the requirements of the UK Quality Code which addresses quality management and the provider's approach to learning, teaching and assessment, programme approval and review. The Common Practices of the UK Quality Code apply in Wales which requires institutions to review their core practices for quality regularly and to use outcomes to drive improvement and enhancement. All provision leading to higher education awards, including
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all modes of delivery, is in scope of the review including higher education programmes offered through transnational education activities (Handbook, page 3f). The scope of the review covers all sites of delivery, including other sites in the UK and programmes delivered by partner institutions as appropriate.

v. Description of the methodology

a. purposes and development of the activity, involvement of stakeholders (ESG 2.2)

- The review was commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) and therefore designed to meet the requirements of HEFCW's Quality Assessment Framework for Wales (Handbook, page 1).

The review is a key component of the Framework which came into effect in March 2018, therefore superseding the previous external review requirement (Higher Education Review Wales). The proposed new method (the draft handbook) went to public and stakeholder consultation between August and October 2017¹ and the response published in December 2017.² Gateway review has been designed to minimise burden on institutions and to focus on demonstrating compliance with regulatory requirements at a threshold level. In order to ensure manageable workloads and cost to both institutions and reviewers, there is a limit on the length of the institution's self-evaluation, the number of pieces of evidence and the number of requests for additional evidence. Reports are focussed on outcomes and findings, and reporting by exception to allow institutions to focus on areas for improvement. The review team's desk-based analysis is structured around whether evidence has the potential to meet threshold expectations so that on-site visits focus on expectations that cannot be closed down before the visit. Institutions can demonstrate improvement by applying for another review after four years thereby showing they are able to deliver a consistently high-quality student academic experience. The

process of action planning and follow-up is clearly set out in the handbook. These elements are designed to make the review process both proportionate and rigorous in relation to its objectives.

b. criteria used, how they were developed, measures implemented to ensure consistency, how ESG 1.1 – 1.10 are reflected in the criteria (ESG 2.1 & 2.5).

•The review is to enable institutions to demonstrate compliance with the baseline quality requirements for higher education as detailed on page 1 of the handbook. The handbook explains the focus of each element of the baseline regulatory requirement (pages 4&5) and tables of indicative questions and evidence (pages 26-29) are provided to guide institutions on how they may demonstrate they meet the requirements. A key element of the process is the responsibility of the institution for the quality of their provision. The institution's policy, procedures and guidance on quality assurance and improvement (ESG 1.1) are a key component of this (Handbook page 25). The provider is required to set this out clearly in their self-evaluation including responsibilities' checklists to clearly demonstrate the responsibilities of the institution under review as against their awarding bodies. When the source method was designed, the UK Quality Code took account of the standards in Part 1 of the ESG. Annex 3 of the QAA Self-assessment Report for its ENQA review (February 2018) demonstrated how external quality assurance undertaken by QAA, including the Gateway Review, takes full account of the standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance, as set out in Part 1 of the ESG. From the academic year 2019/20, the method adopted the revised UK Quality Code. Subsequently, QAA has undertaken a revised mapping against the ESG Part 1 demonstrating that Expectations and Core Practices of the revised Quality Code take account of the criteria. In this way, the UK Quality Code and

the other baseline regulatory requirements provide pre-defined and published criteria for external quality assurance and enable consistent application and referencing. Thus the review method takes consideration of the standards in Part 1 of the ESG for internal quality assurance. The published method handbook contains an assessment framework for reaching judgements for the three levels of judgement (Annex 4 and table 8). Other types of outcomes, areas for development and specified improvements are clearly defined in Annex 1. Findings are moderated by QAA to ensure consistency in judgements and areas for development and specified improvements are proportionate. These elements allow the standard 2.5 to be met.

c.review team composition, selection, appointment and training of reviewers (ESG 2.4).

- The appointment and training of reviewers is set out in the review handbook (Annex 7). Reviewers apply and are selected against a role specification. Reviewers are staff with senior-level expertise in the management and/or delivery of higher education provision, or students with experience in representing students' interests. Each QAA review team will normally consist of three reviewers including a student reviewer. Opportunities are advertised on the QAA website and applications screened using standard HR practices including scoring. All reviewers are required to undergo training before they are deployed. As well as the specifics of the review method, training covers equality, diversity and the avoidance of conflicts of interest, along with regular GDPR training and updating. QAA issues contracts on an annual basis and requires reviewers to confirm compliance with data protection, ethical conduct and other relevant policies. Reviewers are invited to record and update their conflicts of interest record on the reviewer extranet so that direct conflicts of interest are avoided in the provisional allocation of reviewers to reviews. All institutions are asked

to confirm any conflicts of interest reviewers before the start of the review. In order to maintain currency of knowledge and experience, staff and student reviewers are expected to be employed by institutions or enrolled on a programme of study. QAA provides refresher training to keep reviewers familiar with the method and developments in the sector. Further details about the selection of reviewers and training can be found on pages 10 and 11 of the Handbook.

d.Site visits (ESG 2.3):

- reviews involve an on-site visit to the provider in order for the review team to meet some of the provider's students and staff (and other stakeholders, where appropriate) and to scrutinise further information. The duration of the site visit is made on an assessment of size and complexity of provision, usually two days but can be three days. The activity undertaken during the site visit will not be the same for every provider, but each review as a minimum involve meetings with senior staff including the head of institution, academic and professional support staff and a representative group of students.

e.Publication of reports (ESG 2.6):

- the review reports are published on the QAA website under the name of the provider. The report is designed to the guidelines contained in standard 2.6. There is a context description (a section about the institution), an overview of the review method including the names of the reviewers, evidence analysis and findings, a section on the outcomes and findings, including recommendations for improvements. The review does not identify good practice as the method is a review to meet threshold standards for entry to become regulated although examples of good practice can be highlighted in the analysis and findings

f.Follow-up (ESG 2.3):

- where an institution receives an unsuccessful outcome, the institution has the possibility to

have its judgements revised after one year. The institution will need to complete an action plan and QAA will monitor their progress within agreed timescales and confirming that the actions taken have had a positive impact. Details are given on page 21 of the Handbook and guidance on producing an action plan detailed in a separate Annex (Annex 8).

g. Appeals system (ESG 2.7):

- all providers are eligible to appeal against an unsuccessful outcome. An overview of the process is set out in Annex 9 of the Handbook and the appeals process document is published on the QAA website along with an appeal submission form.³ The distinction between appeals and complaints is made clear in the Handbook (Annex 9), including where to go to find out how to make a complaint. Details of how to make a complaint are published on QAA website alongside the appeals procedures.

h. embedding in thematic analyses and internal quality assurance of the agency (ESG 3.4 & 3.6).

- All parties involved in the review (the provide facilitator, student representative, reviewers and officer) are invited to complete an evaluation. They are encouraged to complete the evaluation through tracking of responses and follow-up reminders. This information is used in two ways: the performance management of staff and reviewers, and feedback on the operation of the method. A summary information on the operation of the method is discussed by staff with the Director. Feedback is discussed at the HE in FE Network, an independent and representative group of Colleges in Wales (ie the providers undergoing the review). QAA is in the process of updating its approach to the performance and management of reviewers to take account of its work as the Designated Quality Body in England. There are only a small number of GQRWs per year (around two) and this is currently the only review of its type, therefore,

the timing and format of thematic analyses is a longer-term consideration.

List discontinued

QRV programme in England and NI;
TNE – the last TNE review was of Malaysia which was published in May 2020. However, a proposal to develop a new approach to TNE review was recently accepted by the UUK, Guild HE and QAA Boards. Work will now begin in QAA to develop this new approach during Autumn 2020.

File #1

[120820_EQAR_substantial_change_2020_submission_-_FINAL_SHORT.pdf \(408k\)](#)

Brussels, 20 October 2020

Substantive Change Report – Clarification Request

Dear Douglas,

We wish to thank you for the Substantive Change Report of 12/08/2020. Your report is currently being reviewed by two rapporteurs before it is brought to the attention of the entire EQAR Register Committee.

In order to prepare the consideration by the Committee, we would be obliged if you could clarify the following:

1. In your change report referring to the new DAP, QSR and QSRMI activities you mentioned that “where appropriate the team will include expertise in subject areas relevant to the provider’s provision and student reviewers”.

Could you please clarify in which cases students are nominated as review panel members? Has QAA conducted any such reviews and if so, to what extent have student members participated as review panel members (ESG 2.4)?

2. We noted that in an effort to respond to the changing needs of the educational sector in United Kingdom, QAA has in the past few months continued to revise some of its external QA activities i.e. new handbooks were recently published for Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) (HER AP), Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight (RSEO), Educational Oversight: Exceptional Arrangements, Higher Education Review (Foreign Providers) (HER FP) and the Annual monitoring for educational oversight.

Since these changes have been implemented after the submission of the last change report we presume that QAA will submit (as appropriate) a substantive change report to the attention of EQAR’s Register Committee.

Related to these newly revised activities could you please specify what share (approximate percentage) of the agency’s external

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quality assurance activities is made up by them? Could you further also specify the share of QSR, QSRMI and New DAP considering QAA's volume of external QA activities?

3. In its last external review we noted that QA conducts reviews addressing "Unsatisfactory Quality Schemes/Concerns". Could you please clarify if the activity is still carried out or whether this has been discontinued or replaced since the last external review by QAA?

In order to expedite proceedings we kindly ask you for a reply by 31/10/2020. Please inform us if any difficulties arise in meeting this deadline. Please also note that this request and your response will be published together with the final decision on your Report.

I shall be at your disposal if you have any further questions or inquiries.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Colin Tück".

Colin Tück
(Director)

29 October 2020

18 Bothwell Street
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Director
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Dear Colin,

Many thanks for your letter of 20 October addressed to Douglas Blackstock, which has been passed to me to respond. Please find below QAA's written responses to the questions you raised. I hope that my meeting with you and your colleague Melinda Szabo today was helpful. I am very happy to discuss further should that be required.

1. In your change report referring to the new DAP, QSR and QSRMI activities you mentioned that "where appropriate the team will include expertise in subject areas relevant to the provider's provision and student reviewers".

Could you please clarify in which cases students are nominated as review panel members? Has QAA conducted any such reviews and if so, to what extent have student members participated as review panel members (ESG 2.4)?

We aim to include student members on review teams wherever possible and 23 of the assessments conducted to date (32%) have included a student reviewer. The published method and designation agreement with the Office for Students outline the factors to be considered in team composition. Where a student is not appointed to a team, we ensure that at least one member of the team has a current student engagement role that allows them to represent the interests of students. Such roles might include being a chair or member of a Student Experience Committee, Student:Staff Liaison Committee or responsibilities for working closely with the student representative body.

A more detailed breakdown across these three methods of review is as follows:

QSR panels on which students were involved: 6 (25%)

QSRMI panels on which students were involved: 14 (43%)

DAPs panels on which students were involved: 4 (36%)

2. We noted that in an effort to respond to the changing needs of the educational sector in United Kingdom, QAA has in the past few months continued to revise some of its external QA activities i.e. new handbooks were recently published for Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) (HER AP), Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight (RSEO), Educational Oversight: Exceptional Arrangements, Higher Education Review (Foreign Providers) (HER FP) and the Annual monitoring for educational oversight. Since these changes have been implemented after the submission of the last change report we presume that QAA will submit (as appropriate) a substantive change report to the attention of EQAR's Register Committee.

All of the methods mentioned in the question above were in place and were noted as in scope for the 2018 review. Recent changes to these review handbooks have been either minor updates or short-term responses to the Covid 19 situation.

As part of our annual activity for Educational Oversight, published review handbooks are considered and updated where required to ensure relevance and up-to-date information. Recently this included updates to the published handbooks for Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) (HER AP), Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight (RSEO), Educational Oversight: Exceptional Arrangements (EOEA), Higher Education Review (Foreign Providers) (HER FP) and the Annual monitoring for Educational Oversight. The review methods have not changed this academic year, only minor amendments to the published handbooks. That is, the core processes, operational milestones, timelines, and judgement areas remain the same as 2019-20. Any updates to the published review handbooks are therefore considered minor amendments.

Should any change to a review method meet the criteria for being considered “substantive” then we would, of course, submit a change report to EQAR.

Related to these newly revised activities could you please specify what share (approximate percentage) of the agency’s external quality assurance activities is made up by them? Could you further also specify the share of QSR, QSRMI and New DAP considering QAA’s volume of external QA activities?

QAA currently has 32 providers who require Educational Oversight with QAA. The distribution of these methods, in relation to the agency’s external quality assurance activities, are outlined in the table, below.

Review Method	<i>Rough % against all QAA external quality review activity</i>
Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers)	6.9%
Higher Education Review (Foreign Providers)	3%
Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight (RSEO)	9%
Educational Oversight: Exceptional Arrangements (EOEA)	5%
QSR	17.5%
QSRMI	24.5%
DAP	1.5%

3. In its last external review we noted that QA conducts reviews addressing “Unsatisfactory Quality Schemes/Concerns”. Could you please clarify if the activity is still carried out or whether this has been discontinued or replaced since the last external review by QAA?

This activity continues much as was reported during the last external review.

- *Oversight or Specific Course Designation and publicly funded higher education providers in Scotland are covered by the Scottish Concerns Scheme. This Scheme is administered by QAA Scotland which has devolved responsibility for the work of QAA in Scotland.*

- *Concerns about most universities and further education colleges in Northern Ireland are covered by the Unsatisfactory Quality Scheme run by the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland. QAA is contracted by them to operate this scheme.*
- *Concerns about publicly funded higher education providers in Wales are covered by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales' process for complaints about institutions (including concerns about standards and quality). QAA has a contract for reviews to investigate unsatisfactory quality with HEFCW*
- *As of 1 August 2019, following the creation of the Office for Students (OfS) and the requirement for all higher education providers eligible to register with them, such providers must register with the OfS to acquire or maintain Tier 4 sponsor status. All other HE providers in England, and the devolved nations, requiring or wishing to maintain Tier 4 status, and who are receiving Educational Oversight or specific Course Designation from QAA, must undergo one of the four review methods for Alternative Providers. They are required, when applying for Educational Oversight from the QAA, to agree to be subject to the QAA Concern Scheme for Alternative Providers in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.*
- *In England, the Office for Students can ask QAA to undertake an investigation of an institution where there are concerns about quality.*

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alastair Delaney'.

Alastair Delaney
Director for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland
QAA Scotland



01 March 2021

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Dear Colin,

Re: QAA meeting with members of EQAR Registration Committee

Thank you to you Anita, Beate and Melinda for taking the time to meet with us on 11 February to explore the issues raised in the 02 November 2020 decision notice. At that meeting I promised I would write a brief letter setting out how QAA intends to respond constructively to the Register Committee's decisions.

While most QAA assessments and reviews currently involve students we are committed to working toward students being on all Quality and Standards Review (QSR) and Degree Awarding Powers (DAPs) assessment panels in England. We anticipate that these changes should be in place by September 2021. The nature of the QSR Monitoring and Intervention (QSRMI) method is investigatory, as such the investigation panels can be very small and specialised (sometimes involving only one assessor). This means that while we expect the norm to be that each QSRMI investigation panel will include a student, there are some circumstances when they would not be. The decisions on size and composition of investigation panels will continue to be carefully chosen. We will ensure that any decision not to include a student on an investigation panel will be taken against transparent criteria. We hope that these changes should also be in place by September 2021.

In England all QAA assessment reports for QSR and for Degree Awarding Powers are published after the Office for Students (OfS) has made its regulatory decision(s). Currently QSRMI investigation reports do not always lead to a regulatory decision. As such publication of QSRMI reports (where no regulatory decision was made, or where that decision was delayed) may impact OfS and/or the provider generating a concern that both QAA and the OfS could be legally challenged. Instead only regulatory decisions are published. On 15 December 2020 the OfS published a consultation proposing changes to the way that they publish information. If the proposals are confirmed it will lead to all QAA reports being published, unless there is a reason for not doing so. QAA will respond to this consultation, broadly welcoming the proposals, while highlighting the need for clear criteria to be used if a decision not to publish is reached. The time frame for any change depends on the outcome of the consultation.

I hope the Register Committee will welcome this positive commitment from QAA to progress these issues.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Douglas Blackstock'.

Douglas Blackstock
Chief Executive

Brussels, 25 March 2021

Substantive Change Report - Extension of the Period for Further Report

Dear Douglas,

I wish to thank you for your letter of 01/03/2021 following our conversation and in response to EQAR's decision on QAA's Substantive Change Report of 12/08/2020.

The Register Committee considered QAA's explanations and the planned course of action to ensure compliance with ESG 2.4 and 2.6, but understood that these issues could not yet be substantially addressed.

The Committee welcomed that the involvement of students in all QSR and DAP assessment panels is expected to be in place by September 2021.

The Committee appreciated that the QSRMI method is of a different nature than a typical review. At the same time, as it is presented as an external quality assurance activity within the scope of the ESG, QAA is thus expected to follow the standards accordingly, including ensuring that the assessment is carried out by a groups of experts, and that these groups include a student member.

The Register Committee further appreciated that the publication of reports from QSRMI reviews is currently under discussion as part of the ongoing consultation launched by the Office for Students (OfS). The Committee will be keen to learn of the results of that consultation and any resulting changes. Meanwhile, the Committee stressed that an ESG-compliant external quality assurance process should always lead to a published report, irrespective of whether and what further regulatory actions by the OfS follow after them. While confidential information can always be redacted from a published report, blanket exceptions from publishing reports are not in line with the ESG.

We understood that QAA expects to achieve tangible progress by September 2021. To allow QAA to adequately resolve the compliance issues noted in the Register Committee's decision of 2/11/2020 the Committee therefore extended the period for QAA to provide a further

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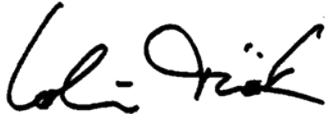
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report until 30 September 2021. Please inform us if any difficulties arise in meeting this deadline.

Your letter and this response will be attached to our published change report decision of 2/11/2020.

I shall be at your disposal if you have any further questions or inquiries.

Kind regards,



Colin Tück
(Director)