Future approaches to quality assessment in England, Wales and Northern Ireland

Response to the consultation by the national funding councils

18 September 2015
Introduction

1. This paper represents our response to the funding councils of England, Wales and Northern Ireland consultation on future approaches to quality assessment in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (June 2015).
   a. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to reform of the quality assessment system for the UK higher education sector.
   b. The sector has undergone significant change; including student centred funding, deregulation of student numbers and increased diversity of providers and between the national systems.
   c. We believe that in responding to these changes the regulatory system has become increasingly complex and the focus of external oversight is not guided toward where it is needed.

2. We set out our view of how the quality assessment system can be reformed based on the framework set out by the funding councils.
   a. Universities UK (UUK) agrees with the need to reform the quality assessment system and are broadly supportive of the proposals set out by the funding councils.
   b. We believe that the proposals broadly represent a viable framework for maintaining public confidence in the quality of UK higher education whilst minimising unnecessary external burden.
   c. We agree that the focus should be on establishing a baseline for entry into the system augmented by regular reporting by established providers on academic standards and student academic experience.
   d. We also believe that the architecture being proposed allows for proportionate use of external interventions guided by institutional performance against appropriate metrics.
   e. However, we believe that there is still a need for a single UK-wide independent co-owned quality assessment body to maintain shared ownership of academic standards, whilst accommodating the different policies and circumstances of the devolved nations.
   f. It is our view that ultimately primary legislation will be required to ensure that appropriate organisational architecture and associated powers are in place to underpin an effective regulatory system.
Future approaches to quality assessment in England, Wales and Northern Ireland: UUK response

3. Our response also sets out our initial views on how the aims and objectives of the proposed Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) can be integrated into a reformed quality assessment system.

   a. It is essential that the proposed teaching excellence framework is integrated into the quality assessment system where appropriate to achieve the streamlining of effort envisaged by these reforms.

   b. These reforms will incorporate the aims of the teaching excellence framework at the heart of the quality assessment system, supporting a strategic and operational focus on teaching across the whole sector.

   c. We also believe it is possible to augment quality base lines with a light touch developmental mechanism that identifies and commends examples of teaching excellence to students.

   d. However, we believe that ultimately institutions themselves, operating in a competitive student recruitment market, are responsible for the assurance and enhancement of the quality of their provision.

   e. It is therefore essential that both the reformed QA system and TEF avoid prescriptive, bureaucratic and costly measures that undermine diversity and innovation.

Specific positions

4. We agree that quality assessment should establish and maintain a clear and transparent baseline requirement for entry into the publicly funded sector:

   a. The bar for leaving the proposed probation arrangements should be set at a relatively high level in order to enable the reduction of direct external oversight for established providers that have a strong track record and who continue to meet the required standard.

   b. The baseline standard of academic quality should be owned by a UK wide co-owned independent quality assessment body.

   c. The baseline standard should not represent a prohibitive barrier and a sliding scale of external oversight should be used to support providers to develop appropriate academic governance and internal review standards.

   d. The length of a probationary period involving periodic institutional review should primarily be dependent on meeting minimum thresholds of academic governance.
e. A minimum period of time should also be set during which a provider will be subject to probationary oversight, the appropriate length should be evidence led but we propose considering a minimum of 10 years.

f. There should still be scope to reduce levels of external oversight progressively during this period should performance merit it.

5. We agree that there should no longer be cyclical external institutional review against academic baselines for established providers, such as, those not in probation.
   a. We agree that institutions should be responsible for their own standards of quality and provide assurances to funding councils via reporting from governing councils.
   b. We agree that external institutional reviews should be used as part of a range of potential external oversight measures, such as additional evidence, follow-up actions or full institution quality review.
   c. Use of external measures should be guided by findings of annual reporting, including underperformance against an institution’s UK performance benchmarks, and through quinquennial assurance review audits (HAR) in England, and equivalent channels in Wales and Northern Ireland.
   d. External measures should be used proportionately in line with the type or scale of problem identified.
   e. Use of external oversight is likely to be a sensitive issue for an institution’s reputation, as well as being burdensome in its own right. As a result we believe that this will act as an effective external incentive for encouraging high standards of institutional quality and performance without cyclical review.

6. We believe that there is a continuing need for an independent UK wide quality assessment body:
   a. A single independent UK wide quality body will enable comparability of standards through shared sector ownership of the baselines of academic quality throughout the UK.
   b. This body should conduct institutional reviews where appropriate and work with providers and its national funding council to agree appropriate reporting and levels of external oversight.

7. In principle we support the proposed contents for audit and reporting on academic standards and student academic experience:
   a. We believe that the priority for the quality assessment system should be accountability of academic standards and annual reporting should reflect this.
b. The proposed framework for review of student academic experience is welcome but should be established by institutions in dialogue with external bodies to ensure it is proportionate and reflects diversity of institutional context, mission and organisational structures.

c. We would propose reviewing approaches to reporting and internal review process in these areas, in partnership with the quality assessment body and funding bodies to establish good practice.

i. Accountability for academic outcomes should focus on providing assurance that the internal governance arrangements for setting and maintaining and assessing academic standards are robust. This reporting may also incorporate relevant outcomes data on academic awards made by an institution as well as the degree algorithms and external examiner arrangements used by the institution.

ii. Verification of internal institutional review of student academic experience should be led by an institution’s own internal and external review mechanisms and priorities and we welcome the acknowledgement of this in the current proposals. It is essential that external verification is flexible and responsive to the necessary diversity that this will entail.

d. It is important that the burden of external cyclical institutional or subject review is not simply passed onto providers.

8. We agree that a core set of quantitative student outcome metrics should be included in institutional reporting. These should be the benchmarked UK performance indicator set, covering retention, widening participation, 6 months destination of leavers from higher education, plus relevant benchmarked results from the national student survey, primarily question 22 ‘overall satisfaction with course’:

a. Any underperformance against an institution’s benchmarks should be reviewed alongside results of reporting on academic standards to guide decisions about the appropriate form of external oversight. Any intervention should be based on a dialogue and appropriate escalation of measures.

b. Institutional performance metrics should be benchmarked against key characteristics, including intake, location and subject. These metrics should be used as part of a computed basket to take into account weaknesses in DLHE and NSS data.

c. Regulators should also recognise that these outcome metrics are influenced by a variety of non-academic factors beyond the formal benchmarked characteristics and outside of an institution’s control, as well as weaknesses in the data.
9. We welcome the acknowledgement of formal responsibility for assuring quality being placed on institutions through their own governance arrangements:

   a. We are happy for the governing councils of established providers to be the responsible body assuring the funding council of the integrity of institutional review and reporting. However, it is absolutely essential that governing councils remain fully independent of external regulators.

   b. We would want the proposed approach to clearly recognise and respect the configuration of responsibilities between institutional governing councils and academic councils. In the majority of cases governing bodies, along with the chief executive officer, are primarily responsible for the institution’s sustainability, educational strategy and ethos. Academic senates or councils are primarily responsible for the academic standards of the institution.

   c. Consideration will also need to be given to the development of the capability of governing councils to perform this assurance role and we would want to work with Committee of University Chairs, the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education and funding councils to address this.

10. We note the proposals for annual reporting and metrics to provide a mechanism for continuous improvement in the student academic experience:

   a. It is our view that it is the responsibility of institutions, operating in a competitive market, to proactively enhance the quality of their provision and experience for students, not the quality assessment system.

   b. It is reasonable for the quality assessment system to include dissemination of good practice to improve institutional review and reporting methodologies, including the role internal review can play in supporting improvement.

   c. Where performance concerns are raised, including underperformance against benchmarks or material issues identified in institutional reporting, we would expect a constructive conversation about how these should be addressed.

11. UUK will work with Guild HE to lead the development of proposals for improving transparency of the external examiner system. We would also engage with other stakeholders, including the Association of Colleges. However, we believe that proposals for centrally mandated training and requirement for entry on to a register as a condition of being an external examiner are likely to undermine the system. We would recommend an approach that improves transparency in the system by:

   a. Establishing clear expectations about the induction and training to be provided to external examiners by the appointing institution.

   b. Setting up a database of examiners that detail their prior roles and the training and induction that they have received.
12. UUK would work with the sector to look again at degree classifications to explore potential options in order to address concerns about threshold effects and encouraging engagement throughout the period of study. We would also ensure that there are not patterns of gearing in degree algorithms that might be introducing grade inflation pressures. We do not believe that it would be proportionate for the review to explore standardised grading and degree algorithms.

13. We understand that these proposals are primarily put forward to govern access to the publicly-funded sector. However we also believe that these proposals should apply to access to the student support system where appropriate. We would welcome legislation that provided a single regulator with the powers to deliver this. We welcome the continued development of the register of providers to improve transparency about providers in the sector.

The proposed system in practice

14. In practice we envisage a system that sets variable arrangements for external oversight on a case by case basis based on the maturity of an institution’s governance arrangements and outcomes of key quality metrics.

15. The system should set high baseline thresholds for providers to meet before they can exit a probationary period of cyclical institutional review. This will be essential to help maintain the high quality and reputation of UK higher education.

   a. This period should support providers to develop mature academic governance and reporting arrangements and meet the agreed baseline standard of academic quality.

   b. Probation should last a minimum period of time, for example ten years, but levels of external oversight may be scaled accordingly depending on a provider’s development.

16. For established providers and providers exiting probationary periods.

   a. Appropriate arrangements of external oversight should be agreed between provider, the UK wide independent quality body and relevant national regulator or funding council.

   b. The agreed arrangement should strike an appropriate balance between:

      i. working with an institution’s own governance arrangements to provide assurances of quality

      ii. using external oversight arrangements when required

17. The default situation for providers in England should be annual reporting on academic standards. The level of external oversight should be determined by:
c. Maturity of institutional quality governance, including internal review of student academic experience, determined by quinquennial HAR audits and external quality assessment where relevant.

d. Material issues identified in reporting from governing councils, including academic standards and the core set of benchmarked student outcome metrics, allied to other types of intelligence.

18. Where issues are identified, the provider, the UK wide independent quality body and relevant national regulator or funding council should agree an appropriate proportionate response. This may range from no action required, further evidence needed, agreed institutional actions, external quality review or a return to a probationary status in extreme cases.

19. In Wales and Northern Ireland, national funding bodies and the sector may prioritise regular cyclical institutional quality review. Furthermore providers across the UK are within their rights to work with external bodies to undergo external institutional review should they feel this is a priority.

Relationship with the Teaching Excellence Framework

20. We believe that an appropriately reformed quality assessment system can form the basis for the decisions and incentives envisaged by the TEF. It is essential that the proposals for reform of QA and the TEF are integrated where appropriate to avoid unnecessary duplication and burden.

a. We believe that the approach set out in our response places the core aims and objectives of the TEF at the heart of a reformed quality assessment system, including:

   i. Using benchmarked national performance indicators to monitor institutional performance against student academic experience.

   ii. Validation of arrangements for internal institutional review of the student academic experience.

b. The reputational and oversight implications of dropping below these baselines will be a significant upward driver of institutional performance. In contrast we believe that:

   i. Decisions to allow inflationary rises in the fee cap should primarily be based on the sustainability of provision.

   ii. Any scheme that links fees to notions of teaching excellence has the potential to introduce significant complexity, be open to challenge over its robustness, and work against diversity and innovation. It also raises questions of proportionality.
Future approaches to quality assessment in England, Wales and Northern Ireland: UUK response

iii. Furthermore, holding fees below inflation is likely to reduce rather than improve teaching quality as it reduces the resource available for delivery, notwithstanding the significant efforts by the sector to drive efficiency.

c. A light touch system of identifying and commending various examples of excellence and innovation to students in a competitive market could be an additional driver of institutional behaviour, but with greater flexibility than a system that is linked to an inflationary fee cap.

i. It is essential that the efficiency savings of ending standardised cyclical review are not lost through the introduction of a teaching excellence framework.

ii. Proposals for identifying and commending examples of excellence should avoid any additional sector wide system of narrative submissions and peer review.

d. Any system that introduces market signals to students in England will have implications for institutions across the UK that compete to recruit domestic and international students. The teaching excellence framework should be developed in close dialogue with Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, allowing for integration of approaches where appropriate.

Considerations

21. As the proposals develop we would like to emphasise the following considerations:

- The proposed system should provide enough collective assurance of the academic standards of providers across the UK in order to provide confidence to all stakeholders, including international markets.
- The system should strike the right balance between providing consistent public assurance whilst adopting an outcomes based approach that reduces unnecessary burden on providers.
- The relationship between governing councils, funding councils and independent quality body should be balanced and appropriately delineated.
- The proposals should not simply shift regulatory burden on to providers, and in particular validation of internal review of the student academic experience should not simply replicate external institutional review.
- There should be flexibility beyond the core evaluation metrics required by the funding councils, and subject to agreement, more scope for individual institutions to establish their own metrics for monitoring and review.
Future approaches to quality assessment in England, Wales and Northern Ireland: UUK response

- The burden of regulation should not incrementally increase over time, including increases in the volume, depth and breadth of necessary reporting requirements, or disproportionate lowering of thresholds for external interventions.

- UK-wide arrangements for maintaining academic standards are retained, including Scotland.

**Next steps**

22. Ongoing work will be required to develop the key components of the reformed system and we look forward to working with the funding councils, BIS and other stakeholders to develop these proposals further. Areas where further work would be required include:

a. Establishing appropriate academic baselines for new entrants into the sector, including content and thresholds and external oversight arrangements during probationary period.

b. Establishing agreed standards for oversight of established providers including:
   
   i. reporting on academic standards by established providers, including content and frequency and framework
   
   ii. methodology for validation of internal institutional review of student academic experience
   
   iii. performance thresholds and framework of proportionate responses

c. The organisation of the UK wide independent co-owned quality assessment body

d. Review of the external examiner system, including development of shared expectations for training and induction and database of external examiners

e. Establishing a shared understanding of the assurance role of the governing councils of established providers, including clear definitions of roles and responsibilities and capability needs.

e. Understanding how the reformed quality assessment system, and integrated TEF, can meet requirements and expectations set out within European quality frameworks that England and the devolved nations are part of.
Conclusions

23. We believe that this is an important opportunity to develop an effective and sustainable quality assessment system that focuses effort and resources where they are needed. The increased diversity of the sector precludes against a ‘one size fits all’ system. Equally it is essential that we maintain consistent and comparable standards of quality across the UK sector.

24. We also recognise that this represents an opportunity to review how this system can help to shape the strategic and operational priorities of the sector to focus on the academic experience of students. By working to achieve these aims we can produce a quality assessment system that supports the continued delivery of the world-class academic standards by the UK higher education sector.

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