

## **QAA Evidence to Senedd Children, Young People and Education Committee: Tertiary Education and Research Bill**

**26 November 2021**

### **Introduction and background to QAA**

1. This paper offers an outline of QAA's work in Wales and across the UK, as well as our broad support for the proposed legislation. This is to provide contextual information for the Children, Young People and Education Committee, ahead of their evidence sessions as part of their scrutiny of the Tertiary Education and Research Bill.
2. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is the UK's independent higher education quality agency. Founded in 1997, we work to safeguard standards and improve the quality of UK higher education wherever it is delivered around the world. A key part of our role is to review universities, colleges and other providers of higher education to check how they maintain their academic standards and deliver teaching and learning for students.
3. QAA's work is guided by the [UK Quality Code](#), which is a key reference point for UK HE. The Code was developed in partnership with stakeholders, including students and staff, from across all four UK nations. The Quality Code outlines the core and common practices and expectations for quality and standards and is supplemented by detailed [advice and guidance](#).
4. QAA operates in a tailored way to suit the needs of each UK nation, and in Wales we work closely with the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales. QAA's activity in Wales is overseen by the QAA Wales Strategic Advisory Committee (WSAC), which reports to the QAA Board. The WSAC is chaired by a member of our Board from the university sector in Wales. More detail about our current work in Wales is offered later in our evidence submission.
5. QAA also operates in adherence to the [Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area \(ESG\)](#), which gives confidence to governments, employers and educators across the world that UK higher education remains at a global high standard. QAA is also a member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), and is reviewed on a cyclical basis by ENQA to ensure it continues to operate in alignment to the ESG. The UK also continues to participate in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) alongside 48 other countries. EHEA participants have agreed to adopt reforms on higher education on the basis of common key values, such as freedom of expression, autonomy for institutions, independent student unions, academic freedom, free movement of students and staff. UK Ministers attend EHEA summits, and QAA continues to provide support for UK engagement at the EHEA.
6. QAA operates on a [membership model](#), and higher education institutions in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland benefit from access to all areas of membership as part of the agreements with the sector, funders and regulators. QAA membership in England is voluntary, with almost all HE providers joining as members.

### **Our views on the proposed legislation**

7. QAA has engaged with the consultation process at all stages, and has taken part in discussions with Welsh Government officers as the proposals for the Tertiary Education and Research Bill have been developed.

8. QAA supports the general proposals of the legislation in terms of quality assessment, as they have been developed over years of wide-ranging consultation with stakeholders and agencies across the tertiary education sector.
9. In our previous consultation responses on the draft Bill, we have stressed the importance of consultation with stakeholders, particularly students, as quality frameworks and designation processes are developed. The Bill text states that before designating a higher education quality body, the Commission must consult each registered provider for HE and such other persons it considers appropriate. We would welcome a strengthening of this text to include students in the process.
10. In terms of the proposed initial and mandatory ongoing registration conditions for each registered provider, we welcome that there are conditions in the Bill related to the quality of education provided.
11. We also welcome that the designated quality body (DQB) will have the option to charge fees to any tertiary education provider in relation to which the body exercises the assessment functions. However, we feel it is important for external quality assurance of HE and FE providers to be on the same footing. Estyn do not charge providers for their external inspection process, and we feel that this work in HE should be funded directly by the Commission. We also believe it to be crucial for the DQB to be adequately funded by the Commission in order for it to undertake enhancement activity, beyond baseline requirements, to support the strategic duties of the Bill.
12. The proposed approach allows for separate expert bodies to focus on their particular areas of expertise in higher education and further education, but we welcome the opportunity that these bodies can collaborate further in the future and through the Commission in order to learn from best practice in terms of assuring and enhancing the student experience, and to help facilitate smooth transitions across individual, high-quality elements of the tertiary education system.
13. We believe there is an opportunity for the Commission to allow the designated quality body to work across the tertiary sector to undertake research and facilitate events for supporting and enhancing the quality of the learning experience. It will be important that the designated quality body will have the capacity to deliver and support enhancement efforts, beyond any baseline requirements.
14. We believe the proposed Learner Engagement Code can ensure learner engagement is at the heart of the tertiary education system in Wales, while also learning from positive practice that has already taken place at universities in Wales, such as student charters. QAA has previously worked in partnership with NUS Wales, HEFCW and Universities Wales by convening and supporting the Welsh Initiative for Student Engagement (WISE). QAA also worked with WISE in discussions on the quality review processes in Wales, and how HEIs can work in partnership with their students in review related activity. QAA would be willing to work with HEIs and students again in the future as the Learner Engagement Code is developed and embedded.
15. We welcome the opportunity that the Bill can bring in terms of supporting flexible learner pathways across the tertiary system, and believe there could be a future role for the designated quality body in driving forward enhancement-led projects to support student transitions, similar to those we've already led in [Scotland](#).
16. Schedule 3 of the Bill does not indicate for how long a designation period may last for, or if there is to be a procedure for renewal of the designation. We would welcome clarity on this.
17. QAA had previously sought clarification from the Welsh Government around the Bill's proposals for the quality assurance of degree apprenticeships. They have confirmed

that the Commission will be responsible for ensuring the quality assessment of degree apprenticeships, and the Bill states that Estyn will be given the ability to inspect degree apprenticeships, should the Commission request them to do so. However, QAA could continue to review degree apprenticeships if asked. We believe that it will be important for the Commission to take account of how degree apprenticeships are quality assured in other parts of the UK as part of this process.

## QAA's role in Wales

### Reviews

18. QAA operates two principal reviews in Wales: [Quality Enhancement Review \(Wales\) \(QER\)](#) and [Gateway Quality Review Wales \(GQRW\)](#).
  - a. The QER is the method to review higher education providers who are regulated by HEFCW as part of [the Quality Assessment Framework for Wales \(QAF\)](#). The review was designed to suit the Welsh higher education context and provides two separate judgements: the requirements of the ESG Part 1 for internal quality assurance and the relevant requirements of the baseline standards of the QAF. The review provides quality assurance and supports quality enhancement, and assures governing bodies, students and the wider public that providers meet HEFCW requirements.
  - b. The GQRW is undertaken by providers seeking specific course designation by HEFCW. QAA carries out GQRWs on behalf of HEFCW to test HE provision against baseline regulatory requirements in the QAF.
19. QAA reviews require considerable preparation and planning, with focus on the evaluation of practices rather than direct observation. There is a significant involvement of students in the QAA review methods, with a student reviewer on every review team and a lead student representative from the institution under review who has an equal status to the institution's facilitator. QAA reviews have a focus on quality enhancement where enhancement is defined as the use of evidence to plan, implement and evaluate deliberate steps intended to improve the student learning experience.
20. In 2020-21 QAA was commissioned by HEFCW to undertake a developmental review of Degree Apprenticeships against the QAA Characteristics Statement for Higher Education in Apprenticeships. The review was only concerned with Degree Apprenticeships funded through HEFCW, made available on a pilot basis since 2018-19. The [overview report](#) was published in October 2021.
21. Other UK-wide review work undertaken by QAA applies to Wales. QAA is a designated educational oversight body for higher education providers by UK Visas and Immigration for Tier 4 sponsor status. For Wales, QAA undertakes reviews of international pathway colleges operating as joint ventures with a higher education institution. QAA also undertakes reviews for degree awarding powers and university title providing advice to the Welsh Government on applications.
22. QAA maintains and manages the scheme for the recognition and quality assurance of Access to Higher Education Diplomas in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Access to HE Diploma is a qualification which prepares people without traditional qualifications for study at university. The QAA Recognition Scheme provides the regulatory framework through which Access to HE courses are recognised and regulated. QAA license Access Validating Agencies to develop, quality assure and award Access to HE Diplomas. In Wales, QAA licenses Agored Cymru which currently has 1,794 learner registrations.

## Enhancement

23. QAA leads on quality enhancement initiatives as part of QAA Membership<sup>1</sup> in Wales and has a long history of developing enhancement. In Wales QAA supports and funds sector-led [Collaborative Enhancement Projects](#) based on areas of priority and common interest across HE providers and sector bodies, which also include collaboration between HE and colleges in Wales. [The ongoing projects are:](#)
- Innovative assessment
  - Student engagement in learning
  - Welsh medium employability initiative
  - Embedding COVID-19 lessons learnt to enhance communities of learning
  - Development of resources for PGR students to assist preparation for their viva (This project is funded through the Welsh collaborative enhancement funding but came through a call from UK-wide membership.)
24. QAA was a partner in the HEFCW-funded Higher Education Investment and Recovery Fund (HEIR) led by Wrexham Glyndŵr University on behalf of the Universities Wales Learning and Teaching Network. QAA undertook a thematic review of digital learning of all HEIs in Wales and the scope of the review included arrangements with FE delivery partners. The review will contribute to a digital learning enhancement plan for the next two academic years.
25. QAA runs the Wales Quality Network (WQN), chaired by a Welsh higher education quality professional. This network allows the sharing of good practice across the sector and has a running theme of sharing commendations from Quality Enhancement Reviews. QAA has recently convened a joint meeting of the WQN and QAA Scotland's The Quality Forum (TQF) to share approaches to quality assurance and enhancement across the devolved nations.
26. QAA supports a HEFCW-funded sector-owned Welsh Integrity and Assessment Network that brings together staff and student representatives across the Welsh sector to discuss and share pan-Wales approaches to strengthening academic integrity. All Welsh HEIs have also signed up to QAA's [Academic Integrity Charter](#).

## QAA's engagement with FE

27. QAA engages with further education providers who deliver higher education provision via two principal means: reviews (QER or GQRW) and through specific membership activities. QAA has six FE members in Wales and runs a UK-wide College HE Policy and Practice Network that is open to all College HE QAA Members in Wales, Northern Ireland and England. College HE members in Wales are also members of the Wales Quality Network. QAA are also invited to College HE Network meetings of Colleges Wales.

## **QAA and Estyn**

28. QAA works to a UK-wide quality framework agreed by the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment which is in turn informed by the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance. A key element of the UK's quality framework is the UK Quality Code, with QAA as its custodian which sets out the sector's expectations for effective quality assurance. QAA uses peer quality professionals, to conduct its reviews on the basis of the sector's agreed expectations. As HEIs are autonomous

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<sup>1</sup> The following HE providers are members of QAA: Aberystwyth University, Bangor University, Cardiff University, Cardiff Metropolitan University, Cardiff and Vale College, Coleg Cambria, Coleg Gwent, Gower College Swansea, Grŵp Llandrillo Menai, NPTC, Swansea University, University of South Wales, University of Wales Trinity Saint David and Wrexham Glyndŵr University.

institutions, this approach of co-regulation is fundamental to the review of institutions delivering higher education.

29. QAA meets with Estyn and HEFCW on a regular basis to discuss areas of common interest and has a three-way memorandum of understanding to ensure efficient and effective cooperation with respect to our areas of work. In our reviews of FE colleges QAA review teams use relevant Estyn inspection reports where they are available as our primary evidence source in order to minimise regulatory burden on institutions. We use the tripartite meetings to confirm and discuss any areas of concern.
30. QAA has been meeting regularly with Estyn over the last year to discuss and understand our approaches to quality, to explore how we can work more effectively in the future to provide quality assurance and enhancement in a more coordinated and coherent way as part of a future tertiary system. We have also been exploring scope for collaboration and joint working. We have produced a joint paper alongside suggestions of collaborative projects which we have shared with HEFCW and Welsh Government.
31. One potential area of joint working, student involvement in quality across tertiary education, is being taken up by HEFCW and the Welsh Government within their work on learner engagement and student partnership in the development of a set of shared principles. QAA and Estyn are involved in forthcoming workshops arranged by HEFCW and the Welsh Government, and as part of the wider project there are intentions for QAA and Estyn to work jointly on testing the principles with the tertiary sector in the early part of 2022.

#### **TNE and validated arrangements**

32. The review of collaborative provision is included within QER for regulated institutions. The development and promotion of a quality culture as part of a wider UK brand has helped to support the enhancement of quality delivered internationally. All regulated institutions in Wales have access to the International Insight package of QAA's membership offer which provides resources and events aimed at enhancing quality and managing risk in TNE.
33. QAA now manages the voluntary [Quality Evaluation and Enhancement of UK-TNE](#) Scheme, known as QE-TNE. The method was commissioned by Universities UK and GuildHE, and has been shaped through consultation with stakeholders in the higher education sector in the UK and worldwide. All Welsh HEIs have been funded by HEFCW to participate in the scheme over the five-year period of operation. All participating institutions and their overseas TNE partners are able to use the QE-TNE Kitemark, which is a public statement of their commitment to quality.
34. QAA has close relationships with many agencies around the world through memorandums of understanding and in many countries where UK TNE is delivered in significant numbers. This provides opportunity for two-way dialogue about any concerns.
35. HEFCW has a complaints policy and can ask QAA to investigate concerns through an Unsatisfactory Quality Investigation. We are currently reviewing this approach as part of our normal review cycle.