# Consultation on the review of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code)

**UKSCQA**
UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment

**QAA**

## Alternative formats

This publication is available in English and Welsh. Both versions can be downloaded from the UKSCQA website (www.ukscqa.org.uk) and from the QAA website (www.qaa.ac.uk). For readers without access to the internet, it can be supplied on CD or in large print by HEFCE, who provide the secretariat for UKSCQA. For alternative format versions please call 0117 931 7305 or email customerservices@hefce.ac.uk

## Overview of the Quality Code

Over the past five years, the Quality Code has become the definitive reference point for managing standards and quality in UK higher education. It has been commended nationally and internationally for the role that it plays in protecting standards and quality and driving change.

The Code embodies the co-regulatory approach that underpins UK higher education.

It is co-owned by the higher education sector, was developed by expert groups of sector representatives, and is kept up to date through regular consultation with providers, students and other key stakeholders.

This consultation document sets out a bold proposal for a new approach to the Quality Code's Expectations, and seeks to ensure that the Code best fulfils its role as the cornerstone for quality in UK higher education, protecting the public and student interest, and continues to champion UK higher education's world-leading reputation for quality.

It presents an approach that allows the Code to be agile and responsive in the context of ongoing regulatory change across the nations and a diversifying UK higher education landscape. It places students at its heart, and reflects sector views about how the Code should adapt and develop to best serve a rapidly changing sector.

The paper proposes reform starting at the highest level, with new, streamlined sector expectations, and sets out a timeline of activities that will be undertaken to support the development of these expectations, and the subsequent development of the Code. The review is designed to involve the sector and students at every stage.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is coordinating this consultation on behalf of the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment (UKSCQA), which is responsible for strategic oversight of the Code. The UKSCQA supports and endorses the proposals set out in this paper.

## More about the Quality Code

The UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code) was developed by QAA working with universities, colleges and students in 2012. It built on and replaced the Academic Infrastructure, the previous set of UK benchmarks for quality and standards, also developed and managed by QAA.

The Code operates UK-wide, and applies to higher education providers operating in all four nations of the UK, as well as to UK higher education provision overseas. Higher education providers use the Code to ensure that the awards they offer are consistent with nationally agreed standards, and to manage the quality of the academic experience that they provide for their students. The Code currently sets out 19 Expectations that should be met by UK higher education providers.

# Background to this consultation

## Feedback from providers

During 2016-17, QAA gathered feedback and suggestions from providers about how the Quality Code should evolve and develop for the future. This feedback told us the following:

### What providers like about the Quality Code

Providers like that the Code:

- is the benchmark for standards and quality in UK higher education

- binds the UK sector together and presents a common understanding of UK higher education

- underpins providers' existing quality systems across the UK

- sets clear parameters for new providers entering the sector.

The sector is committed to continuing to use the Code to underpin, shape and develop the way in which it manages quality and standards.

### How the Quality Code needs to change

Providers think that several overarching aspects of the Code would benefit from review and improvement. These are:

- its accessibility – to ensure that it can better serve a range of audiences, including students, academics and governors

- its clarity – to ensure both specialist and non-specialist readers understand the terminology used, making its requirements clearer and more precise

- its structure – to ensure that this is intuitive for users in the context of various ways in which they may think about quality and standards, and to allow users to 'dip in and dip out' of the content more readily

- its scope – to rationalise it in ways that reduce instances of internal duplication and overlap with other external reference points

- its enhancement, as an overarching theme in the Code but one that some feel is not sufficiently prominent and requires further expansion.

### Priorities for the Quality Code

Providers think that several key topics should be given priority consideration in the future development of the guidance that underpins the Code. These are:

- employability

- work-based learning and working with employers

- flexible and distance learning

- working with other UK providers

- working with international providers

- student engagement

- the use of data in programme monitoring and review.

## Changes in the broader landscape

As we reflect on the future of the Code, fundamental changes are taking place across higher education quality assurance and regulation across the UK:

- The sector in Scotland has reaffirmed support for the Quality Enhancement Framework. Following previous themes, including transitions and employability, a new Enhancement Theme will focus on evidence-based enhancement.

- Publication of the Hazelkorn report has seen the Welsh Government consult on extensive reform of post-compulsory education and training. HEFCW has developed a new Quality Assessment Framework to take account of the Higher Education (Wales) Act 2015 and other changes in quality across the UK.

- The establishment of the new Office for Students in England brings with it new statutory obligations and a different regulatory approach in which 'sector-recognised standards' have a central role.

- Providers are increasingly looking at innovation in provision, including accelerated degrees, off-campus provision and apprenticeships.

## The UKSCQA's vision for the Quality Code

In June 2017, the UKSCQA met to consider and agree a vision for the future direction of the Code, in light of the feedback received from the sector and taking into account the ongoing change in the regulatory landscape outlined above. The Committee agreed a vision for the Code in which it is:

- unifying for UK higher education, in the context of a diverging regulatory landscape

- a definitive source of information on what 'good' looks like in UK higher education

- owned by the sector, co-regulatory and managed in a way that enables all providers proactively to steer its future development

- agile and able to respond quickly to change

- stable and continues to articulate fundamental principles that should apply for higher education irrespective of changing contexts

- structured and written in a way that allows it to be digestible and detailed

- interactive and offering flexibility for users

- more detailed in its exploration and articulation of performance above a high minimum expected baseline, for those providers who are seeking to enhance their practice.

# Proposal for the future development of the Quality Code

Rather than a chapter-by-chapter review of the current Code, this consultation proposes a holistic approach to its reshaping and restructure. This aims to secure the Code's core principles while allowing for greater flexibility to meet the needs of a diversifying sector, and the different contexts of the nations within the UK. The proposed approach will result in a Code that will look and feel different but will nonetheless provide continuity for the sector and protect its international reputation. It aims to support diversity and allow the Code to continue to be applied UK-wide. The approach is underpinned by a commitment to retaining the principle of co-ownership, and includes information about how co-ownership with the sector will be embedded in the redevelopment process and the future management of the Code.

## A new, streamlined set of Expectations

The primary proposition is to introduce a new, streamlined top layer to the Code, consisting of a smaller number of overarching Expectations. These Expectations express, clearly and succinctly, the overarching requirements that are implicit in the structure of the Code at present, namely that providers have responsibility for setting and maintaining the standards of their awards (both at and above the threshold), and for managing the quality of their provision. In addition, they give more prominence to providers' responsibilities to operate fair admissions in the context of managing quality and promoting social mobility.

Each Expectation is expressed in terms of an outcome and in language that supports broader engagement with academic staff and students in its implementation.

These Expectations are proposed to replace rather than supplement the Code's existing Expectations. The detail of the existing Expectations is used instead to inform a set of underpinning 'core and supplementary practices' that sit beneath the top level.

## Underpinning core practices

Each Expectation is accompanied by one or more core practices that demonstrate the achievement of the outcome described. These represent effective ways of working that can deliver positive outcomes for students. A number of the core practices correspond closely to the existing Expectations in the Code, but they offer rationalisation and greater clarity, place students at the heart of the Code's focus, and aim to serve better a diversifying sector and the priorities of each nation.

The proposed Expectations and accompanying core practices are set out in Table 1.

## Table 1

| Expectations | Core practices |
|---|---|
| **Standards**<br><br>The provider ensures the value of qualifications awarded to students at the point of qualification and over time, in line with sector recognised standards.<br><br>The provider delivers courses that match the academic standards as they are described in the relevant national qualifications framework[1]. | Students achieve the threshold academic standards set out in the qualifications framework. |
| | Students achieve standards beyond the threshold level that are reasonably comparable with those achieved in other UK providers. |
| | Providers with degree awarding powers secure the standards of all of their awards, irrespective of where or how these are delivered or who delivers them. |
| | Providers use assessment and classification processes that are reliable, fair and transparent. |
| **Quality**<br><br>The provider delivers well-designed courses that provide a high-quality academic experience and enable a student's achievement to be reliably assessed.<br><br>The provider supports students, including through the admissions system, to successfully complete and benefit from a high-quality academic experience. | The provider designs and delivers high-quality courses. |
| | The provider has sufficient appropriately qualified and experienced staff to deliver a high-quality academic experience for all students. |
| | The provider has sufficient facilities and learning resources to deliver a high-quality academic experience for all students. |
| | Views and feedback from students are regularly sought and acted on and providers offer feedback in return. |
| | Students understand how to make academic appeals and complaints, providers deal with these in a fair and timely manner and use the outcomes of these as a source for improvement. |
| | High-quality research programmes take place in appropriate and supportive research environments so that students are supported to achieve successful academic, personal and professional outcomes. |
| | Where a provider works in partnership with other organisations, it takes responsibility for the quality of the student academic experience. |
| | The provider has a reliable and fair admission system that results in students being matched to appropriate courses and provided with the support necessary for a high-quality academic experience and successful completion. |

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[1] The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications for England, Wales and Northern Ireland, which starts at Level 4, and the Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland, which starts at Level 7.

1. Does this proposal provide a coherent framework for quality and standards in UK higher education?

2. Do the revised Expectations appropriately express the outcomes students and stakeholders should expect from higher education providers?

3. Are the core practices for standards appropriate and flexible enough to:

   a. Serve the needs of all nations in the UK?

   b. Serve the needs of an increasingly diverse sector?

4. Are the core practices for quality appropriate and flexible enough to:

   a. Serve the needs of all nations in the UK?

   b. Serve the needs of an increasingly diverse sector?

## Supplementary practices for enhancement-led approaches

In addition to these Expectations and core practices, the Code will include a set of supplementary practices. These aim specifically to inform enhancement-led approaches to quality and standards by describing key features of performance above the baseline expressed through the core practices. We ask the higher education sector and other key stakeholders for their views and ideas about what these supplementary practices should be, in order to reflect current thinking across the UK. Any responses to this can be given in the 'general comments' section of the response to the consultation.

Areas covered may include student engagement, employability (including entrepreneurship), work-based learning, working with partners, and flexible and distance learning. In some UK nations the supplementary practices may form part of the regulatory framework.

5. Does the proposal to develop supplementary practices outlined above:

   a. Serve the needs of all nations in the UK?

   b. Serve the needs of a diversifying sector?

## Advice and guidance

The new Expectations, core practices and supplementary practices will be underpinned by advice and guidance. Separate consultation will be undertaken with the sector and other key stakeholders to define the nature of this guidance and the topics that it may cover. It is anticipated that the existing guidance provided within the Code, updated and refined as appropriate, will form a key part of the new content.

## Next steps

This consultation is open to individuals and organisations with an interest in UK higher education. We are particularly interested to hear from students, governing bodies and senior leaders representing the broad diversity of UK higher education, graduate employers and other stakeholders.

To respond to the consultation, please visit www.ukscqa.org.uk.

To register for a workshop, visit www.qaa.ac.uk.

Following analysis of the consultation responses and workshops, UKSCQA and QAA will work together to finalise a new set of Expectations and core practices. We expect these to be published in March 2018. Further work on the structure, format and accessibility of the Code will continue over the following year, and include the development of supplementary practices as well as advice and guidance. There will be a further consultation on a strategy for the long-term management and review of the Code.

## Timeline

### 2017

| September | Consideration of the timeline and proposed reforms to the Code by the UKSCQA |
| --- | --- |
| October | UKSCQA launches UK-wide consultation on the new Expectations and core practices; QAA coordinates consultation and schedules supporting events |
| December | Consultation closes |

### 2018

| January | Responses to the consultation analysed |
| --- | --- |
| February | Consultation outcomes considered by the UKSCQA |
| March | New Expectations and core practices approved by the UKSCQA and published |

## 2018 continued

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|---|---|
| **April** | QAA commences a programme of UK-wide consultation activities with the sector and other stakeholders, to develop supplementary practices and reform the structure, shape and accessibility of the advice and guidance available to underpin the Expectations and practices |
| **November** | New supplementary practices and revised advice and guidance are signed off by UKSCQA and launched |

## 2019

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|---|---|
| **January** | UK-wide consultation activities commence to inform a strategy for the future management and maintenance of the Code |
| **May** | New Code management strategy is signed off by the UKSCQA and implemented |

6.  How should we involve the UK nations, the higher education sector, students and other stakeholders (such as graduate employers) in the future development and management of the Quality Code?

Respondents are invited to share additional comments and views on these proposals in the general comments section of the online survey.