Higher education institution (HEIs) are autonomous, self-governing institutions. Each is responsible for the quality of its own programmes and, for those institutions with degree awarding powers, for the academic standards of the awards it offers.

HEIs operate within a regulatory framework that covers the granting of powers to award degrees; the right to use a ‘university’ or ‘university college’ title; the receipt of public funding via the Office for Students (OfS); and designation for student support purposes. This framework is described in relation to the ‘Responsible bodies’ in the subsection below.

Beyond this regulatory framework, the system incorporates a number of elements that aim to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualifications, and to inform and encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education. These elements incorporate internal and external scrutiny and a shared set of reference points. They are described in the subsection on ‘Approaches and methods for quality assurance’.

Responsible bodies

Following the passing of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, the Office for Students (OfS) was established as the new regulator for the higher education sector, officially replacing the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in April 2018.

In February 2018, the OfS published a new Regulatory framework for higher education in England, which will become fully operational on 1 August 2019. 1 April 2018 to 31 July 2019 is a transitional period for the higher education sector as it moves from operating under the previous operating framework, introduced when the HEFCE was still in operation, to the new regulatory framework.

Department for Education

The Department for Education (DfE) is the lead government department for higher education. Its role includes higher education reform, including implementing the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 and the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (see the subsection on ‘External assessment of quality of teaching’).

The DfE was also previously responsible for advising the Privy Council on applications for degree awarding powers; and for setting the terms and conditions under which individual programmes, which do not have ‘institutional designation’ under the regulations made under the Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998, are designated as eligible for student support. Responsibility for these areas is being transferred to the Office for Students (OfS).
Office for Students (OfS)

The Office for Students (OfS) [5] is the new regulator for the higher education sector. It was established as a non-departmental public body [13] under the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 [6] and is sponsored by the DfE. The OfS is responsible for the regulation and funding of higher education in England, for holding higher education institutions (HEIs) [1] to account, and for promoting students’ interests. It replaced the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in April 2018.

Higher education providers must register with the OfS if they wish to access public grant funding or student support funding, recruit international students, or apply for degree awarding powers or university title. They must also have an access and participation plan [14], approved by the OfS, if they wish to charge fees higher than a specified amount for fee-regulated courses.

The OfS developed and published a new regulatory framework [7] for higher education in February 2018. This will come into force in full on 1 August 2019. During the transition period, running from 1 April 2018 to 31 July 2019, all existing providers are required to register with the OfS, which is also managing the registration process for new higher education providers.

The OfS holds legal responsibility for assuring quality in higher education, which it does through a designated body - the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) [15].

The OfS also manages the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) [10]; see the subheading ‘External assessment of quality of teaching’ below for further information.

Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is responsible for the external evaluation of higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK. It maintains the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, which is a voluntary code setting out what higher education providers are required to do, what they can expect of each other, and what the general public can expect of them. In 2017/18, the Code was redeveloped; see the subheading ‘The Quality Code’ below for further information.

The QAA is not a regulator; the regulatory role is that of the Office for Students (OfS) and consequently the QAA has no powers over HEIs and no statutory authority. It was set up in 1997 as an independent body funded by subscriptions from universities and colleges of higher education throughout the UK, as well as through contracts with the funding bodies. It is now a designated body of the Office for Students, responsible for providing evidence to help the OfS establish whether higher education providers satisfy the quality conditions of registration, and to inform its decisions regarding degree awarding powers (see the subheading ‘Degree awarding powers [16]’ in the article on ‘Types of Higher Education Institutions’ for further information). The QAA also provided advice to the Privy Council and Companies House on applications for ‘university’ and ‘university college’ titles until the OfS took on responsibility for this at the end of March 2019.

See the subheading ‘External review of higher education institutions’ for further information.

Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA [17]) is a not-for-profit, private limited company, funded by subscriptions from the higher education providers from whom it collects data - universities, higher education colleges and other, differently funded providers of higher education. This data is provided to the UK Government and higher education funding bodies to support their work in regulating and
funding higher education providers.

**UK Research and Innovation**

UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) [18] was established under the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 [6] as a single research and innovation funding body. UKRI brings together the seven UK Research Councils [19], Innovate UK [20] and Research England [21], a new organisation which took over the research and knowledge exchange functions of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in April 2018. These include implementing the Research Excellence Framework (REF); providing grant funding to English universities for research and knowledge exchange activities; and oversight of the sustainability of the higher education research base in England. See the subheading ‘External assessment of quality of research’ below for further information on the REF.

**Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies**

Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) regulate professional and occupational standards and issue their own licences for professional practice. Accreditation arrangements are in place so that the syllabus for certain higher education programmes (in subjects such as architecture, engineering, medicine and law) is reviewed and approved for recognition by the relevant body as an initial phase of professional training, or for exemption from a professional examination.

**Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted)**

The Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) [22] is responsible for conducting inspections of all providers of programmes leading to Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) [23] for school teachers, and for programmes of further education teacher training validated by higher education institutions (HEIs).

**Advance HE**

In March 2018, Advance HE [25] was established to provide support to the higher education sector to continuously develop its teaching, leadership and research. It was formed as a result of a merger between the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) [26], which aims to support equality and diversity for staff and students in HEIs; the Higher Education Academy (HEA) [27], whose focus is on teaching excellence in HE; and the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE) [28], which aims to develop the management, governance and leadership skills of existing and future leaders of higher education.

The establishment of Advance HE was a result of a recommendation included in the 2017 Report of the Review Group on UK Higher Education Sector Agencies [29] undertaken by Universities UK [30], a body composed of the executive heads of HEIs.

**Approaches and methods for quality assurance**

Higher education institutions (HEIs) [1] are autonomous, self-governing institutions. Each is responsible for the quality of its own programmes and, for those institutions with degree awarding powers [2], for the academic standards of the awards it offers. The approaches used incorporate internal and external scrutiny and a shared set of reference points.

Following the passing of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 [6], the Office for Students (OfS) [31] was established as the new regulator for the higher education sector. It published the Regulatory framework for higher education in England [7] in February 2018, which will become fully operational on 1 August 2019. As outlined in the framework, higher education providers wishing to access grant
funding and/or student support funding, and/or recruit international students, and/or to apply for degree awarding powers or university title, must be registered by the OfS. They must also adhere to initial and ongoing conditions of registration, demonstrating that they are able to offer high quality higher education to students. These conditions are described below under the subheading ‘External review of higher education institutions’.

Evaluation of research in HEIs is carried out every few years on a UK-wide basis. In addition, the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) encourages high quality teaching by financially rewarding HEIs which have been identified as delivering excellent quality teaching. See the subheadings ‘External assessment of quality of research’ and ‘External assessment of quality of teaching’ below for details.

The Quality Code

The Quality Code for Higher Education is the definitive reference point for all UK higher education providers, though use of the advice and guidance accompanying the Code is voluntary. The Code, which is produced and maintained by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) [32], makes clear what higher education providers are required to do, what they can expect of each other, and what students and the general public can expect of them. It covers all four nations of the UK (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) and all providers of UK higher education operating internationally. The Code aims to protect the interests of students, regardless of where they are studying or whether they are full-time, part-time, undergraduate [33] or postgraduate [34] students.

In 2017-18, the Quality Code was redeveloped and a new version published. Transition arrangements for moving to the new Code vary across the different constituent parts of the UK. In England, all providers seeking registration with the OfS use the new version of the Code. These providers must demonstrate that they meet the core practices of the new Quality Code, as part of the Quality and Standards Review [35] method used by the QAA (see the subheading ‘Initial conditions of registration’ below). Existing providers previously designated for student support by the Secretary of State [36], and who have yet to be registered by the OfS, continue to undergo annual monitoring with reference to the old version of the Code until 31 July 2019.

The Quality Code 2018

Following a period of consultation [37] undertaken by the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment (UKSCQA) in 2017, the Quality Code was redeveloped. The new Quality Code [38] was published [39] in full in November 2018 and is based on three elements:

a. Expectations, which clearly and succinctly express the broad outcomes providers should achieve in setting and maintaining the standards of their awards, and for managing the quality of their provision.

b. Core practices, which represent effective ways of working that underpin the delivery of the expectations and will deliver positive outcomes for students.

c. Common practices, which describe effective ways of working that will be applied by providers in line with their mission, the needs of their students, and the regulatory context. They are required in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, but are optional in England.

While the expectations and core practices of the new Quality Code are mandatory for higher education providers, the supporting advice and guidance [40] isn’t. Instead, it is intended to help both existing and new providers to meet the mandatory requirements of the Code, and to develop and maintain effective quality assurance practices. The advice and guidance, which includes guiding principles, practical advice and further resources, is split into 12 themes:
admissions, recruitment and widening access
assessment
concerns, complaints and appeals
course design and development
enabling student achievement
external expertise
learning and teaching
monitoring and evaluation
partnerships
research degrees
student engagement
work-based learning.

There is no national accreditation of programmes (other than the accreditation by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies to provide assurance that a programme meets the standards required by a particular profession), but higher education providers must have quality assurance procedures for their programmes. These should be informed by the Quality Code, as described in the advice and guidance document on monitoring and evaluation. Providers are advised to ‘develop strategic principles to ensure that monitoring and evaluation is relevant, useful, timely and credible’ (p.5). Effective monitoring and evaluation practices analyse and collect data to draw conclusions on effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, sustainability and impact, which ‘feed into course review’ (p. 6).

The Quality Code 2018 aims to take account of the guidance in the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

Two additional key reference points for providers, about which more information is available on the QAA website, are subject benchmark statements and qualifications and credit frameworks. Subject benchmark statements provide general guidance for the design, delivery and review of academic programmes, describing the nature of study and academic standards which are expected of graduates in specific subjects. They show what graduates might reasonably be expected to know, do and understand at the end of their studies. Qualification frameworks set out the different levels of higher education qualifications and the requirements for each of these, while the credit framework provides guidance on using credit when designing programmes which lead to higher education qualifications.

The Quality Code 2013-18

The Quality Code 2013-18 (the ‘old’ Code) comprises three parts, as follows.

a. Part A: Setting and maintaining academic standards

   Chapter A1: UK and European reference points for academic standards

   Chapter A2: Degree-awarding bodies’ reference points for academic standards

   Chapter A3: Securing academic standards and an outcomes-based approach to academic awards.

a. Part B: Assuring and enhancing academic quality

   Chapter B1: Programme design, development and approval
There is no national accreditation of programmes (other than the accreditation by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies to provide assurance that a programme meets the standards required by a particular profession), but higher education providers must have quality assurance procedures for their programmes which should be informed by the Quality Code. Typically, this is an internal process which encompasses two separate but complementary measures: programme monitoring and programme review.

As described in Chapter B8 of the Code, **programme monitoring** refers to a regular, systematic process which provides a check on ongoing learning and teaching provision at an operational level. **Programme review** occurs less frequently, but periodically and to an agreed cycle. It has a broader remit and is informed by a view of trends over time. The review of a programme may be related to its re-approval, if the original approval was time limited.

The 2013-18 Quality Code for Higher Education takes account of the guidance in the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*[^42]. Consequently, although the ESG is not a separate reference point, if an institution is engaging with the Quality Code it follows that it will also be taking account of the ESG.

**External examining**

External examining is an integral and long-standing part of the system of higher education in the UK. Each higher education institution (HEI) with degree awarding powers is responsible for the academic standards of the awards it offers. External examining plays an important and essential role in every degree awarding institution’s arrangements for assuring its academic standards.

External examiners are experienced higher education teachers who offer an independent assessment of academic standards and the quality of assessment to the appointing institution. Acting as an
external examiner generally involves the review of a selection of exam scripts, assignments and dissertations, followed by informal engagement with staff to discuss the assessed work, and participation in the formal meeting of the examination board.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) Quality Code 2018 requires providers to use external examiners as part of their core practices; see the guidance and advice document on external expertise [46] for further information. The Quality Code for Higher Education 2013-18 [45] also includes the expectation that ‘Higher education providers make scrupulous use of external examiners’ (see Chapter B7: External examining, page 25).

External review of higher education institutions

Under the new regulatory framework [7], registration with the Office for Students (OfS) is required by 1 August 2019 for all new and existing higher education providers wishing to access public funding; recruit international students; be granted degree awarding powers (DAP) [2]; or be given ‘university’ [3] or ‘university college’ [4] title. Registration with the OfS involves providers meeting, and then continuing to meet, initial and general ongoing conditions. Specific ongoing conditions may also be applied to certain providers in order for them to register or remain registered with the OfS, based on a risk assessment.

Initial and general ongoing conditions

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is the designated body responsible for carrying out quality and standards assessment functions on behalf of the OfS, including assuring the OfS that providers meet its initial and ongoing conditions of registration. These conditions fall into seven areas, as outlined below. Note that the initial and ongoing conditions of registration providers must meet differ, depending on which registration category the provider is in (this depends on whether the fees they can charge their students are capped or not, which in turn depends on whether they have an access and participation plan [14] in place).

a. Access and participation for students from all backgrounds: providers intending to charge fees higher than a specified amount for fee-regulated courses must have an access and participation plan in place.

b. Quality, reliable standards and positive outcomes for all standards:

i. condition B1: the provider must deliver well-designed courses that provide a high quality academic experience for all students and enable a student’s achievement to be reliably assessed;

ii. condition B2: the provider must provide all students, from admission through to completion, with the support that they need to succeed in and benefit from higher education;

iii. condition B3: the provider must deliver successful outcomes for all of its students, which are recognised and valued by employers and/or enable further study;

iv. condition B4: the provider must ensure that qualifications awarded to students hold their value at the point of qualification and over time, in line with sector recognised standards;

v. condition B5: the provider must deliver courses that meet the academic standards as they are described in the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) for Level 4 or higher (see the subheading ‘Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) [47]’ in the introduction to higher education chapter);

vi. condition B6: the provider must participate in the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (see the subheading ‘External assessment of quality of teaching’ below).
a. Protecting the interests of all students.
b. Financial sustainability.
c. Good governance.
d. Information for students.
e. Accountability for fees and funding.

When seeking initial registration with the OfS, all providers (existing and new) are required to submit documentary evidence to the QAA related to the initial and ongoing conditions above.

In addition, to collect further evidence that new providers are meeting the quality and standards conditions of registration, the QAA uses Quality and Standards Review [48]. This involves review teams, composed of external experts with experience in higher education or regulation, visiting the provider and collecting evidence in order to assess whether and how the outcomes expressed by the core practices of the Quality Code 2018 (see above) are being achieved. During their visit, review teams are likely to assess further documentary evidence; meet with staff and students; observe teaching and learning activities; and assess learning resources and other facilities.

For existing providers registering with the OfS for the first time, the QAA uses the provider’s documentary evidence that they are meeting the quality and standards and financial viability and sustainability conditions of registration, alongside evidence collected previously via the former Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), or the Department for Education (DfE).

**Specific ongoing conditions**

The OfS also undertakes a risk assessment to determine how likely it is that a provider will breach one or more of its ongoing conditions. In cases where it considers there to be an increased risk of such a breach, one or more specific ongoing conditions of registration may be imposed on the provider. Specific conditions vary between providers but might, for example, concern a provider taking a particular action to remain financially sustainable. Further information is available on the OfS [website](#) [49].

**External review of other higher education provision**

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) [15] is responsible for reviewing other types of higher education provision. This includes:

- higher education delivered by private providers, through QAA educational oversight reviews and reviews for specific course designation;
- higher education delivered overseas, through QAA reviews of transnational education, which is the process for reviewing higher education programmes delivered by UK institutions through partnership links with organisations abroad or delivered on overseas campuses;
- professional programmes - the QAA carries out reviews of higher education provision for some professional programmes, e.g. reviews of osteopathic courses and providers for the General Osteopathic Council.

More information on these review methods is available from the [QAA website](#) [50].

Ofsted [22], the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills, conducts inspections of all providers of programmes leading to Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) [23] for school teachers, and of programmes of further education teacher training validated by higher education institutions. The Initial Teacher Education (ITE) Inspection Handbook [51] (2018) sets out the statutory basis and framework for initial teacher education (ITE) inspections.
External assessment of quality of research

The evaluation of research in higher education institutions (HEIs) [1] is carried out every seven years on a UK-wide basis on behalf of Research England [52], the Scottish Funding Council [53], the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales [54], and the Department for the Economy [55], Northern Ireland.

Evaluation is based on academic peer review of selected research outputs for each unit of assessment (subject area) and is carried out by subject-specific assessment panels. The outcomes are used to:

- inform the distribution of quality-related funding for research;
- provide accountability for public investment in research;
- provide benchmarking information and establish reputational yardsticks.

The method used is the Research Excellence Framework (REF) [56], a single unified framework for the funding and assessment of research across all subjects. Three distinct elements are assessed for each submission received: the quality of outputs (e.g. publications, performances, and exhibitions); their impact beyond academia; and the environment which supports research.

Assessment combines quantitative indicators, including bibliometric indicators where these are appropriate, and light-touch expert review. The balance between the methods used varies as appropriate to each subject. The REF was first completed in 2014 and has informed the selective allocation of research funding since 2015/16.

In January 2019, Research England published final guidance and criteria [57] for universities for the second REF in 2021. This includes a number of changes made following an independent review [58] in 2016, such as ensuring that information on all research active staff is included and giving HEIs more flexibility to submit case studies evidencing their interdisciplinary and collaborative impacts. Further information on the changes is available on the REF 2021 website [59].

External assessment of quality of teaching

The Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework [10] assesses and rewards excellence in teaching at English higher education institutions (HEIs). The TEF is voluntary and each HE provider decides whether to take part. It is managed by the Office for Students (OfS) [5].

The TEF was originally launched as the Teaching Excellence Framework, and the first TEF awards were made in 2016 to those HEIs with a quality assessment of ‘meeting’ or ‘exceeding’ the expectations for quality standards. In the second year of operation, awards were made in June 2017 on the basis of HEIs’ performance against a series of metrics, including student retention, satisfaction, and employment outcomes. In the third year of operation, from 2018-19, differentiated tuition fees began in England, with HEIs deemed to be providing excellent teaching being allowed to charge up to the higher maximum tuition fee.

TEF assessments are carried out by peer review based on a HEI submission. An independent TEF panel comprising students, academics, widening participation experts and employers is responsible for deciding the assessment outcomes. During the initial phase of assessment, three panel members review a TEF submission against a series of metrics. A larger group of panel members then considers the application and forms a recommendation, in advance of the whole TEF panel considering the recommendation and making a final decision.

In September 2017, the Department for Education published a report [60] on lessons learnt about the TEF over the first two years of its operation. This concluded that:
• the second year of the TEF had operated in a fair and transparent way;
• the assessment process for providers in 2017/18 and 2018/19 would be refined to ensure that excellence in part-time provision would be recognised more systematically;
• the TEF would be renamed the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework, to reflect the fact that it assesses providers' teaching and student outcomes.

For a comprehensive overview of the TEF, see this House of Commons Library Briefing [61] published in June 2017.

Publication of information

The OfS Register [62] lists all the registered higher education providers in England, including their Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) rating (see above); the highest level of degree awarding powers they hold; and, for those providers which have one, a link to their access and participation plan [14]. During the transition period running from 1 April 2018 to 31 July 2019, the OfS is managing the registration process for existing and new providers, so until 1 August 2019, the Register will not be complete.

In addition, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) [63] publishes reports of reviews of alternative higher education providers (see the subheading ‘External review of other higher education provision’ above).

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) also publishes performance indicators [64], which provide comparative data on the performance of higher education providers across several areas. Performance indicators are intended to provide reliable information on the nature and performance of the higher education sector in the UK and a consistent set of measures of this performance. This aims to contribute to greater public accountability, and to ensure that policy decisions can be made on the basis of consistent and reliable information. The indicators provide comparative data on the performance of institutions in widening participation, student retention / non-continuation rates, and the employment of graduates. The indicators cover publicly funded higher education providers in the UK and one privately funded institution.

Providers are also required to publish a range of information about teaching quality and standards. Some of this information is available on institutions’ websites, and some is available on the Unistats website.

The Unistats website [65] provides comparable sets of information about full- or part-time undergraduate [33] courses to meet the information needs of prospective students. The data covers publicly funded higher education institutions over the whole of the UK and is drawn from national surveys of students and information collected from providers. The data includes:

• student views / satisfaction from the National Student Survey;
• student destinations and salary on finishing their course from the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education survey;
• the percentage of students continuing on the course after a year;
• course accreditation and / or professional recognition.

The site also includes links to provider websites so that prospective students can find detailed information on areas such as:

• course content;
• how the course is structured and taught;
• how the course is assessed;
• costs (tuition fees and accommodation costs).

Article last reviewed March 2019.