Higher education institutions (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 system that covers the granting of powers to award degrees, the right to use university or university college title, and the receipt of public funding via the Department for the Economy (DfE). This system is described in the subsection below on ‘Responsible bodies’.

Beyond this regulatory role, 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 below on ‘Approaches and methods for quality assurance’.

**Responsible bodies**

**Department for the Economy (DfE)**

The Department for the Economy (DfE) has a statutory duty, under Section 102 of The Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, to make provision for the assessment of the quality of the provision that it funds. In relation to higher education, this includes provision in universities, university colleges and in the six further education colleges in Northern Ireland.

The DfE also has a contract with the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) (see below) to undertake more detailed investigations of higher education providers who have been found to be of concern by the external quality assessment process.

The DfE is responsible for the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in Northern Ireland, along with (in their respective jurisdictions) the Office for Students (OfS) in England; the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales; and the Scottish Funding Council. This is a UK-wide framework through which the quality of research undertaken in HEIs is assessed to inform the selective allocation of research funding. The framework also provides accountability for public investment in research. See the subheading ‘External assessment of quality of research’, in the article ‘Quality Assurance in Higher Education’ in the England country description for further information on the REF.

**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) throughout 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. It 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.

The QAA also advises the Privy Council [13] on applications for the granting of degree awarding powers [1], 'university' [2], title, or designation as a higher education institution in Northern Ireland. See the subheading 'Degree awarding powers' [14] in the article on 'Types of Higher Education Institutions', and QAA’s guidance on The Right to Award UK Degrees [15] (2018) for further information.

Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) [16] 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 the higher education funding bodies to support their work in regulating and funding higher education providers.

Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs)

Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) regulate professional and occupational standards and issue their own licences for professional practice. There are accreditation arrangements through which 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.

Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI)

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) [17] is responsible for the inspection of initial teacher training for teachers in schools and in further education [18]. The ETI is a ‘unitary’ inspectorate, which provides independent services and policy advice for a number of departments within the Northern Ireland Civil Service, including the Department of Education and the Department for the Economy.

Advance HE

In March 2018, Advance HE [19] was established to provide support to the higher education sector to continuously develop its teaching, leadership and research. It was formed following a merger between the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) [20], which aims to support equality and diversity for staff and students in HEIs; the Higher Education Academy (HEA) [21], whose focus is on teaching excellence in HE; and the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE) [22], 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 [23] undertaken by Universities UK [24], a body composed of the executive heads of HEIs.
Approaches and methods for quality assurance

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

The Revised Operating Model for Quality Assessment in Higher Education [25] (2016) is the external process used to examine how effectively each higher education provider operates its internal quality assurance system. It is 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 through the Research Excellence Framework (REF). In addition, the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) in England can be used by HEIs in Northern Ireland to assess the quality of teaching and learning outcomes. See the subheadings ‘External assessment of quality of teaching’ below and ‘External assessment of quality of research’ [10] in the article on ‘Quality Assurance in Higher Education’ in the England country description for details.

The Quality Code

The Quality Code for Higher Education [12] 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) [26], 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 (Northern Ireland, England, Wales and Scotland) and all providers of UK higher education operating internationally, and aims to protect the interests of all students, regardless of where they are studying or whether they are full-time, part-time, undergraduate [27] or postgraduate [28] students.

In 2017-18, the Code was redeveloped. Transition arrangements for moving to the new Code vary across the different constituent parts of the UK. Providers undergoing review in Northern Ireland continue to reference the existing (2013-18) version of the Code until August 2019.

The Quality Code 2013-18

The Quality Code 2013-18 [29] 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.

b. Part B: Assuring and enhancing academic quality:

   Chapter B1: Programme design, development and approval

   Chapter B2: Recruitment, selection and admission to higher education
Chapter B3: Learning and teaching
Chapter B4: Enabling student development and achievement
Chapter B5: Student engagement
Chapter B6: Assessment of students and the recognition of prior learning
Chapter B7: External examining
Chapter B8: Programme monitoring and review
Chapter B9: Academic appeals and student complaints
Chapter B10: Managing higher education provision with others
Chapter B11: Research degrees.

a. Part C: Information about higher education provision:

This shorter part is a single chapter, which addresses how providers produce information that is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy.

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. It may take place annually or at shorter or longer intervals, and 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. In both cases, the unit of learning under consideration may be a module or group of modules, or a programme or group of programmes. Monitoring and review may also take place at the departmental, subject or organisational level.

Higher education providers may use different terminology from that adopted in Chapter B8 or use the same terminology in different ways in relation to monitoring and review, reflecting their individual history and approach. For example, the monitoring which takes place at the end of each academic cycle may be described as annual monitoring or annual review, and the less frequent review process is often described as periodic review.

The QAA’s 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)*[^30]. Consequently, although the ESG is not a separate reference point, if an institution in Northern Ireland is engaging with the Quality Code it follows that it will also be taking account of the ESG.
Quality Code 2018

Following a period of consultation undertaken by the UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment (UKSCQA) in 2017, the Quality Code was redeveloped.

The new Quality Code was published in full in November 2018. The revised Code 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, representing effective ways of working that underpin the delivery of the expectations and will deliver positive outcomes for students.

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

The Code is supported by non-statutory advice and guidance, which is intended to help both established and new providers to develop and maintain effective quality assurance practices. This advice and guidance 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.

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, whilst the credit framework provides guidance on using credit when designing programmes which lead to higher education qualifications.

External examining

External examining is an integral and long-standing part of the system for 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.


External review of higher education institutions

The Revised Operating Model for Quality Assessment in Higher Education [25] (2016) has been in operation in Northern Ireland since the start of the 2017/18 academic year. The approach set out in the revised model aims to assess the quality of education in the higher education providers funded by the Department for the Economy (DfE) in a proportionate and risk-based way, targeting regulatory activity on those institutions that represent greater risk to the student interest or to the reputation of the sector.

The Annual Provider Review (APR) process is central to the Revised Operating Model and is the core mechanism used to assess quality in the higher education providers funded by the DfE.

For providers seeking to enter the publicly funded higher education sector, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) [37] undertakes Quality Review Visits on behalf of the DfE.

Quality Review Visit (QRV)

The Quality Review Visit (QRV) is the process through which a provider’s readiness to enter the publicly-funded higher education sector in Northern Ireland is tested. The QRV verifies a provider’s ability to meet the elements of the baseline regulatory requirements which serve as external reference points to safeguard academic standards and the quality of the student academic experience. These are:

- the expectations of the UK Quality Code for higher education (see above), including The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies [35];
- the Higher Education Code of Governance [38];
- providers’ obligations under consumer law;
- the good practice framework for handling complaints and academic appeals, published by the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman.

QRV is also used to re-test new entrants to the higher education sector as they approach the end of their developmental period. Established providers may, in special circumstances, be subject to QRV if they require enhanced monitoring.

Further information about QRV is available on the QAA website [41].

Annual Provider Review (APR)

The core mechanism for reviewing established higher education (HE) providers in Northern Ireland is
the **Annual Provider Review (APR)** [25]. This is an annual monitoring process that brings together data, intelligence and assurance activities to reach a rounded view about the quality of the academic experience provided to students, and the outcomes they achieve. Different parts of the APR are carried out by the Office for Students (the regulator of higher education in England) and the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), on behalf of the Department for the Economy (DfE).

In its early stages, the APR process involves collecting and analysing the following pieces of data and information about a provider.

a. Assurance statements on quality and standards, submitted by the provider’s governing body. These relate to oversight of academic governance (with a focus on the continuous improvement of the student academic experience and student outcomes), as well as the reliability of degree standards.

b. Key pieces of data, including data submitted to the **Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)** [42] and the Department for the Economy, such as student non-continuation rates, **National Student Survey** [43] outcomes, and student employment outcomes. This is known as a provider’s APR dashboard.

The quality and standards profile included in each provider’s APR dashboard is considered by the OfS Officer’s Group. If the Group identifies concerns which could lead to a negative APR outcome, it informs the DfE; the provider is invited to comment on the Officer’s Group findings and has four weeks to respond.

Taking into account the OfS assessment, the provider’s response where relevant, and the APR dashboard, the DfE then makes a final judgement about a provider’s quality and standards matters, as follows:

i) meets requirements: the provider will continue to undergo APR;

ii) meets requirements with an action plan: the provider will continue to undergo APR, but with an action plan outlining the areas of immediate concern which need to be addressed;

iii) pending: the APR process for this provider has not yet been completed and this judgement is replaced by one of the other three once the process is complete;

iv) does not meet requirements: the provider will undergo a period of enhanced scrutiny, alongside an action plan outlining the areas of immediate concern which need to be addressed.

In cases where the DfE has serious concerns about quality and standards matters, the process set out in the second stage of the **Unsatisfactory Quality Scheme (UQS)** [44] is followed, and the QAA carries out a desk-based analysis of the evidence, followed by a one/two day investigation visit. Once the DfE has considered the new evidence, the provider receives its APR outcome; in the meantime, the provider receives a ‘pending’ judgement.

The outcome of the APR process for each provider is published on the DfE website [25].

**Guidance** [45] on the 2018-19 APR process is available from the DfE.

**External review of other higher education provision**

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is responsible for reviewing different 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, where the QAA carries out reviews of higher education provision for some professional programmes.

More information on these review methods is available from the QAA website [46].

To evaluate the provision of initial teacher education (ITE) in Northern Ireland, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) [17] conducts inspections of ITE programmes. Inspection also audits and quality-assures the self-evaluation carried out by ITE providers.

**External assessment of quality of research**

See the subheading ‘External assessment of quality of research [10]’ in the article on ‘Quality Assurance in Higher Education’ in the England country description for further information.

**External assessment of quality of teaching**

The Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework [47], originally launched as the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), assesses and rewards excellence in teaching at English higher education institutions (HEIs). The TEF was established with the aim of making teaching and research in HEIs of equal status, and of ensuring that all students receive an excellent teaching experience. The TEF encourages high quality teaching by financially rewarding HEIs in England which have been identified as delivering excellent quality teaching: HEIs which are deemed to be providing such teaching are allowed to increase their fees in line with inflation. Providers in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland are able to take part in the TEF, but this has no direct impact on their tuition fees.

See the subheading ‘External assessment of quality of teaching [48]’ in the article on ‘Quality Assurance in Higher Education’ in the England country description for further information.

**Publication of information**

The results of the Annual Provider Review (APR) process for each higher education provider in Northern Ireland are published on the Department for the Economy website [25].

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) also publishes performance indicators [49], 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
The Unistats website provides comparable sets of information about full- or part-time undergraduate 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 provides 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.

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