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.

HEIs operate within a regulatory system that covers the granting of powers to award degrees, the right to use university title and the receipt of public funding via the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW). 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 on ‘Approaches and methods for quality assurance’.

**Responsible bodies**

**Welsh Government**

The Welsh Government [3] sets the overall policy direction for higher education in Wales. Current policy priorities include widening access, supporting students, and promoting innovation and entrepreneurship in universities and colleges. The Welsh Government is also responsible for higher education reform, for funding higher education through the Higher Educations Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), and for the granting of ‘university [4]’ title in Wales.

**Higher Education Funding Council for Wales**

The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) [5] is a Welsh Government sponsored body which receives its funding from and is directly accountable to the Welsh Government. It acts as an intermediary body between the Welsh Government and the higher education sector in Wales. HEFCW distributes funds for higher education, research and related activities (in Wales’ universities and further education colleges [6]); regulates fee levels at higher education providers; and scrutinises the financial and governance performance of universities in line with the Quality Assessment Framework for Wales [7]. Conditions of grant from HEFCW are laid out in the Memorandum of Assurance and Accountability [8] made between HEFCW and each higher education provider.

The Higher Education (Wales) Act 2015 [9], which replaced the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 [10], provides the statutory underpinning for HEFCW’s quality assessment responsibilities. The Act gave HEFCW new powers of regulation from 1 September 2015. These include the power to intervene where an institution has charged course fees in excess of those set out in its Fee and Access Plan [11], or where the quality of an institution’s education provision is assessed as being, or likely to become,
inadequate. In addition, since 1 August 2017, HEFCW has had the power to intervene where an institution has failed to, or is likely to fail to, deliver measures relating to the promotion of equality of opportunity in its Fee and Access Plan; or where it has failed to comply, or is likely to fail to comply, with the Financial Management Code [12].

HEFCW has a contract with the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) [13] to conduct external reviews of quality and standards in the higher education institutions (HEIs) [1] that it funds. The method used is Quality Enhancement Review, described in the subsection on ‘External review of higher education institutions’. If a HEFCW-funded institution receives a ‘meets requirements with conditions’ or ‘does not meet requirements’ judgement in a Quality Enhancement Review, and fails to improve through the QAA follow-up process, this will trigger HEFCW’s policy for addressing unsatisfactory quality in institutions.

HEFCW is also responsible for the Research Excellence Framework (REF) [14] in Wales, along with (in their respective jurisdictions) the Office for Students [15] in England; the Department for the Economy [16] in Northern Ireland; and the Scottish Funding Council [17]. 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’ [18], in the article ‘Quality Assurance in Higher Education’ in the England country description, for further information on the REF.

Proposed Tertiary Education and Research Commission for Wales

In 2017 and 2018, the Welsh Government undertook several consultations related to proposals to create a new Tertiary Education and Research Commission for Wales. It is intended that the Commission will take on responsibility for planning; contracting; funding; ensuring quality; audit; financial monitoring; performance; risk; and for leading on research funding for all post-compulsory education and training. The responsibilities and functions of the HEFCW will transfer to the new authority once set up. The responses received during the consultation process are being taken into account as the policy develops during the legislative process. Further information is available on the Welsh Government website [19].

Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) [20] 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 [21] on applications from institutions in Wales for the granting of degree awarding powers [2].

Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) [22] 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.

**Estyn, Her Majesty’s Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales**

Estyn [23] is responsible for carrying out inspections of initial teacher training. Estyn is independent of the National Assembly for Wales, but funded by the Welsh Government.

**Advance HE**

In March 2018, Advance HE [24] 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) [25], which aims to support equality and diversity for staff and students in HEIs; the Higher Education Academy (HEA) [26], whose focus is on teaching excellence in HE; and the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE) [27], 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 [28] undertaken by Universities UK [29], 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.

‘Quality Enhancement Review’ is the external process examining how effectively each higher education provider operates its internal quality assurance system. The process forms part of the new Quality Assessment Framework for Wales [7], published in 2018 (see the subheading ‘External review of higher education institutions’ below). In addition to Quality Enhancement Review, the Framework includes:

- regulated institutions providing annual assurance to the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) in relation to quality;
- annual review of data, student views and other information;
- triennial assurance visits by HEFCW to regulated institutions, which focus on quality.

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) encourages high quality teaching by financially rewarding HEIs which have been identified as

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 UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) [31], 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 countries of the UK (Wales, England, Northern Ireland 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 [32] or postgraduate [33] students.

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

The Quality Code 2013-18

The Quality Code 2013-18 [34] 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
c.) 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). Consequently, although the ESG is not a separate reference point for higher education institutions (HEIs) in Wales, if a HEI is engaging with the Quality Code it follows that it will also be taking account of the ESG.

The Quality Code 2018

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

The new Quality Code was published in full in November 2018 and is based on three elements.

1. 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.

2. Core practices, representing effective ways of working that underpin the delivery of the expectations and will deliver positive outcomes for students.
3. Common practices, that will be applied by providers in line with their missions, their regulatory context and the needs of their students. These are required in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, but are optional in England.

The Code is also supported by non-statutory advice and guidance [39], which is intended to help established and new providers alike to develop and maintain effective quality assurance practices. This is split into twelve 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.

Two additional key reference points for providers, about which more information is available on the QAA website, are subject benchmark statements [40] and qualifications and credit frameworks [41]. 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.

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) [35].

**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) [1] 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 UK Quality Code for Higher Education 2013-18 [34] includes the expectation that: ‘Higher education providers make scrupulous use of external examiners’. See Chapter B7: ‘External examining’ (p.25). The 2018 Quality Code also requires providers to use external examiners as part of their core practices; see the guidance and advice document on external expertise [42] for further...
External review of higher education institutions

The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) published a new Quality Assessment Framework for Wales [7] in March 2018. Key to the new framework are the Gateway Quality Review and Quality Enhancement Review processes and triennial assurance visits. These external review aspects of the new framework are described in the subheadings below.

Gateway Quality Review

Gateway Quality Reviews are used to scrutinise a provider’s ability to meet the baseline regulatory requirements of the Quality Assessment Framework for Wales, allowing them to become designated for student support. They are undertaken by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) on behalf of the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW). Higher education providers undergo two Gateway Reviews, as outlined below.

The first Gateway Review assesses each provider’s performance against the following baseline regulatory requirements:

- the expectations of the UK Quality Code for higher education (see above), including the Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies [41],
- the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW) [43],
- the Higher Education Code of Governance [44],
- providers’ obligations under consumer [45] law,
- the good practice framework for handling complaints and academic appeals [46],
- Welsh language requirements.

Review teams carry out both desk-based research and on-site visits for the first Gateway Review. A successful outcome for a provider means that it is able to apply for course designation, i.e. its courses are eligible for student support.

The second Gateway Review is held four years later. A successful outcome at this stage can be used by the provider as evidence to apply for a Fee and Access Plan [11]. This allows the provider to charge students more than the basic fee for fee-regulated courses, and also means that the provider becomes a ‘regulated’ HEFCW institution. Providers must publish their fee and access plans on an annual basis; approved Fee and Access Plans are published on the HEFCW website [47].


Quality Enhancement Review

Quality Enhancement Review (QER) is the external quality assurance review process which regulated (established) higher education institutions must commission from the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) every six years. This is required by the Quality Assessment Framework for Wales [7]. In order to remain regulated by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), providers must have their internal quality assurance approaches assessed in line with the Quality Assessment Framework and the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

The QER process has an assurance and enhancement function, and focuses on the student learning experience delivered by providers. This comprises the learning opportunities available to students,
together with the support provided to them to take advantage of these; and the extent to which providers engage students in the management and enhancement of quality.

QERs may take place more frequently than every six years if desired by the governing body of a provider, or if required by the HEFCW.

Providers evaluate and identify the areas they would like the QER to focus on and submit evidence to the QAA on that basis. In considering the areas for review, they must:

- consider the outcomes of any previous reviews;
- reflect on information they have submitted to external agencies such as the HEFCW and Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA);
- evaluate student feedback received as part of the National Student Survey;
- consider monitoring and reviews from professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs);
- map their practice against the ESG.

The provider evidence informs the composition of the QAA review team and helps tailor the review to the particular area(s) of focus.

The review team visits the provider twice as part of QER. The first visit lasts one day, and is used to assess whether any further areas need to be examined as part of the main review visit. The main review visit then lasts between three and five days, depending on the assessment of the evidence submitted by the provider and the outcome of the first team visit. During the main review visit, the QAA team considers the provider's documentation and holds meetings with staff, students and other key stakeholders to collect further evidence.

One week after the main review visit, the QAA publishes an early draft ‘Outcome Report’ on its website, setting out its judgements and findings. The provider is given a clear judgement on whether it meets:

- the baseline regulatory requirements of the Quality Assessment Framework for Wales;
- the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

It is also given a clear statement on its approach to the enhancement of the student learning experience.

There are three possible judgements, with associated required actions.

i) ‘Meets requirements’ (in terms of the baseline regulatory requirements and the ESG) results in the provider being required to publish an action plan, and the review is signed off as complete. The provider addresses the review findings in collaboration with students, and updates the action plan annually in the form of Quality Assurance Statements, until all actions have been completed. The next QER is required within six years.

ii) ‘Meets requirements with conditions’ or ‘does not meet requirements’ in any area results in the provider agreeing an action plan with the QAA and its students. The provider’s activities in line with the action plan are then evaluated by the QAA within 12 months and, if the action plan has been successfully implemented, the QAA will upgrade the judgement and publish an amendment to the original report. If the action plan has not been successfully implemented, the QAA will maintain the original judgement and the provider is subject to a HEFCW ‘Statement of Intervention’. The review is only signed off as complete when the provider has completed the ensuing follow-up activity. The next QER is required within four years for
providers meeting requirements ‘with conditions’; and within two years for those whose original judgement was ‘does not meet requirements’.

For further information on the QER process, see the QAA [53].

**Triennial assurance visits**

The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) also carries out triennial assurance visits to regulated institutions as part of the [Quality Assessment Framework for Wales](#) [7]. These assurance visits focus on quality and inform assurance processes, including HEFCW’s assessment of annual submissions of Fee and Access Plans [11]; other visits to institutions; and annual risk letters sent to providers.

A triennial visit involves representatives from the HEFCW visiting a provider and holding separate meetings with its student union, members of the governing body, and members of the senior management team. Issues and problems or good practice identified during other processes of the Quality Assessment Framework are explored and a report is produced by HEFCW representatives.

Further information [54] has been published by the HEFCW.

**External review of other higher education provision**

The UK [Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)] [13] 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, through QAA reviews of higher education provision for some professional programmes.

More information on these review methods is available from the QAA [55].

[Estyn](#) [56], Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales, conducts inspections of all initial teacher training providers using the 2010 Common Inspection Framework [57]. Guidance [58] on such inspections is available.

**External assessment of quality of research**

See the subheading 'External assessment of the quality of research' [18] in the article on 'Quality Assurance in Higher Education' in the England country description for information about the Research Excellence Framework (REF) [14].

**External assessment of quality of teaching**

The Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework [59], 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 Wales, Northern Ireland 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 the quality of teaching' in the article on 'Quality Assurance in Higher Education' in the England country description for further information.

**Publication of information**

Institutions’ approved Fee and Access Plans [11] are published on the HEFCW website [47]. In addition, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) publishes the reports resulting from the Quality Enhancement Review process.

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) also publishes performance indicators [60], which provide comparative data on the performance of UK 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 on the Unistats website. The Unistats website [61] provides comparable sets of information on full- or part-time undergraduate courses to meet the information needs of prospective students. The data covers publicly funded higher education institutions (HEIs) 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 [62];
- 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).

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