

Higher education and QA in the United Kingdom

UK higher education providers

The term 'provider' is widely used in the UK to describe any institution or organisation that delivers or contributes to all or part of a higher education programme.

Requirements to undergo external quality assurance

Different providers are obliged to undergo external quality assurance for different reasons. Publicly funded providers are obliged to undergo external quality assurance or assessment because the bodies that allocate public funding are required by law to ensure that provision is made for the assessment of the quality of the education at providers they fund. However, Higher education is a devolved matter to the national parliaments – The Welsh Senedd, The Northern Ireland Assembly, and the Scottish Parliament. Each country of the UK has different requirements for quality assurance.

Alternative providers of higher education are obliged to take part in external quality assurance if they want 'educational oversight' from QAA, which they need in order to be:

- licensed by the UK Government to recruit students who are not European Economic Area nationals
- they want 'specific course designation', which allows eligible students access to student support loans from the Student Loans Company (SLC)
- they hold Degree Awarding Powers (DAP), which, for alternative providers, must be renewed every six years.

National approaches to quality assurance

UK

The UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment was established in November 2016. The Committee provides sector-led oversight of higher education quality assessment arrangements that continue to be shared across the UK.

Its remit is to:

- ensure the reliability of degree standards (including projects on developing training for external examiners, approaches to the calibration of standards, and a review of degree classification algorithms)
- explore the support required by governing bodies as they exercise effective oversight of academic governance
- develop a strategic understanding of transnational education (TNE), including through review of TNE activities to ensure that students studying for a UK higher education qualification overseas receive a high quality academic experience, and that the reputation of the UK higher education system as a whole is protected.

England

The 2017 [Higher Education and Research Act](#) (HERA) drives the regulatory and legal requirements of HE in England. This Act established the Office for Students (OfS) and gave it responsibility for regulating the English HE sector. With political oversight from the UK Government and Parliament, the OfS is responsible for risk-based monitoring of indicators relating to the baseline quality and standards of provision, with powers of intervention and sanction. It maintains the Register of HE



providers in England, and degree-awarding bodies in England must be registered and meet all ongoing conditions of registration in order to retain degree-awarding powers. The OfS [regulatory framework](#) was implemented in February 2018.

Under the framework, risk-based and outcomes-focused quality assurance is intended to minimise regulatory burden, and QAA operates as the 'Designated Quality Body' - appointed by the Secretary of State for Education since 2018. We have responsibility for assessing quality and standards in English higher education. QAA carries out Quality and Standards Reviews for new providers that wish to join the OfS Register, or for institutions selected by OfS for monitoring and intervention purposes. We also scrutinise applications for degree awarding powers and university title, providing advice to the OfS. Details of how QAA carries out its review functions on behalf of the OfS can be [found here](#).

Northern Ireland

Due to the Northern Ireland Assembly not functioning for several years, the arrangements for quality in Northern Ireland fell into abeyance. However, QAA is currently engaging with the Northern Ireland Government with a view to re-establishing quality arrangements along the lines of that used in Scotland and Wales.

Scotland

The Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF) in Scotland is a collaboration between the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) as the funding body, QAA as the quality agency, Universities Scotland as the representative body of the HE sector and NUS Scotland as the students' representative body. The Framework balances quality assurance and enhancement and emphasises the student learning experience and partnership between sector bodies. SFC's statutory duty in Scotland continues to cover both quality assurance and quality enhancement; thus, enhancement continues to be a particularly strong feature of QAA's work in Scotland.

Scotland's Enhancement Themes are a national programme of planned, strategic activity designed to enhance our students' learning experience and are managed by QAA Scotland. The programme encourages academic staff, support staff and students to share current good practice and collectively generate ideas and models for innovation in learning and teaching. The Themes are part of Scotland's commitment to excellence in higher education and to providing an outstanding student learning experience.

Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) is QAA Scotland's cyclical review method. It is just completing its fourth cycle of reviews of institutions, and we are considering how best to develop this approach in future.

Wales

Publicly funded providers in Wales operate within the Quality Assessment Framework, developed by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW). A condition of the Framework is that providers must undergo a review from a body on the European Quality Assurance Register at least every six years. QAA developed the Quality Enhancement Review (QER) method, which will complete its current cycle in Summer 2022. It is designed to enable HEFCW to approve Fee and Access Plans from institutions each year, and therefore for regulated institutions to access student funding.



UK degrees and degree awarding powers

Decisions to grant degree awarding powers in the UK are made by the Privy Council, based on assessment and scrutiny of applicant providers by QAA and its advice to the respective UK Government. Precise arrangements depend on where in the UK the applicant is based.

Qualifications frameworks

QAA maintains and publishes the Qualifications Frameworks for UK higher education, on behalf of the HE sector.

The Qualifications Frameworks describe the achievement represented by higher education qualifications. They apply to degrees, diplomas, certificates and other academic awards granted by a higher education provider with degree awarding powers. There is one qualification framework for higher education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (*The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland - FHEQ*), and a separate one for Scotland (*The Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland - FQHEIS*).

Both Scotland and Wales have developed credit and qualifications frameworks and, functionally, the FQHEIS effectively forms part of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF), which covers pre-HE levels of learning, as well as the three cycles at HE. Similarly, the FHEQ is a constituent part of the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW). The SCQF is not maintained by QAA but the Agency is a member organisation of the SCQF Partnership. The CQFW is also not maintained by QAA, but takes account of the Agency's advice in its work.



Responsibilities and structure of QAA

Organisation

In 1997, QAA was established as a single quality assurance service for providers of higher education in the UK. QAA is an independent body, a registered charity and a company limited by guarantee. Its Articles of Association, dated 10 April 2017, are published on its public website. As such, it is independent from Government.

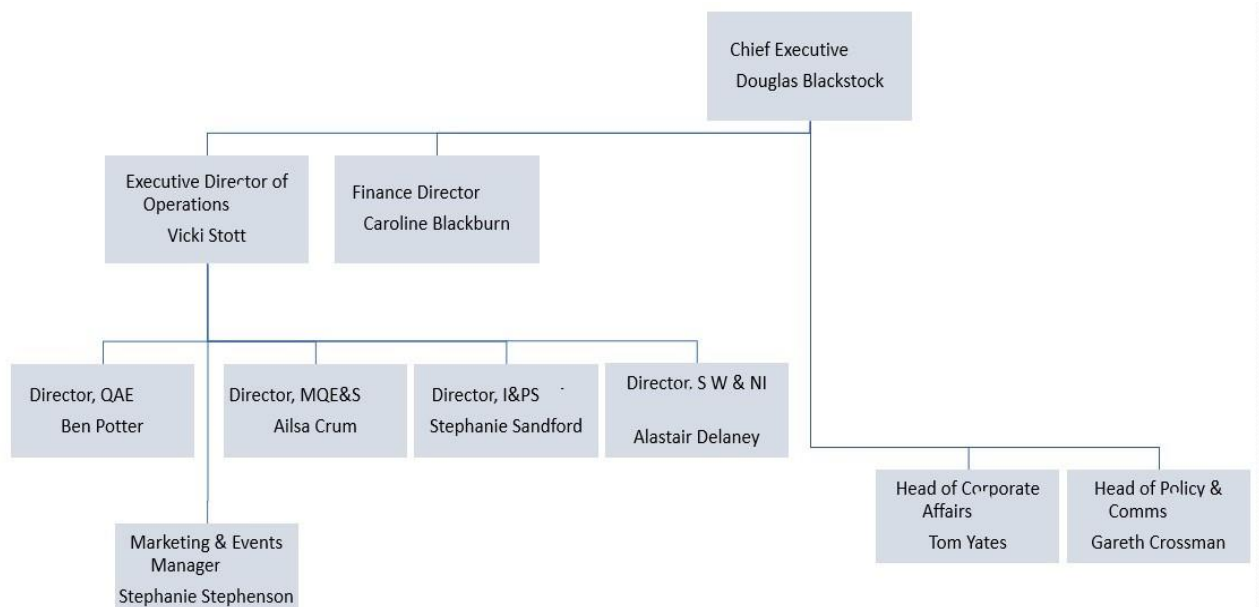
QAA is governed by its Board. The QAA Board is responsible for QAA's mission, strategy and policy development at strategic level, for the Agency's finances and for monitoring its performance against agreed targets at a corporate level. It oversees all annual reporting, with overall responsibility for the company's assets. Board members are trustees of the charity, with experience both from within higher education across the UK, and in other areas.

The QAA Board has a number of committees, each of which is chaired by a Board member or independent person approved by the Board:

- Access Recognition and Licensing Committee
- Advisory Committee on Degree Awarding Powers
- Student Strategic Advisory Committee (SAC)
- Audit Committee
- Nominations and Remuneration Committee
- QAA Wales Strategic Advisory Committee
- QAA Scotland Strategic Advisory Committee
- QAA Enterprises.

Structure

QAA is structured as follows:





Chief Executive

The Chief Executive is appointed by, and is accountable to, the Board. His role is to provide day-to-day leadership of QAA and its programmes of work, including the setting and achievement of corporate objectives in line with the Board's strategic direction. Much of this work involves liaison and consultation with external partners and stakeholders (for example, government departments; civil servants; professional, statutory and regulatory bodies; funding bodies; providers and their representative bodies; students and their representative bodies).

Financial arrangements

QAA is funded through a number of channels:

- subscriptions from higher education providers (almost all publicly funded higher education providers in the UK subscribe to QAA and pay an annual fee, as do some that are not publicly funded). It is mandatory for subscribers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to become members of QAA; this is a requirement of their funding body. Subscription services include enhancement events and workshops, webinars and publications such as Insight pieces on various topics.
- commissions from providers in Wales for review services
- a contract with the four UK funding bodies (England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) for international activities
- an outcome agreement with the Scottish Funding Council and Universities Scotland
- a fee and an annual maintenance charge paid by providers of higher education seeking educational oversight from QAA
- a fee and an annual maintenance charge paid by providers of higher education seeking specific course designation from QAA
- a fee paid by providers of higher education seeking degree awarding powers for the scrutiny process that supports their application
- other private contracts, consultancy and business development work in the UK and overseas.

Activities of the agency

QAA's main areas of work within the scope of the ESG are outlined below:

- Reviews of alternative providers.
- Enhancement-led reviews in Scotland.
- Reviews for regulated providers in Wales.
- Advising UK Governments on applications for degree awarding powers and university title.
- Delivering key elements of the revised operating model for quality assessment in England
- Transnational education reviews.
- Stewardship of the Quality Code on behalf of the sector.
- International strategic activities to support the world-class reputation and influence of the UK higher education sector.
- Working with UK Governments and other sector bodies to provide expert advice and support policy development (for example, guidance on plagiarism and essay mills).
- Delivering training, guidance and events to help UK higher education providers to develop and improve their own quality assurance processes.
- A programme of engagement with providers, students, and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) to support UK higher education.
- Producing publications to support continuous improvement in the sector, including research, analysis, case studies and thematic reports.



Those activities that sit outside the scope of the ESG include:

- national capacity building and enhancement of quality assurance overseas
- institutional capacity building and enhancement of quality assurance overseas
- training for external quality review overseas
- International Quality Assurance Programme
- Teaching Excellence Framework
- Access to Higher Education.