

The Future of Quality Assessment in Higher Education

University Alliance response to HEFCE Discussion Document, February 2015

Introduction

1. University Alliance is a non-partisan, non-political organisation working to promote, safeguard and sustain the public benefit delivered by universities. University Alliance brings together the UK's leading innovative and enterprising universities – major institutions combining science, technology and the creative industries with a focus on delivering for the professions, business and the community. Alliance universities are central to the UK's economy, driving growth in new sectors and markets through the delivery of high quality, industry-ready graduates and research. They work openly and collaboratively to achieve wide societal benefits.
2. This short paper outlines University Alliance's response to the discussion document *The Future of Quality Assessment in Higher Education*, concentrating on higher education (HE) quality assessment in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Alliance universities have been encouraged to respond to the survey published by HEFCE alongside the discussion document.

Background and Principles

3. Quality assessment does, and should, sit within a broader framework for the regulation of HE providers, including finance, governance and public information – all of which are important.
4. Quality assessment reform is needed to protect the international reputation of UK HE and to ensure the quality assessment system is fit for purpose in this more complex world.
5. It is timely to review the quality assessment process. Even though it is a relatively short period of time since Higher Education Review (HER) was introduced in 2013/14, the HE landscape has significantly changed in this time – not least due to the implementation of elements of the 2010 White Paper, *Students at the heart of the system*. As a result we have seen a new focus on greater competition, wider access to government loans and the lifting of student number controls.
6. Students, employers and the public should be able to draw confidence that sufficient regulation and quality assessment is in place in the UK HE system.

7. UK HE has a system of co-regulation for quality assessment, which includes peer review and external examining. Co-regulation is a vital pillar of UK HE regulation as it protects university autonomy, which has been shown to have a direct correlation with the quality of a system¹. Co-regulation should be maintained in any future quality assessment process and a quality assessment process should not restrain peer reviewers. Any framework used for quality assessment must not be used purely as a checklist, but as definitive reference points to help autonomous universities reflect on and develop their regulations, procedures and practices.
8. An HE Bill should be introduced as soon as possible; this should be a priority for whatever Government is in power after the 2015 General Election. There should be a single regulatory body for all HE providers in England, commissioning an organisation to undertake quality assurance across the system.
9. The learning from previous quality assessment review processes, such as HER, must be used to inform this review.

Areas for improvement

10. We recognise that, alongside HEFCE, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) has adapted quickly to the changing HE landscape. For example, the introduction by QAA of a UK-wide set of national reference points in the form of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education has been deemed very valuable by the HE sector. That said, initial discussions with Alliance universities have highlighted the following areas for improvement:
 - Risk-Based quality assessment has not been appropriately implemented in our quality assessment system. It should be in the future and it should have clearly defined and fair metrics, such as KPI's, the Key Information Set (KIS) and institutional record used to determine the frequency and intensity of quality assessment. A cause for concern procedure should also be retained to provide a basis for matters of public concern.
 - Public information and HE quality are intertwined. The accuracy and usefulness of public information and its links to regulation and quality assessment must be reviewed, to ensure prospective applicants get a full

¹ P Aghion et al, [Higher aspirations: An agenda for reforming European universities](#), 2008

and accurate picture. Accurate public information is vital for student recruitment and social mobility.

- Quality enhancement must be central to HE, as is the case in Scotland. In any regulation system, innovative practice must be encouraged to enhance learning and teaching practice.
- Where possible, regulation should be reduced, for example through greater collaboration between the quality assessment process and Professional, Statutory and Regulatory bodies (PSRB's).
- The current QAA process rightly positions students as equal partners in the quality assessment system, through the use of students as peer reviewers and equal weighting for students' perspective of their educational experience. This must be retained in any future quality assessment system. Consideration should also now be given to the measurement of student knowledge and skills learning gain.