HEFCE: Quality Assessment Review

Future approaches to quality assessment in England, Wales and Northern Ireland

September 2015
Overview of the Northern Ireland Further Education Sector

Colleges Northern Ireland (NI) is the representative body for NI’s six regional Further Education (FE) Colleges which between them offer provision to over 90,000 learners and 156,000 enrolments per year. The six Colleges which make up the sector are as follows:

- Belfast Metropolitan College
- Northern Regional College
- North West Regional College
- Southern Regional College
- South Eastern Regional College
- South West College.

The FE Colleges are the main providers of professional and technical education and training in NI. The sector plays a central role in raising levels of literacy and numeracy, and in up-skilling and re-skilling the population. This is through a broad range of courses leading to qualifications, with progression routes to further education, higher education, training and employment.

In respect of Higher Education (HE), approximately one in five HE students in NI are studying in a FE College. This is commonly referred to as ‘HE in FE’ and tends to be at the intermediate levels (Level 4 and Level 5). The types of HE provision in FE Colleges range from Foundation Degrees (over 40 courses on offer) to Higher National Certificates/Diplomas. Some Colleges also offer a number of Honours Degree programmes. The Foundation Degrees and Honours Degrees offered in the FE Colleges are validated by Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) – such as Ulster University and Queens University Belfast, as well as HEI’s elsewhere in the UK.
Consultation response

The FE sector broadly agrees that the current QAA approaches are fit for purpose, notwithstanding the fact that there is some room for improvement. In terms of the improvements, the FE sector see the changes needed as small ‘tweaks’ rather than an extensive overhaul. The main recommendations are that any future quality improvement process results in added value, is less bureaucratic and does not become another ‘tick box’ exercise. The responses to the consultation questions in the Appendix, while the main views as to what is currently working well and what needs improved are summarised below.

What the FE sector feels currently works well

- The FE sector can see significant changes since the QAA first came in – this has resulted in positive changes.
- The sector agrees that an external examining system works well. This leads to an unbiased system and a standardised approach across all providers. There was agreement that a standardised approach with parity for all providers could not exist without an external reviewer in place.
- The current QAA process easily alerts Colleges to any concerns with partnership collaboration – that otherwise may not come to light.
- There was a view in the FE sector that the College Governing Bodies could not take on a QAA role.
- The QAA process has resulted in the development of new systems, processes and structures within the FE sector (and good ‘house-keeping’ systems within the Colleges). Furthermore, the Higher Education Managers Group was created as a direct result of this interaction and is a mechanism to enhance collaboration between the six FE Colleges.
- The FE College role in the QAA process has been very positive from the Developmental Review process to the Summative stage. The role of an external reviewer gives the Colleges a feeling of added credibility and has helped make FE staff feel more empowered as they are subject to external checks. In terms of empowerment and personal development – FE staff are keen to be actively involved during QAA visits as they see the visits as vital to their own organisational development and can bring an understanding of HE in an FE environment to the process.
- Following on from the above, some of FE staff in NI are QAA reviewers. This has resulted in such staff learning practice from other Colleges and upskilling as a result (e.g. through the design and development of new systems and networks and reviews of existing processes).
- A vast majority of the Foundation Degrees in NI are validated by one university – namely Ulster University. The Colleges have a good working relationship with the University. This is different to the case in England where some individual FE Colleges work across a range of validating Universities depending on the Department within the College.
What the FE sector feels could be improved

- There is no reference to the Quality Code in the consultation document. At present all FE staff refer to the Code to ensure parity of standards and the FE sector in NI is very conscientious about embedding the Quality Code. The Quality Code needs referenced in revised processes moving forward – perhaps even included as one of the ‘Principles’.

- The system does need to recognise quality controls and quality assurance already in place by HE and FE providers.

- The current system is too focused on process audits and compliance and there needs to be more of a focus on academic outcomes. The current process is too ‘tick box focused’. It is not sufficient to simply measure quality in quantitative terms e.g. retention, achievement and success rates. Other qualitative measures need to be built in as well. For example, NI’s FE Colleges are very strong in employer engagement – whereby employers feed into the design of the curriculum and this type of qualitative value add needs to be built in revised quality review processes. The quality assurance process needs to recognise how far the FE Colleges have come in terms of ‘HE in FE’ and give them some credit for this. Also the QAA review should take cognisance of what is happening ‘in the classroom’ – this does not happen at present. For example, as per the ETI inspections, classroom observations form a large part of the review of quality.

- The quality review process should capture the view of learners. There is agreement in the FE sector that NI learners views should be captured through the UK National Student Survey. However, cognisance needs to be taken that many ‘HE in FE’ learners are only with the providers for two years (full-time) and may not have the same skills in voicing their opinions as say a PhD student. Also the Student Unions within FE would not be on the same scale as the Student Union movement in HEIs. However, the ‘HE in FE’ learner voice is still very important – but there is recognition that this would take time to embed and roll-out within the NI FE sector.

- There is quite a lot of duplication of effort at present with regards quality processes. FE Colleges are required to carry out so many quality reviews – for the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), Department for Employment and Learning, QAA, Whole College SER, Audits, Awarding Body reports etc. There is a need to ensure that any additional / revised quality processes in future – adds value to what already exists.

- Following on from the above, in Northern Ireland, as the FE Colleges are subject to regular ETI inspections, then it would be beneficial for the team of QAA reviewers to meet the ETI inspectors in advance to get an overview of the issues within each Colleges – for example, regarding Higher Level Apprenticeships – which are starting to expand rapidly across the FE Sector – and for which, Foundation Degrees are the underpinning qualification.

- Colleges welcome the peer review approach but advise that regional FE inclusion in the review group, is essential to understand the NI Further Education context.

- The IQER themed approach is welcomed by FE Colleges. However, Colleges would like to ask for specific information at the outset of the quality review. For example, expert advice on how to run Level 6 provision – as opposed to the current ‘tick box’ type approach. The process should
also include support for internal development i.e. giving mentoring and guidance as well as an inspection role.

- A suggestion put forward by the Colleges – was regarding collating a standardised view from employers to contribute to future quality reviews. Also to bear in mind the important role of SMEs (which make up the majority of employers in NI) – which often do not have dedicated HR / Personnel staff to dedicate time to feeding into such mechanisms.

- The QAA report in future needs to set out practical recommendations on how the College can move forward and help enhance its provision. The end reports could build on some practice from the Northern Ireland ETI reports in terms of summarising the main findings which would make it easier for prospective students / parents to make informed decisions between providers. Furthermore, the final report from a quality review process, to aid the reader and really inform practical implementation – should contain a high level summary of the ‘Essentials for each College, whereas the remainder of the report should outline area of good practice.

- There is a need for reflection of changes in previous academic year and action plans for forthcoming year for review of specific areas in College / HEI. This should be included in any assurance statement issued each year to ensure continuous development and enhancement of policies, processes and guidelines.

- The WCQIP includes the HE section being reviewed through desktop by QAA is welcomed. However, more direction is needed in terms of content to support preparation for future reviews.
Appendix: Response to the individual consultation questions

Question 1: Do you agree with our proposed principles to underpin the future approach to quality assessment in established providers?

Yes – especially in relation to reduced bureaucracy. It is recommended that the Quality Code is also included as a Principle.

Question 2: Do you agree that our current proposals for the use of meaningful external scrutiny as set out in paragraphs 32-34 are sufficient? If you do not agree, please indicate what additional or different external scrutiny you propose and provide the reasons for this.

Yes – but there is a need to add value to existing quality processes rather than duplicate them.

Question 3: Do you agree that future approaches to quality assessment should be based on an assumption that ‘one size’ can no longer sensibly fit all?

Yes – gaining the views from employers is also important.

Question 4: Do you agree that there should be a baseline requirement for the quality of the academic experience for students, and that this should be published and maintained?

Yes – although recognise that the student voice for ‘HE in FE’ is not as well structured as the Student Unions within HEIs.

Question 5: For England, do you agree with the proposal that an individual provider, once it has passed the gateway for entry into the publicly funded system in England, should not be repeatedly externally retested against the baseline requirements for an acceptable student academic experience, unless material evidence suggests otherwise?

N/A

Question 6: For Northern Ireland, do you agree that providers should provide annual evidence and assurance that they are meeting the baseline requirements for an acceptable student academic experience?

Yes - but a more standardised approach is needed to ensure providers are meeting the Quality Code. FE Colleges are required to carry out so many quality reviews – for the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), Whole College SER, Audits, Awarding Body reports etc. There is a need to ensure that any quality process required by a body such as QAA on annual basis – adds value to what already exists. There is a need to ensure that the current 5-6 year review does not become the annual review.
Question 7: Do you agree that the funding bodies’ verification of an institution’s review methodology provides a reasonable mechanism through which to operate risk-based scrutiny of a provider’s arrangements to secure a good and improving student academic experience and student outcomes?

Yes

Question 8: Do you agree that student outcomes data should provide the basis for continuous improvement activities within an individual provider?

Yes – but in NI we need to consider how this is captured. Could NI become part of the UK National Student Survey.

Question 9: Do you agree that we should take forward into detailed design and pilot phases further work on the use of student outcomes data to identify patterns and trends and on the development of approaches for monitoring and supporting institutions as they address areas of concern?

Yes but reflective of College software package and processes to reduce duplication.

Question 10: In Northern Ireland, do you agree with the approach outlined to introduce more effective and consistent arrangements for collecting and analysing feedback from higher education learners?

Yes there is agreement that feedback from learners should form part of the review process. It is recommended that the UK National Student Survey is used to capture the views of learners in NI. However, cognisance needs to be taken that many ‘HE in FE’ learners are only with the providers for two years (full-time) and may not have the same skills in voicing their opinions as say a PhD student in a HEI. Also, the Student Unions (who would help promote the survey) within FE would not be on the same scale as the Student Union movement in HEIs. However, the ‘HE in FE’ learner voice is still very important – but there is recognition that this would take time to embed and role out within the NI FE sector.

Question 11: Do you agree with the proposal that more emphasis should be placed on the role of a provider’s governing body to provide assurances about the quality of the student academic experience and student outcomes in line with the Higher Education Code of Governance? If you agree, please indicate what, if any, additional support they should receive to provide such assurances.

There is a view that instead of providing an assurance role, the Governing Bodies role would provide a sign-off function. The Governors would be assured by the internal management and departments within the individual FE Colleges / Universities to ensure that procedures and processes are in place to support any QAA statement. This would be accompanied by an action plan on the continuous reflection / development of policies and processes. This should be the same across all FE Colleges and HEIs in NI.
Question 12: For England, do you agree that, for English institutions, HEFCE should develop and use the existing external accountability mechanisms, particularly the HAR, in the ways described?

N/A

Question 14: Do you agree that there should be a ‘probationary period’ for new entrants to the publicly funded sector in England?

N/A

Question 15: Do you agree that international activities should be included in the remit of future quality assessment arrangements as described?

Yes

Question 16: Do you agree that a future quality assessment system must provide reliable assurances to students and other stakeholders about the maintenance of academic output standards and their reasonable comparability across the UK higher education system?

Yes

Question 17: Do you agree that the external examining system should be strengthened in the ways proposed, ie through additional training and the establishment of a register?

Yes – although clarification would be needed between the role External Examiners and any inspection. There should be a register to support any potential conflicts of interest.

Question 18: Do you agree that our proposals in relation to the external examining system are sufficient, ie do they go far enough to provide the necessary assurances about academic output standards to students and other stakeholders?

Yes – as long as they build on some of the areas for improvement outlined in Page 3 and Page 4 of our response.

Question 19: Do you agree that it would be helpful to explore approaches to the calibration of academic output standards in different disciplinary and multi-disciplinary contexts?

Yes
Question 20: Do you agree that providers should use the accreditation activities of at least some PSRBs more centrally in future approaches to quality assessment?

Yes

Question 21: Do you agree with the proposal that we should place more emphasis on the role of the governing body of a provider with degree awarding powers to provide assurances about security and reasonable comparability of the academic output standards of students?

N/A. The FE Colleges do not have Degree Awarding powers.

Question 22: Do you agree with the proposal to develop guidance to providers on a sensible range of degree classification algorithms at the pass/fail and 2i/2ii borderlines?

N/A

Question 23: Do you agree with our proposals to develop and implement a strengthened mechanism to investigate rapidly when there is an indication of serious problems within an individual provider which has not been addressed in a satisfactory and timely manner?

Yes

Question 24: Should the mechanism to investigate problems in an individual provider require, in addition to the investigation of the specific issue of concern, the re-testing of the arrangements in the provider under review against the baseline requirements set out for the gateway for entry to the higher education system?

Yes

Question 25: Do you agree with the proposal that providers seeking entry to the publicly funded sector in England and Northern Ireland should be tested, through an external peer review scrutiny process, against a set of baseline requirements for quality?

Yes

Question 26: Are there any particular areas of our proposals that you feel we should concentrate on as we undertake a more detailed design phase?

Yes – build on suggestions outlined on Page 3 and Page 4 of our response.
Question 27: Are there proposals not referred to above that you feel we should have in consideration? If so, what are they and what is the rationale for their inclusion?
Yes – employer views.

Question 28: Are there any particular areas pertinent to the devolved nature of higher education in Wales and Northern Ireland that you feel we should have considered further? If so, what are they and what is the rationale for their inclusion?
Yes – refer to all the general points outlined in Page 2, 3 and 4 of our responses.

Contact details
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