

# **The impact of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education on alternative higher education providers**

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## **Abstract**

This paper will present the findings of a research project carried out by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in the UK, in association with Ashridge Business School, and supported by the Quality Strategy Network. The project analyses how a significantly updated regulatory framework (the Quality Code) has affected the UK higher education system, in particular 'alternative providers'. A first study focused on degree-awarding bodies found that the Quality Code had a broadly positive, but incremental, impact. The second study has found that the impact of the Quality Code on alternative providers has been high and greater than on degree-awarding bodies. The most challenging sections of the Quality Code for alternative providers include student engagement and information. The study concludes that regulatory changes have accelerated the development of quality management in alternative providers, with significantly increased organisational attention to many aspects of higher education quality.

## **Outline**

### **Introduction**

This paper will present the findings of a research project funded by the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education, carried out by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in the UK, in association with Ashridge Business School, and supported by the Quality Strategy Network (QSN, the UK's professional association for heads of quality in higher education institutions). The general objective of the project is to understand the way in which a significantly updated regulatory framework has affected different parts of the UK higher education system, in particular 'alternative providers'. Alternative providers are institutions which deliver higher education programmes which lead to the awards of a separate degree-awarding body or other awarding organisation, and who are not in receipt of public funding from the higher education funding councils.

### **Methodology**

Data for the project was collected in two ways. Firstly, through an online survey, circulated to 233 alternative providers who had undergone review for educational oversight or review for specific course designation. The survey questions were designed to enable comparison with the findings of a survey of QSN members (mostly degree-awarding bodies) carried out in 2013 (Lockett 2013). Secondly, two focus groups were held with members of staff responsible for quality assurance in a range of alternative providers, to discuss their experience of working with the UK Quality Code for Higher Education and the impact of reviews coordinated by QAA. Interpretation of this data was underpinned by analysis of the findings of published review reports.

### **Context**

The change in the national regulatory framework which forms the context for the project is the introduction of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code) (QAA 2011-13), which replaced a set of previous reference points for academic standards and quality known as the Academic Infrastructure.

In recent years there has been rapid growth of 'alternative' higher education provision in the UK outside the publicly-funded universities in which most higher education used to be offered. This has led to the growth of many private colleges offering higher education programmes whose awards are made by degree-awarding bodies, primarily the public sector universities. These colleges often offer both vocational and higher education qualifications which fall under different regulatory frameworks. Many students at these colleges come from outside the UK.

Given a combination of a desire to protect academic standards and the reputation of UK higher education, and political pressure to reduce immigration into the UK and some cases of abuse of education visas among 'alternative providers', a new regulatory framework was developed in 2012, at the same time the Quality Code was being implemented. Specifically all 'alternative providers' who wish to recruit international students from outside the EU or to enable UK/ EU students to access student loan support must undertake Review for Educational Oversight or Review for Specific Course Designation, which are external peer reviews, coordinated by QAA, similar to QAA's audits of publicly-funded colleges and universities. One of the requirements of the review is that "the provider and its awarding bodies/organisations are already managing the provision effectively according to the expectations of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education" (QAA, 2013, p. 3). This was a new requirement with which many alternative providers were unfamiliar.

More broadly, the question of the value and impact of external quality assurance on higher education systems continues to be subject to debate both in the UK and globally. In some quarters, regulation and the requirements of quality assurance agencies are seen as needlessly bureaucratic, divorced from the academic and student experience (recent discussions can be found in El-Khawas, 2013; Houston & Paewai, 2013; Shattock, 2012). Others have argued that the development of a quality culture is an element of public responsibility, safeguarding, rather than threatening, institutional autonomy (Kristensen, 2010). The effectiveness of a number of established systems has been examined (for example, Australia [Shah, 2012], Ireland [Lillis, 2013]).

### **Anticipated findings**

The previous study which focused on degree-awarding bodies found that the Quality Code had a broadly positive, but incremental, impact. The most challenging part of the new Quality Code was Chapter B10: Managing higher education provision with others', which deals with arrangements to work with delivery organisations, support providers and partners, followed by Chapter B5: Student engagement and Part C: Information about higher education provision (QAA, 2011-13).

The hypotheses which this project set out to test are that the impact of the Quality Code on alternative providers has been high and greater than on degree-awarding bodies. It is proposed that the overall impact has been significant and positive. The most challenging sections of the Quality Code for alternative providers include student engagement (Chapter B5) and information about higher education provision (Part C), but managing higher education provision with others (Chapter B10) has had less direct effect given the continuing relationship between alternative providers and awarding bodies.

Initial data analysis indicates that these hypotheses will be supported. The paper will include full analysis of the focus groups and survey together with a comparison between degree-awarding bodies and alternative providers. It will conclude that a specific combination of circumstances has led to positive unanticipated consequences in accelerating the development of quality management in alternative providers, combined with significantly increased institutional attention to many aspects of higher education quality. Finally, the consequences of these conclusions in the context of the increasingly diverse UK higher education sector will be highlighted.

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