

HEFCE to review university watchdog's role

University standards are currently monitored by the Quality Assurance Agency



By [Amy Wong](#), Deputy Editor (2015)
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The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has announced plans to review the way in which universities are monitored.



Photo Credit: Nouse

Currently, universities are technically responsible for their own standards but the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) has checked these standards are met since 1997. However, for the first time ever, there will be a public tendering process to manage the university inspection system from 2017.

A consultation will take place, followed by the opportunity for bids to run the quality assurance monitoring.

The QAA, which claims to offer "internationally recognised expertise in providing quality assurance and enhancement to an exceptional standard", has confirmed it will be bidding for the contract.

Sir Rodney Brooke, Chairman of the QAA, added: "In recent years, we have continued to adapt the quality assurance framework to meet the needs of a growing and dynamic sector, working with higher education, further education and alternative providers."

He went on to say: "We look forward to continuing the development of quality assessment, protecting the public interest and supporting the UK higher education sector's international reputation for excellence."

However, it is possible a new system could be put in place to maintain the quality of higher education and replace the QAA, with HEFCE saying it is looking for "innovative approaches [to quality assurance] which are risk-based, proportionate, affordable, and low burden" in light of "rapid change[s]" to higher education.

Some academics have welcomed HEFCE's announcement. Geoffrey Alderman, Professor of Politics and History at the University of Buckingham and former head of the University of London's academic council, said: "Scandal after scandal has occurred on the QAA's watch, so one has to ask whether the QAA is giving value for money and could it be done differently."

Similarly, Roger King, a visiting professor at the University of Bath's School of Management and former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Lincoln, commented: "With the weight of responsibilities coming its

way, the QAA cannot do everything it is expected to do without a major rethink.”

In 2009, the QAA was branded “toothless” by a cross-party committee of MPs who criticised the watchdog for its inability to increase the quality of higher education. Further doubts over the QAA’s ability last year after the University of Southampton successfully appealed against critical findings in a review conducted by the watchdog.

However, Bahram Bekhradnia, President of the Higher Education Policy Institute, defended the QAA, saying it had done a “perfectly reasonable job” since it was founded.

Similarly, Pam Tatlow, Chief Executive of the Million+ group of universities, said: “While there have been concerns about the QAA’s modus operandi, the system is certainly not broken and has the advantage of being UK-wide in scope and internationally recognised.”

It is possible that the current system which monitors universities across the UK could be divided as England, Wales and Northern Ireland are carrying out their own review alongside a separate review in Scotland.

Tatlow went on to issue a warning to HEFCE, telling them “to be careful not to throw the baby out with the bathwater”.

Roger Brown, emeritus professor of higher education policy at Liverpool Hope University, also urged caution, saying the replacement of the QAA would lead to an “incredibly messy” system.

Brown, who headed the Higher Education Quality Council, the QAA’s predecessor, added: “Not having a single regulatory body would be a retrograde step.”

Wendy Piatt, Director General of the Russell Group, said she wanted a “proportional approach” which would require less “inspection and bureaucracy” for older, well established institutions. She added: “Our universities will not flourish if they are over-regulated. Resources should be focused where problems of quality are most likely to occur.”

A University of York spokesperson told *Nouse* they agreed with Piatt, saying: “Quality assurance should be proportionate and should keep bureaucracy to a minimum.”

They went onto say: “The Funding Council is well aware of this perspective and will no doubt take it into account in the course of its recently announced review.”



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