



**Review of higher education in further education colleges  
in England**

**Operational description**

**Draft for consultation**

**October 2011**

DRAFT

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ISBN 978 1 84979 395 7

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Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

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## Introduction

1 The new method of review for higher education in further education colleges in England will replace the Integrated quality and enhancement review (IQER) that has run between 2007-08 and 2011-12. This operational description presents the details of a method that is based on Institutional review for higher education institutions in England and Northern Ireland. However, it contains significant adaptations to more effectively meet the needs of higher education in further education colleges. The review method is designed to benefit students through assuring and enhancing the quality of their higher education and improving the student experience. Students are central to, and are involved in, the whole process.

2 The principles and objectives that apply to the quality assurance system for higher education in England were consulted on in 2010 by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and other key partners<sup>1</sup>. The principles and objectives apply to all higher education in England, whether delivered in a further education college or a higher education institution. The proposed method is designed to be flexible and adaptable to change. This is important in the light of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills' (BIS) recent White Paper on higher education and technical consultation on proposed changes to regulation, including the introduction of a less burdensome, more risk-based approach to quality assurance. The method may therefore need to change in response to future policy and legislative developments. However, irrespective of possible future changes, a system for reviewing higher education in further education colleges in England needs to be introduced for 2012-13 to succeed IQER, and maintain public assurance about the quality and standards of higher education provision in colleges.

## Summary of the main changes in the method of review for higher education in further education colleges in England

3 The main changes from Integrated quality and enhancement review are summarised below:

- there will be no Developmental engagement
- there will be four judgements, in academic standards, the quality of learning opportunities, enhancement and public information
- the judgements on academic standards will be categorised as 'meets' or 'does not meet' UK expectations in threshold standards
- the judgements on the quality of student learning opportunities, information provided by the college, and the enhancement of student learning opportunities, will be graded as 'commended'; 'meets UK expectations'; 'requires improvement to meet UK expectations'; or 'does not meet UK expectations'
- following a 'fail' judgement, judgements may be revised upwards or downwards through the follow-up process
- there will be a thematic element, but this will not lead to a judgement.
- recommendations will not be graded
- affirmations of action in progress will be included
- there will be a first team meeting four weeks before the visit
- the duration of the visit will be decided at the first team meeting

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<sup>1</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Institutional-review-of-higher-education-institutions-in-England-and-Northern-Ireland---Operational-description-Draft-for-.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Institutional-review-of-higher-education-institutions-in-England-and-Northern-Ireland---Operational-description-Draft-for-.aspx)

- there will be a judgement meeting at the end of the visit rather than a week after
- there will be a student reviewer as part of the review team
- there will be provision for a lead student representative.

4 The scope of the review will include all higher education provision covered by *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), wherever and however delivered by a college. The review will be concerned with the college's performance of its responsibilities, as delegated by the awarding body, and the impact on students' education. These responsibilities are outlined in the partnership agreement between the awarding body and the college.

## The core element

5 Institutional review consists of a core element and a thematic element. All colleges have responsibilities delegated by their awarding bodies for managing quality and standards within the context of their partnership agreements. The core element will examine the effectiveness of the policies, structures and processes that the college uses to:

- fulfil its responsibilities for maintaining the threshold standards of higher education programmes set by its awarding bodies
- manage the quality of students' learning opportunities
- manage the quality of public information, including that produced for students and applicants
- enhance the quality of students' learning opportunities.

6 In addition, for colleges with Foundation Degree awarding powers or full taught degree awarding powers, the core element will examine the effectiveness of the policies, structures and processes that a college uses to:

- set and maintain the threshold standards of its Foundation Degrees or other taught degrees.

## Judgements

7 Review teams will make judgements on:

- whether the college fulfils its responsibilities for maintaining the threshold academic standards set by its awarding bodies
- the quality of students' learning opportunities
- the quality of information produced for students and applicants
- the college's enhancement of students' learning opportunities.

8 The judgements are about the quality of the student experience. This experience is informed by the effectiveness of the college's management of quality and the fulfilment of its responsibilities for maintaining standards of higher education programmes set by its awarding bodies. Judgements will not apply to the thematic part of the review.

9 The judgement will be determined by several factors:

- the college's awareness of, and engagement with, the Academic Infrastructure<sup>2</sup> and other agreed external reference points
- the extent to which students and staff have input into the management of quality
- the extent to which students and staff fulfil their responsibilities for maintaining academic standards set by awarding bodies
- the strategic mechanisms which a college has for guiding and reviewing its management of quality and standards.

10 The judgements will be made by peers with experience of higher education in further education and knowledge of the higher education sector's expectations for quality assurance. Judgements represent the reasonable conclusions that informed academic peers are able to come to, based on the evidence and time available to them in review. Judgements may be differentiated by awarding body.

11 The judgements are made in the context of UK expectations on the management and quality assurance of higher education. These expectations are described in the following documents:

- the Academic Infrastructure
- national guidance for external examiners
- UK professional standards framework for teaching and supporting learning in higher education
- guidance for colleges in supporting international students
- the national public information resulting from the Higher Education Public Information Steering group's (HEPISG) consultation (and any nationally agreed guidance on provision of information).

12 For colleges that have Foundation Degree or full taught degree awarding powers, the team will judge whether the academic standards of the college's Foundation Degrees or taught degrees meet or do not meet UK expectations for threshold standards. For other programmes, and for colleges without Foundation Degree or taught degree awarding powers, the judgement on academic standards will confirm whether the college meets or does not meet the UK expectations for maintaining academic standards in the context of the college's partnership agreements with its awarding bodies. The definition of partnerships and arrangements is referred in the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning), published by QAA.*

13 The judgements on the quality of student learning opportunities, information provided by the college, and the enhancement of student learning opportunities, will each be graded as one of the following: 'is commended'; 'meets UK expectations'; 'requires improvement to meet UK expectations'; or 'does not meet UK expectations'. The latter two categories of judgement are considered to be 'fail' judgements, and therefore there will be follow-up action to complete the review (see paragraph 71).

14 When teams make their judgements, they will take into account whether the UK expectations have been met. The handbook will include detailed guidance on the types of processes, structures, policies, procedures and outputs which a college should have in place to safeguard standards and quality. Review teams will decide whether the

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<sup>2</sup> The Academic Infrastructure is currently being revised. The new UK Quality Code for Higher Education will be published in stages between 2011-12 and 2013-14.

expectations have been addressed satisfactorily in an institution. They will also accept that the expectations could be met in alternative ways in different kinds of colleges. Teams will use their expertise and experience to make that judgement.

15 The public summary of the report will inform the institution about the quality of its provision, will explain the relevance of the judgements to a wider audience and provide links to further information.

16 The review team will also identify features of good practice and, where appropriate, affirm developments or plans already in progress in the college. The team will also make recommendations for action. These will indicate the urgency with which the team thinks each recommendation ought to be addressed. We will expect colleges to take notice of these deadlines when they put together the action plan after the review.

17 Review reports will also include a commentary on the thematic element of the review.

## **Thematic element**

18 In accordance with the review of higher education institutions, HEFCE has requested that the review process should comprise both a core element, which is applied to all colleges, and a thematic element, which will change annually and will be the same for all higher education providers. Therefore, different colleges will experience a review of different thematic elements. The inclusion of a thematic element will provide some flexibility within the review process to look in a timely way at issues that are attracting legitimate public interest or concern. The thematic element of the review will allow reviewers to explore a college's engagement with a particular quality assurance theme. As a result, the thematic element will promote development through the sharing of good practice across higher education providers. The identification and operation of themes will be subject to the protocol agreed by the Quality in Higher Education Group (QHEG).<sup>3</sup> The thematic element does not preclude other more immediate investigations being carried out, should issues requiring urgent research emerge within the higher education sector (see paragraph 74).

19 In order to promote consistency and comparability of review findings, the thematic element will not be subject to a judgement. Instead, the review report will contain a commentary on the thematic element.

20 The themes will be confirmed on an annual basis by the QHEG, on advice from QAA. It is possible that more than one theme will be chosen per year, but no college will be asked to address more than one theme in each review. QAA will publish the themes six months before the start of the academic year. For example, the theme will be published in March 2012 for reviews taking place in the academic year 2012-13. QAA will clarify which external reference points relate to the topic, and the main aspects of the thematic element of the review. As with the rest of the review process, it is envisaged that any documents which the college might need to provide for the thematic element will already exist within the college. One of the aims of the thematic element is to chart the kind of variability in practice which exists in institutions in relation to the theme topic, and, if necessary, produce good practice guidelines which could enhance provision in that area.

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<sup>3</sup>[www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/PolicyAndResearch/PolicyAreas/QualityAssurance/Pages/DocumentsLibrary.aspx](http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/PolicyAndResearch/PolicyAreas/QualityAssurance/Pages/DocumentsLibrary.aspx)

21 QAA will brief review team members on the approach to reviewing themes, in general, and any specific guidance which needs to be borne in mind for a particular theme.

22 Colleges will be provided with a guide containing topics and questions for the theme area, which the college should address in an annex to the self-evaluation. Student representatives will also receive the guide so that they can address the theme in an annex to the student submission. The guide will enable some consistency in information gathering which can inform subsequent analysis of the review findings. Where agreed external reference points exist, the guide will be based on those reference points. Where no such agreed reference points exist, QAA will develop a set of prompts for guidance. The annex will give the college the opportunity to evaluate its own management in the theme area.

23 The review report will contain a summary of the findings of the thematic review. The college will also receive a more detailed evidence base for the thematic element. The evidence base information will be used by QAA to report on the thematic findings across the higher education sector.

## **Evidence base for the review**

24 To enable them to form their judgements, review teams will have available to them a variety of information sources about a college, including:

- a self-evaluation of the college to include the approach to:
  - fulfilling its responsibilities for maintaining academic standards set by its awarding bodies
  - the management of the quality of students' learning opportunities
  - the management of information
  - the management of enhancement
  - a view on the effectiveness of that approach
- reference in the self-evaluation to evidence which supports the college's view of the effectiveness of its approach
- how the college works with employers in developing and delivering vocational programmes, including the management of work-based learning
- other key documents as specified from time to time (the handbook will provide more information on these)
- a student submission prepared by representatives of students of the college on behalf of the student body<sup>4</sup>
- reports on the college or its provision within the five years preceding the review. Examples of reports include those produced by QAA and other relevant bodies, such as professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs). Relevant action plans and progress reports will also be taken into account, including action plans from previous QAA reviews.

25 As part of the self-evaluation, the college will need to provide clear reference to its internal review processes and action plans. It will need to explain how they can be used as evidence of development and enhancement.

26 A particularly important source of evidence will be the agreed key information set (KIS) which all institutions are required to make available for relevant courses of one

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<sup>4</sup> The student submission may be submitted in multimedia formats, and does not necessarily need to be in a written form.



year's duration or more. Colleges will also be expected to publish a wider information set, the content of which has been consulted on and agreed by HEFCE, UUK and GuildHE.<sup>5</sup> The outcomes of that consultation are being taken into account in the way that public information is addressed in the review.

27 A requirement of the sponsoring body is that the review should continue to take account of evidence raised by other reviews undertaken by QAA and other bodies such as Ofsted or PSRBs. In planning for review, QAA should try as far as possible to avoid clashes with these other organisations' activities. Where possible, when QAA knows of dates of other review activities, we shall try to conduct our activities to help to limit regulatory burden on institutions. This is in line with the call in the government White Paper Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System<sup>6</sup> to minimise overlap between methods and reduce burden on higher education providers.

## Use of reference points

28 Review teams will use the Academic Infrastructure as a reference point when considering a college's approach to academic standards, quality, information and enhancement of provision. Teams will be looking for evidence that colleges have:

- carefully considered the purpose and intentions of the elements of the Academic Infrastructure
- reflected on the impact of the elements on college practice
- taken, or are taking, any necessary measures to achieve better alignment between college practice and the guidance provided by the Academic Infrastructure.

29 In relation to the FHEQ, review teams will look at the procedures adopted in colleges with Foundation Degree awarding powers or taught degree awarding powers for aligning their relevant degrees with the appropriate level of the FHEQ and to the *Foundation Degree qualification benchmark*.

30 Review teams will not specifically ask institutions about their engagement with the *Code of practice* on a precept by precept basis. However, a team will expect to see, in the self-evaluation, a reflection on how the college has gone about engaging with the precepts of the *Code of practice* overall. This account could include illustration of how any changes to its practices have resulted, and any areas of difficulty that the college has experienced in addressing the *Code of practice*.

31 Review teams will enquire into the way in which any relevant subject benchmark statements have been referred to when establishing or reviewing programmes and awards. Award benchmark statements, for example the *Foundation Degree qualification benchmark*, provide a description of the characteristics of a particular award. Award and subject benchmark statements do not represent a national curriculum. Instead, they allow for flexibility and innovation in programme design, within an overall conceptual framework established by an academic subject community. They do, however, provide authoritative reference points, which help to ensure that the standards of the programme are appropriate, and which students and other interested parties will expect to be taken into account when programmes are designed and reviewed.

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<sup>5</sup> See HEFCE (2011/18) *Provision of information about higher education* for more information about the proposed content for the key information set and the wider information set.

<sup>6</sup> <http://discuss.bis.gov.uk/hereform>

32 Programme specifications are the definitive published information on the aims, intended learning outcomes and expected achievements of programmes of study. Review teams will explore their usefulness to students and staff, and the accuracy of the information contained in them. In particular, teams will be interested to see how programme specifications make use of other reference points in the Academic Infrastructure in order to define clearly the expectations that students should have for the teaching, learning and assessment provided by the programme.

33 Review teams may also wish to enquire into the ways in which a college has considered the expectations of the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education in the European Higher Education Area*,<sup>7</sup> and any other guidance relating to European or other international practices. This could include the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System and *A Framework for Qualifications of The European Higher Education Area*. The Academic Infrastructure and other UK reference points are considered to subsume the expectations and good practice of part one of the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education in the European Higher Education Area*.

34 From time to time, other reference points may be agreed by the QHEG<sup>8</sup> and these will also be drawn upon in the review process. Those to be used in the proposed review process are listed in paragraph 11. These are considered to embody accepted good practice which institutions will find useful in assuring the quality and standards of higher education provision. The *UK Professional Standards Framework for teaching and supporting learning in higher education*<sup>9</sup> has been developed for the higher education sector to apply to their professional development programmes and activities. Review teams may wish to consider the extent to which the college engages the Higher Education Academy and with the Institute for Learning to support the development of professional standards in teaching and learning.

35 About 22 weeks before the review visit, the college and the awarding body (if different) should discuss and agree the extent to which the latter will be involved in the review. This discussion should take account of:

- the provisions of the partnership agreement between the awarding body and the college
- the nature of the partnership (validating, franchising or other)
- the maturity of the relationship between partners
- the extent of the responsibilities which the awarding body has conferred on the college
- the accuracy and completeness of the written evidence about these responsibilities.

## Reviewers and review teams

36 **Roles:** it is expected that the review team will normally comprise three reviewers (one of whom will be a student reviewer) and a QAA officer/coordinator who will provide administrative support and fulfil the primary coordination and liaison function during the visit. Reviewers and student reviewers will perform the same duties. The roles of reviewer and QAA officer/coordinator will be clearly defined. In the case of institutions with extensive or complex provision, a team may need to include additional reviewers.

<sup>7</sup> [www.eqar.eu/application/requirements/european-standards-and-guidelines.html](http://www.eqar.eu/application/requirements/european-standards-and-guidelines.html)

<sup>8</sup> [www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/POLICYANDRESEARCH/POLICYAREAS/QUALITYASSURANCE/Pages/HigherEducationGroup.aspx](http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/POLICYANDRESEARCH/POLICYAREAS/QUALITYASSURANCE/Pages/HigherEducationGroup.aspx)

<sup>9</sup> [www.heacademy.ac.uk/ukpsf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ukpsf)

This will ensure that sufficient coverage of the college's portfolio of activity can be obtained to inform the judgements and comments being made. Where a college's provision is less extensive or complex, the duration of the visit may be reduced.

37 The size of the review team will be confirmed by QAA nine months before the start of the review. To enable QAA to make this decision, colleges will be asked to provide a short form of key information one year before the review date.

38 **Selection:** QAA hopes that its current cohort of reviewers will wish to take part in the new review method. They will continue to be expected to have current or recent<sup>10</sup> senior-level expertise and experience either in a college or a higher education institution. This expertise and experience will include the fulfilling of responsibilities for maintaining academic standards set by awarding bodies, and the management of higher education provision. Student reviewers will be recruited from students, sabbatical officers and graduates, who have current or recent experience of studying in a UK higher education institution or college over the previous two years. The experience should normally be equivalent to at least one year's full-time study, and will include those who also have experience in representing students' interests in their place of study.

39 If QAA needs to recruit further reviewers, they will be selected from nominations made by colleges, PSRBs and awarding bodies, as well as from practitioners. Role descriptions and selection criteria for review team members will be published. Every attempt will be made to ensure that the cohort appropriately reflects diversity, including academic discipline, geographical location, and size of college, as well as reflecting those from diverse backgrounds. We shall encourage applications from those in diversity groups currently under-represented in the review team member cohort.

40 **Training:** training for review team members will be undertaken by QAA. Both new team members and those who have taken part in previous review methods will be required to take part in training before they conduct a review. However, those reviewers and facilitators who have prior experience of other QAA methods will not need to take the Core skills of review module again. The purpose of the training will be to ensure that all team members fully understand the aims and objectives of the revised review process; that they are acquainted with all the procedures involved; and that they understand their own roles and tasks, QAA's expectations of them and the rules of conduct governing the process. We shall also provide opportunities for continuing development of review team members and facilitators, and procedures for evaluating and enhancing team performance.

41 As and when new review team members are recruited, this will continue to be on the basis that they are willing to undertake at least four reviews over a period of two years. They may continue beyond two years by mutual agreement.

## The role of students

42 Students are central to the Review of higher education in further education colleges in England. There are a number of opportunities for the college's students to take part in the review, including:

- contributing to the student submission
- attending the preparatory meeting
- participating in meetings during the review

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<sup>10</sup> Within two years of having left employment in higher education.

- nominating a lead student representative (see paragraph 46).

43 The review team will also contain a student reviewer.

## **College facilitator**

44 Colleges will be invited to nominate a facilitator to liaise with the review team and different parts of the college, and to provide the team with advice and guidance on college structures, policies, priorities and procedures. The facilitator will contribute to the first team meeting and the review visit. The facilitator will also be expected to play an active role through regular meetings which will provide opportunities for both the team and the college to seek further clarification outside of the formal meetings.

45 The facilitator will help to provide a constructive interaction between all participants in the review process. The development of an effective working relationship between QAA and the college through such liaison should help to ensure that the college does not go to unnecessary lengths in its preparation for the review. It should also help to avoid any misunderstanding by the college of QAA's expectations, or by QAA of the nature of the college or the scope of its provision.

## **Lead student representative**

46 Where possible, there should also be a lead student representative. This role is voluntary. The lead student representative will receive copies of key correspondence from QAA, and be involved in the first team meeting and in the review visit to the college. The lead student representative will carry out the following key roles:

- liaise with the facilitator throughout the process to ensure smooth communications between the student body and the college
- disseminate information about review to the student body
- organise or oversee the writing of the student submission
- help in the selection of students to meet the review team
- ensure continuity of activity over the review process.

## **The review process**

### **Preparation for the review**

47 At the start of the process, the college should access the online briefing package. This can be done at the college's convenience. The package will include:

- details of the review process
- roles of key players
- guidance on the preparation of the self-evaluation and the documents required
- guidance on the preparation of the student submission
- frequently asked questions and other guidance.

48 A QAA officer/coordinator will be appointed about six months before the review visit to coordinate the review. The officer/coordinator will be available to support the college and student representatives by email or phone.

49 We will expect the college to have briefed itself by the time of the Preparatory meeting. The college will need to be confident by the time of the Preparatory meeting that production of its self-evaluation is in hand, or be comfortable with being able to prepare it in the four weeks between the Preparatory meeting and the point at which the evidence base should be uploaded to the QAA's secure electronic review folder. QAA will provide a briefing on the role and responsibilities of the college facilitator and lead student representative, and guidance on how to upload information to the review folder. Briefing events for facilitators and lead student representatives will also take place annually for all colleges having a review in that year.

50 The Preparatory meeting will be attended by the QAA officer/coordinator. The purpose of the Preparatory meeting will be to answer any questions about the review method which may remain after the online briefing, and to agree the information to be made available by the college. The meeting will give an opportunity to discuss the likely interactions between the college, QAA and the review team; to confirm that the college's self-evaluation will be well matched to the process of review; to emphasise that documentary evidence should be based primarily on existing material used in internal quality management, not on material prepared specially for the review; and any matters relating to the required wider information set<sup>11</sup>. Between the Preparatory meeting and submission of the college's self-evaluation, QAA will continue to offer such advice and guidance on the process as it can, at the request of the college.

51 The Preparatory meeting will also normally provide an opportunity for continuing discussion with student representatives about the student submission. It is anticipated that, prior to the Preparatory meeting, the lead student representative will have attended the briefing and contacted the QAA officer/coordinator where additional clarification is needed. The purpose of this meeting will be to confirm the scope and purpose of the student submission and to confirm any additional topics that the student representatives consider appropriate. After that, up until its submission, QAA will continue to offer such advice and guidance on the process as it can, at the request of the student representatives.

52 College and student representatives will be requested to upload their submissions and supporting evidence to the secure QAA electronic review folder no later than four weeks after the Preparatory meeting. It is envisaged that much of this information will consist of the college's required wider information set (which includes the KIS and National Student Survey results, in addition to other information at the college and programme level), other public information, and other documents on intranets or extranets. However, colleges will also need to bear in mind that some categories of information, while available in the college, may not normally be available online. In such cases, provision will need to be made to upload those documents to the QAA secure electronic review folder as well.

53 In the four weeks after the evidence base has been uploaded, the wider information set, including a sample of KISs, will be analysed by QAA. QAA will provide a commentary on this information drawn from comparisons with other information made publicly available by the college and by, for example, HEFCE and Higher Education Statistics Agency. This commentary will be available for the review team.

54 At the same time that QAA is preparing its commentary, the review team will also be reviewing the public information and the evidence about its processes that the

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<sup>11</sup> See HEFCE (2011/18) *Provision of information about higher education* ([www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2011/11\\_18](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2011/11_18)) for more information about the proposed content for the key information set and the wider information set.

college has posted to the secure QAA electronic review folder. This will allow team members to reach an overview of the wider information set, and to become familiar with the college's quality assurance documents and general aspects of provision before the first team meeting.

55 During the five-week period between the submission of the self-evaluation and evidence base, and the first team meeting, the team will post comments on its preliminary views to the QAA secure electronic review folder.

## **First team meeting**

56 Four weeks before the review visit, there will be a one-day virtual desk-based meeting for the team to discuss the commentaries and to decide on issues arising, any extra documents needed, and a programme for the review visit. The college facilitator and the lead student representative will be invited to contribute to this meeting by email and/or telephone conference.

57 One week after this meeting, the QAA officer/coordinator will confirm with the college the plan of activity for the review visit and confirm the length of the visit. The programme of activity will start four working weeks after the college has received the plan of activity.

## **The visit to the college**

58 The activity carried out at the visit will not be prescribed. There is no standard programme for every review. This enables the review to be contextualised for each college. Reviews may include meetings with staff, external examiners, awarding bodies, recent graduates or employer link visits. Meetings with current students will always be held. The programme of activity will extend from two days to a maximum of four days, including the judgement meeting, and will be tailored to:

- the scope and complexity of the college
- the clarity and usefulness to the review team of the self-evaluation and the evidence base
- the information which the college has provided
- the issues which the team has identified.

59 All activities in the college will be carried out by at least two review team members, although it is envisaged that most activities will involve the whole team. Where the team splits for an activity, there will be catch-up time afterwards so that all members of the team are in agreement with the outcomes of the enquiries.

60 The review team will ensure that its programme for the review visit includes meetings with students from a range of programmes and modes of study. This will enable the team to gain first-hand information on students' experiences as learners and on their engagement with the college's processes for quality assurance and enhancement. The team will meet student representatives who have been involved in the preparation of the student submission, as well as members of the student body who do not have representative functions.

61 The programme for the review visit will include a final meeting between the team and senior staff of the college, the lead student representative, and the facilitator. It will not be a feedback meeting, but it will be an opportunity for the team to summarise the major themes and issues that it has been, and may still be, pursuing. The intention will

be to give the college a final opportunity to present evidence to ensure that the team's findings are secure. No feedback will be given at this meeting on potential good practice found, recommendations or judgements.

62 On the last day of the review, the team will consider its findings at a judgement meeting in order to:

- agree the features of good practice that it wishes to highlight as making a particularly positive contribution to the college's approach to the fulfilment of its responsibilities for maintaining academic standards set by its awarding bodies; its management of the quality and enhancement of the provision; and its management of the published information it is responsible for
- agree recommendations for action by the college
- decide on the commentary on the thematic element of the review
- decide on the grades of the four judgements
- agree affirmations.

63 The review team will identify features of good practice and, where appropriate, affirm developments or plans already in progress in the college. The team will also make recommendations for action. These recommendations will indicate the urgency with which the team thinks each recommendation should be addressed. For example, the team may indicate that a recommendation should be addressed immediately; within three months; before the start of the next academic year, or before any further students are recruited to a programme. We will expect the college to take notice of these deadlines when they put together the action plan after the review.

64 In addition to identifying good practice and making recommendations, review teams will make judgements (see paragraphs 7-17).

65 Two weeks after the review visit, the key findings will be sent to the college and to HEFCE. After a further two weeks, the draft report and the evidence base for the findings will be sent to the college and its awarding bodies.

## Reports

66 The report will comprise the findings of the review. It will be concise while including enough explanation for it to make sense to an audience familiar with the concepts and operation of higher education. The report will not contain detailed evidence for the findings: this will be provided for the college in a separate evidence base, which will be an unpublished document. The report will contain a summary in a format accessible to members of the public.

67 The format of the report will follow a template that aligns with the structure recommended for the college's self-evaluation. The report will also contain a section which responds to the students' submission and the meetings with students. The report will be prepared and submitted to the college as soon as possible following the review visit, normally within four weeks, with a request for corrections of factual inaccuracies. The college will have two working weeks to supply corrections to the report. The college is expected to share the draft report and any proposed corrections with the student representative body and its awarding bodies. The report will normally be finalised and published within 12 working weeks of the review visit.

## Action planning and sign-off

68 The college will be expected to provide an action plan, signed off by the Principal, responding to the recommendations and affirmations, and giving any plans to capitalise on the identified good practice. The college should either produce this jointly with student representatives, or student representatives should be able to post their own commentary on the action plan. The QAA officer/coordinator will have discussed the mechanism for this with the college at the Preparatory meeting. The action plan (and commentary, if produced) will be published on the QAA website as part of the report. The college will be expected to update the action plan annually, again in conjunction with student representatives, until actions have been completed, and post the updated plan to the college website. Depending on the nature of the judgements and recommendations, the awarding body may be expected to contribute to the development of the action plan.

69 Where the review report offers 'pass' judgements in all four areas, the review will be formally signed off by QAA on publication of the initial action plan. Upon sign-off, institutions will be allowed to place the QAA logo and judgement (as supplied by QAA) on the homepage of their website and on other documents as a public statement of the outcome of their review.

## Exception reporting follow-up

70 Three years after the review visit, the college will report on its action plan to QAA, noting only those areas (exceptions) where it has not been able to meet the objectives of the action plan. QAA will review the exception report to ensure that recommendations are being followed up. Colleges which fail to engage seriously with review recommendations may be referred to QAA's *Concerns about standards and quality in higher education* procedure.<sup>12</sup> Future review teams will take into account the progress made on the actions from the previous review.

## Full follow-up

71 Where a review team makes a 'fail' judgement (see paragraph 12 and 13) in one or more areas of the review, the report will be published, the initial action plan produced, and there will be a programme of follow-up activity to address the area of the review related to the failing judgement. Any action attached to areas of the review which have received a pass judgement will be addressed over the normal lifetime of the review process, as specified in paragraph 68. Judgements may be revised upwards or downwards through the follow-up process, as described in paragraphs 72 and 73.

72 For areas where there has been a failing judgement, QAA will require progress reports at regular intervals, indicating how the relevant recommendations are being addressed. The progress reports should be drawn up jointly with relevant awarding bodies, and with student representatives. If the judgement is a failure in standards, then the awarding bodies should be involved. When the college indicates that the action plan has been completed and implemented successfully, or a maximum time limit of 18 months has expired, QAA will arrange a follow-up visit to the college by a team of peer reviewers. The review team will decide whether concerns have been addressed such that the original failing judgement can be amended, and will make a recommendation to the QAA Board. If this is accepted, the judgement will be changed and the review signed off, and this will be indicated on the QAA website. At this stage, use of the QAA logo as indicated in paragraph 69 will be permitted.

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<sup>12</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/Complaints/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Complaints/Pages/default.aspx).



73 If, at the maximum time limit, there remain concerns about the effectiveness of the remedial action, QAA will report this to HEFCE. HEFCE's policy for addressing unsatisfactory quality will apply in these circumstances (see paragraph 76). This policy sets out a range of possible actions that might be taken.

## Other quality assurance mechanisms

74 Weaknesses or failures in quality and standards may also be followed up by three additional mechanisms. First, where a problem is detected that may be sector wide, QAA may carry out desk-based research across higher education institutions or further education colleges in England, or a sample of them. This will establish whether a widespread issue exists and will suggest courses of action to remedy it.

75 Secondly, QAA's *Concerns about standards and quality in higher education* procedure can at any time investigate a policy, procedure or action implemented, or omitted, by a higher education institution or further education college in England, which appears likely to jeopardise the college's capacity to assure the academic standards and quality of any of its higher education programmes and/or awards.

76 Finally, HEFCE's policy for addressing unsatisfactory quality in institutions<sup>13</sup> is currently triggered if a higher education institution or further education college in England receives a 'fail' judgement in two successive QAA reviews; or does not make sufficient progress on an action plan made following a 'fail' judgement; or is unable to agree such an action plan within a reasonable time frame. This policy is currently being reviewed.

## Rolling review procedure

77 The sponsoring body has requested that the Institutional review process for higher education institutions, on which the review of higher education in further education is based, should be organised on a rolling basis rather than as a fixed cycle. This allows the possibility of both minor and substantive changes to the process being introduced at any point, given sufficient justification and warning. A rolling process is intended to allow greater flexibility in the review process and enable changes to be made to the review method in a timely way, rather than waiting for the end of a cycle. This means that changes made to other review methods, which are considered good practice, can be introduced into the programme of reviews without waiting for a particular review cycle to come to an end. HEFCE, as the sole sponsoring body for the review of higher education in further education colleges in England, may authorise changes to the review method in line with changes made to Institutional review for higher education institutions, or other changes relevant to higher education in further education institutions.

78 QAA will publish any agreed substantive changes six months before the start of the next academic year. In other words, if the review year begins in September, changes will be published in March of that calendar year. At the same time, QAA will clarify whether there are any changes to external reference points associated with the process change.

79 Changes proposed to Institutional review of higher education institutions by the QHEG will be considered by HEFCE in terms of application to this review method. Effort will be made to ensure conformity, where possible, between the two methods.

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<sup>13</sup> [www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09\\_31](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09_31)

## **Administration of the process**

80 A QAA officer/coordinator will have responsibility for the coordination and management of each review. Every effort will be made by QAA to ensure that a constructive working relationship is established with colleges.

81 The review findings (judgements, recommendations, features of good practice and affirmations) will be decided by the review team. The QAA officer/coordinator will ensure that all findings are backed by adequate and identifiable evidence, and that the review report provides information in a succinct and readily accessible form. To this end, QAA will retain editorial responsibility for the final text of the report.

## **Timetable for implementation**

82 The revised review programme will begin in October 2012-13 and will operate after that on a rolling basis. Within the rolling programme, each college will be reviewed approximately once every six years. The first review visits will take place from January 2013. Briefings for facilitators and lead student representatives will take place in October 2012 and Preparatory meetings with the first colleges to be reviewed will take place from November 2012.

83 It is intended that, once the revised process is established, each college will be informed of the term of its review 18 months before the review visit takes place. For the first year of the cycle, as much notice as possible will be given.

84 QAA wishes to ensure that a review is accomplished within one year, reports in a more timely way, and does not preoccupy a college unnecessarily over an extended period of time. The review timeline (from the Preparatory meeting to the publication of the report) is less than 28 weeks. To achieve this within existing costs and resources and to draw up a workable schedule of reviews, we will be more proactive in proposing dates for review activity, based on what we know about a college's term/semester dates and examinations timetable. We will ask colleges for this information 18 months before the review (one year in the case of reviews in the first year of the revised process).

85 QAA will produce a handbook for the revised Institutional review of higher education in further education colleges in England by 30 June 2012. Reviewers will be recruited, or their current status confirmed, in summer 2012; training of review teams will be provided during early autumn 2012.

## **Complaints and appeals**

86 Complaints about the conduct of the review and appeals against a judgement of no confidence in the current IQER method made by the review team are considered by QAA under the formal procedures published on its website.<sup>14</sup> Similar processes will be available for the Review of higher education in further education.

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<sup>14</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/Complaints/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Complaints/Pages/default.aspx)

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