



# **Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight: Handbook**

**January 2012**

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## About educational oversight by QAA

Educational oversight by a designated body is a requirement for highly trusted sponsor status. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) has been recognised as a designated body for higher education providers by the UK Border Agency (UKBA).

The Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight (RSEO) has been developed for organisations seeking oversight by QAA. It reflects the core principles of QAA review processes. In line with QAA's mission, this Scheme is intended to contribute in part to the enhancement of higher education.

Applicants for RSEO are agreeing to come within the QAA Concerns about standards and quality in higher education scheme's jurisdiction (or within the jurisdiction of the *Protocol for managing potential risks to quality and academic standards* in Scotland) and to cooperate with any investigations.<sup>1</sup>

RSEO starts in 2011-12. It addresses the specific needs of overseas higher education providers operating in the UK. This includes study abroad providers,<sup>2</sup> as well as overseas institutions operating in the UK who offer full-time provision for qualifications that meet the requirements in UKBA's Tier 4 policy and sponsor guidance.

## About QAA

The mission of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is to safeguard standards and improve the quality of UK higher education.

QAA's aims are to:

- meet students' needs and be valued by them
- safeguard standards in an increasingly diverse UK and international context
- drive improvements in UK higher education
- improve public understanding of higher education standards and quality.

## QAA's values

### Integrity

We always aim to be fair, objective and honest in our work, basing our judgements on sound evidence.

### Professionalism

We set high professional standards in everything we do, providing relevant and effective services that are trusted by all with an interest in UK higher education.

### Accountability

Through safeguarding standards and driving improvements we fulfil our responsibilities. We consult on the development of our work and assess its impact, seeking to provide a high level of service and to be responsive to external demands.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/complaints/pages/default.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/complaints/pages/default.aspx)

<sup>2</sup> A 'study abroad provider' is a provider of higher education based in the UK, accepting students who are enrolled on higher education courses at higher education institutions outside the UK. For further details see paragraph 67 of the UKBA Tier 4 policy guidance available at [www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk/visas-immigration/studying/adult-students/apply-outside-uk](http://www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk/visas-immigration/studying/adult-students/apply-outside-uk).

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### Openness

We are open and approachable about the work we do and how we do it, believing that this encourages trust and confidence. We publish full details of our review methods, as well as our reports on institutions. We are committed to communicating clearly and accessibly about all aspects of our work.

### Independence

To fulfil our responsibilities we must be an independent voice in UK higher education, basing our work on expert, objective scrutiny and analysis.

QAA is committed to evaluating and monitoring its work in an open and reflective manner. It does this within the context of an evaluation policy. For further information please see the QAA website: [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk).

## About this handbook

This handbook is intended primarily for staff working for higher education providers that are based overseas and applying for educational oversight by QAA, and for recognition scrutiny panel members. The term 'provider' is used to refer to both study abroad providers and overseas institutions operating in the UK and offering full-time provision for qualifications meeting the requirements in UKBA's Tier 4 policy and sponsor guidance. The intensity and extent of scrutiny outlined in this handbook will vary depending on the role of the provider and whether they are a study abroad provider or an overseas institution. QAA will provide more detailed information about the process in the form of a briefing note or event before the first scrutinies commence.

## An overview of the Scheme

The Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight (RSEO):

- prioritises the interests of students
- focuses on how the student learning experience is managed
- acknowledges the shared responsibilities of providers and their overseas partners
- is an evidence-based peer review process
- focuses on the provider's responsibilities for the management of academic standards, on their management and enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities provided for students, and on the public information they provide
- works where appropriate in cooperation with nationally recognised accrediting bodies in the home country
- is based on a short self-evaluation prepared by the provider
- involves a one-day visit to the provider
- results in published reports.

RSEO is an evidence-based peer review of the provider's management of its responsibilities for academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities that it offers. Where appropriate RSEO focuses on how providers discharge any delegated responsibilities within the context of their agreements with overseas awarding bodies.

RSEO 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 involved in, the process.

RSEO is conducted in an open and collegial way. The approach is primarily concerned with scrutinising the effectiveness of the provider's systems and procedures for discharging its

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responsibilities in relation to academic standards and its management of the student learning opportunities, and with forming a conclusion about the public information it produces. RSEO includes a one-day visit to the provider's UK headquarters. RSEO does not involve direct scrutiny at the level of an academic discipline, but does explore the effectiveness of quality management at institutional and programme levels, including internships and work placements.

QAA publishes a report at the end of the review. Working documents related to the scrutiny which are not already in the public domain are regarded as confidential and will only be disclosed to a third party when QAA believes the release is appropriate to comply with the law.

# How the Scheme works

## Aims

The aims of RSEO are to:

- publish reports about how providers meet their responsibilities for the management of academic standards and quality of learning opportunities of higher education delivered in the UK, and the reliability of public information about that education
- support providers in reviewing and enhancing the management of their higher education provision delivered in the UK, for the benefit of students and within the context of any agreements with third parties
- enhance working relationships between providers and their awarding body/bodies for the benefit of students
- provide public information.

## Scope

Based on the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*<sup>3</sup> and the *UNESCO Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education*<sup>4</sup> RSEO reports will comment on how well the provider meets its responsibilities for the management of academic standards, quality of learning opportunities and public information.

**Academic standards** refers to the level of achievement a student has to reach in order to achieve a credit or qualification.

**Quality of learning opportunities** means the effectiveness of everything that is done or provided by the provider to ensure that its students have the best possible opportunity to meet the stated intended learning outcomes of their programmes, and the academic standards of the credit or qualification they are seeking.

**Public information** is information about academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities that is in the public domain.

In examining these areas, RSEO teams will focus in particular on:

- the provider's strategic approach to its provision
- internal quality assurance reviews
- the use made of external reference points in collaborative provision
- publicly available information about the quality of programmes and the academic standards of awards gained
- the provider's internal systems for the management of information, and their contribution to effective oversight of quality and of academic standards
- the academic standards of provision
- the learning opportunities available to students
- the role of the provider in assuring the quality of teaching staff, which may include criteria for the appointment of teaching staff and the ways in which teaching effectiveness is appraised, improved and rewarded

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<sup>3</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/assuringstandardsandquality/code-of-practice](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuringstandardsandquality/code-of-practice)

<sup>4</sup> [www.unesco.org/education/guidelines\\_E.indd.pdf](http://www.unesco.org/education/guidelines_E.indd.pdf)

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- the role of the provider in undertaking quality enhancement; that is, to take deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of learning opportunities.

### Scrutiny panels

There will normally be three members of an RSEO team (scrutiny panel): a reviewer, a QAA coordinating officer, and a QAA development officer. Providers will have the opportunity to check team membership for conflicts of interest.

Each RSEO is coordinated by a QAA officer. Before and during the preliminary meeting this officer provides advice to the provider on the process, and works with the reviewer on the initial analysis of documentation. The QAA officers will participate in the visit to the provider. It is the responsibility of the QAA coordinating officer to make sure that the panel's findings are supported by adequate and identifiable evidence, and that the review report provides information in a succinct and readily accessible form.

### Information sources

Wherever possible information should be provided for the panel in electronic format and should be existing documentation. The following sources of information will provide important evidence for the panel:

- the provider's self-evaluation
- the provider's register of its provision
- information relating to awarding bodies (if a study abroad provider)
- relevant quality assurance reports produced by or about the awarding body
- information from the national accrediting organisation about the provision
- information (written or oral) acquired during and after the visit to the partner.

### Role of students

Students' views of their education are a key information source for review teams. There will normally be a confidential meeting with a representative group of students during the visit to the provider. Given the importance of meeting students, providers will want to think carefully about the timing of the review.

The review team will expect the provider's self-evaluation to explain, with evidence, how it ensures that students' views inform the management of its higher education and/or study abroad provision.

### Preliminary meeting

At least 14 weeks before the panel visit is scheduled to take place, QAA will notify the provider of the proposed dates of the scrutiny visit. A preliminary meeting will take place at the provider's headquarters between staff and the QAA officers. This will take place no later than eight weeks before the initial visit of the review team to the provider's headquarters.

The purpose of the preliminary meeting is to discuss the arrangements for the RSEO. It is also an opportunity for the QAA officer to meet key staff, clarify the process, and provide an opportunity for staff and students to ask questions.

### Self-evaluation

The self-evaluation is a key element of RSEO. It needs to be submitted to QAA four weeks in advance of the initial visit to the provider. The purpose of the self-evaluation is to describe the responsibilities that the provider has for the management of academic standards, quality of learning opportunities and public information with respect to its higher education provision. This should make reference to its agreements with third parties and the processes and procedures it has adopted for carrying out these responsibilities, as well as providing a critical self-reflection on its approach. The self-evaluation needs to cover all aspects of the provider's UK higher education provision. It needs to be fully referenced. Providers should send their self-evaluation to QAA four weeks before the visit. The RSEO panel will carry out a careful analysis of the self-evaluation prior to the visit.

### Desk-based scrutiny

On receipt of the self-evaluation the scrutiny panel will analyse it and the additional supporting documentation provided. With the support of QAA officers the panel will particularly want to ascertain the following:

- the status of the overseas provider in its home country
- any relevant accreditation arrangements for delivering programmes abroad
- the arrangements in place for the assurance of academic standards of awards offered in other countries
- details of partnership agreements between the credit awarding institution, the provider and its delivery organisations in the UK (if any)
- criteria for participation in study abroad programmes
- arrangements for the recruitment and admission of students
- entry requirements for full programmes of study delivered in the UK.

### Panel visit to the provider

The visit to the provider is designed to allow the panel to scrutinise evidence on site; to meet the provider's staff, students and other stakeholders; and to confirm the extent of the provider's quality assurance framework.

### Role of credit awarding body

In terms of the division of responsibilities for the management of academic standards, the management of the quality of learning opportunities, and the provision of public information, QAA recognises that the nature of the relationships between study abroad providers, credit awarding bodies and third parties may vary. The self-evaluation should explain all such arrangements.

RSEO assumes no preferred awarding model for higher education provision, other than that it expects that any model must permit any awarding body to assure itself about the standards and quality of the provision, however or wherever delivered. RSEO will consider how the provider discharges its responsibilities within the context of its agreements with its awarding bodies.



### Reporting

Within two weeks of the end of the review visit QAA will send the provider a key findings letter which will summarise the scrutiny panel's conclusions. The letter will be copied to UKBA.

The panel will then produce a report of its findings. The main body of the report will cover the provider's overarching roles in the management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities and public information.

Six weeks after the end of the visit, the QAA officer will send a draft version of the report to the provider for comment. The draft gives the provider the opportunity to draw the team's attention to any areas that it regards as inaccurate or incomplete and, if necessary, to submit additional evidence. Teams will be able to consider supporting evidence only if it was available at the time of the review visit. The team will consider the provider's comments and any supporting evidence as it finalises its report. The final report is subsequently published on the QAA website 12 weeks after the end of the visit.

Providers will be required to provide QAA with an annual report on actions and developments relating to the findings of their report and any changes to provision delivered in the UK.

### Judgements

RSEO panels are required to make two separate judgements: one concerning the provider's management of academic standards and the other concerning a provider's management of the quality of learning opportunities. The judgements may be **confidence**, **limited confidence** or **no confidence**. The judgement on the management of academic standards will be placed in the context of the particular responsibilities the provider has for setting and securing academic standards. Teams are also required to reach a conclusion as to whether **reliance** can be placed on the provider's public information.

The outcome indicating a satisfactory review for UKBA Tier 4 purposes is that the provider receives judgements of confidence in both its management of academic standards and its management of the quality of learning opportunities, together with a conclusion that reliance can be placed on the accuracy and completeness of its public information.<sup>5</sup>

A judgement will be **confidence** where a provider is found to be managing its responsibilities effectively (for academic standards or for the quality of learning opportunities, as applicable), and where there are good prospects that this effective management will be continued into the future. Such a judgement may be accompanied by recommendations for action considered to be advisable and/or desirable (but never essential). Nevertheless, the overall judgement should not be seen as being qualified by such recommendations.

A judgement will be **limited confidence** where significant concerns exist about aspects of a provider's current or likely future management of its responsibilities (for academic standards or for the quality of learning opportunities, as applicable). Such a judgement will normally be accompanied by one or more recommendations for action considered to be essential and, almost certainly, others for action considered to be advisable and/or desirable.

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<sup>5</sup> (See [www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk/sitecontent/newsfragments/54-t4-sponsors-education-over](http://www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk/sitecontent/newsfragments/54-t4-sponsors-education-over)).

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A judgement will be **no confidence** where major concerns exist about a provider's current or likely future management of its responsibilities (for academic standards or for the quality of learning opportunities, as applicable). Such a judgement will be accompanied by one or more recommendations for action considered to be essential and, almost certainly, others for action considered to be advisable and/or desirable. A judgement of no confidence will reflect serious procedural inadequacies or implementation failures, and will be indicative of fundamental weaknesses in a provider's capacity to manage its responsibilities for academic standards or for providing higher education of an appropriate quality.

A conclusion that **reliance can be placed** on the accuracy and completeness of all the public information that the provider is responsible for publishing will be reached where the provider:

- recognises all the information that it is responsible for publishing within the area under review
- has rigorous mechanisms for the management of these responsibilities, which ensure that the information it publishes is both accurate and complete
- has supplied evidence that this is the case.

A conclusion that **reliance cannot be placed** on the accuracy and completeness of all the public information that the provider is responsible for publishing will be reached where:

- a provider does not recognise all of the information that it is responsible for publishing, and/or
- there is evidence that this information is inaccurate and/or incomplete.

### Recommendations

RSEO reports may include recommendations, which are categorised according to priority.

**Essential** recommendations relate to matters that the review team regards as currently putting quality and/or academic standards at risk and hence require urgent corrective action.

**Advisable** recommendations relate to matters that the review team regards as having the potential to put quality and/or academic standards at risk and hence require preventative corrective action.

**Desirable** recommendations relate to matters that the review team regards as having the potential to enhance quality, build capacity and/or further secure standards.

### Features of good practice

RSEO reports also identify features of good practice. These relate to matters that the review team regards as making a particularly positive contribution to the management of academic standards, the quality of learning opportunities, and/or public information in the context of the provider, and which is worthy of wider dissemination within and/or beyond the provider.

### Action plans

Following the review, the provider will be asked to develop an action plan (according to a format prescribed by QAA). The action plan will be included in the published report and will constitute a record of the provider's commitment to take forward the findings of the review. The action plan, its implementation and its impact will form part of the evidence base for any future review activity.

### Follow-up, including annual visits

Providers who wish to maintain educational oversight by QAA will need to pay an annual maintenance fee. More details will be published at [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk) in due course.

If the RSEO results in a judgement of limited confidence in the provider's management of its responsibilities either for academic standards or for the quality of learning opportunities, or in a conclusion of non-reliance on the provider's public information, QAA may (following discussions with the provider) undertake a second visit within eight weeks of the RSEO visit. The second visit allows the potential for the provider to offer additional evidence that may lead to a revised judgement of confidence and/or a revised conclusion of reliance. More details about second visits will be published at [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk).

If the RSEO results in one or more judgements of limited confidence, either with or without a second visit, the provider will be able to apply for a re-review a minimum of six months after its RSEO report is published.

Applicable procedures in the case of a repeated unsatisfactory outcome are explained on the UKBA website.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See note 5.

## Content of the report

All RSEO reports will be published at [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk). This section indicates what the content will be, and how it will be structured.

### Key findings

This section is an executive summary giving the outcomes of the review. It will contain:

- a judgement on the management of academic standards
- a judgement on the management of the quality of learning opportunities
- a conclusion on the reliance that can be placed on the provider's public information
- features of good practice
- recommendations for action (essential, advisable and/or desirable as appropriate).

### Contextual information

The judgements and conclusion will be placed in the context of the particular responsibilities the provider has for setting and securing academic standards, details of which will be given in this section.

### Detailed findings

This section will give details of QAA's findings on:

#### Academic standards

This subsection will report on academic standards, under the following categories:

- responsibilities for academic standards
- design and approval of programmes (setting academic standards)
- assessment and student attainment (applying academic standards).

#### Quality of learning opportunities

This subsection will report on the quality of learning opportunities, under the following headings:

- responsibilities for learning opportunities
- monitoring and evaluation of programmes
- teaching and learning
- student information, support and guidance
- staff development
- learning resources.

#### Public information

This subsection will report on whether the provider's public information is sufficient and effective.

#### Action plan and follow-up

This subsection will include an action plan and give details of what happens next.

## Web references

QAA: [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk)

Academic Infrastructure:

[www.qaa.ac.uk/assuringstandardsandquality/academicinfrastructure](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuringstandardsandquality/academicinfrastructure)

UNESCO Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education:

[www.unesco.org/education/guidelines\\_E.indd.pdf](http://www.unesco.org/education/guidelines_E.indd.pdf)

More information about RSEO, for example on student involvement in the review process, can be found on the dedicated page of the QAA website:

[www.qaa.ac.uk/institutionreports/types-of-review/tier-4](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/institutionreports/types-of-review/tier-4).

## Annex A: Timeline

<b>Week</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Who</b>
At least 14 weeks before the panel visit	QAA informs provider of the panel visit	QAA following consultation with provider
At least eight weeks before the panel visit	Preliminary meeting	QAA officer Provider
Four weeks before the panel visit	Provider's self-evaluation	Provider
Panel visit	Initial team visit to provider (one day)	Provider Student representatives QAA scrutiny panel
Two weeks after panel visit	Key findings letter to provider and UK Border Agency	QAA officer
Six weeks after panel visit	Draft report to provider for comments on factual accuracy	QAA officer
10 weeks after panel visit	Provider submits comments on factual accuracy to QAA (and, where necessary, supporting evidence)	Provider
12 weeks after panel visit	Review report published at <a href="http://www.qaa.ac.uk">www.qaa.ac.uk</a>	QAA

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