

Review of higher education in further education colleges in England

MEG response (November 2011)

Q1-4 Information about respondent

Q5 To what extent does the review method address the needs of the students?

A: To a great extent

Q6 Could the needs of students be made more central to the review?

A: Yes

If so, how?

Involvement of students through the review picks up best practice in the current arrangements and adds to it by including a student on the review panel. It is unclear how the student will be selected and prepared for the review process.

This proposal begs a question as to whether this can be truly regarded as a 'peer' review, as is currently the case, because of the judgement element accorded to the student as part of the review team.

The consultation document seems to suggest that all aspects will be in scope for the student reviewer including maintenance of, and adherence to, academic standards which may be felt to be ultra vires. However, the inclusion of an external student perspective has the potential to add to the judgements on the quality of learning opportunities and public information.

There is concern about whether the student reviewer will be drawn from an appropriate background, ie HE in FE, and how the perspective of part-time students will be included.

Q7 To what extent does the review method reflect the maturity and experience of colleges in managing their own QA?

A: To a great extent

Additional comments submitted:

Self evaluation is key and is a familiar experience for all colleges and although in the future some colleges will find themselves in a less supported position in terms of their HE partners as they move from franchise partners to direct providers, MEG is confident that the expertise in the sector will enable the QA to be well managed.

Indeed members of MEG would be in a position to support this for colleges new to the experience.

However, there will be an additional complication for those colleges moving from fully indirect funding relationships to part direct/part indirect funding through the Core and Margin process in that they will be working to make two sets of data returns and develop their direct relationship with HEFCE for the first time in the first year of operation of this review method. Consideration should be given to this when planning reviews, particularly of smaller providers.

Further clarity would be helpful as to whether the responsibility of the college is directly to the QAA or to the validating HEI.

Q8 How could the method be adapted for larger and smaller higher education providers, and those that have more or less experience of managing higher education programmes?

A: The aim of the core judgements is to ensure a consistency in the core themes across FE colleges so it will be important that any review panel will have sufficient capacity in terms of time and number of reviewers to fully examine the evidence on which to make these judgements. Colleges with extensive and very diverse provision may well benefit from additional reviewers as suggested therefore a proportionate approach is to be encouraged, subject to achieving the core purpose within the time allowed as with the current abridged reviews. MEG would encourage QAA to provide more guidance on how the evidence base is provided, as well as adopting new methods of working, eg the submission of evidence electronically, use of teleconferencing, etc. A risk based approach in determining when a review would be scheduled may be helpful as well looking at a range of indicators.

A thematic element would allow for some retention of the supportive aspects of the current Developmental IQER and has the potential to support less experienced colleges and it would be helpful if this could be built in. Themes could have an extended shelf life, maybe a 2-3 year cycle, for example the first year experience. (There is a similar approach taken by Ofsted in its thematic visits to colleges and schools which inform good practice in the sector.)

Q9 To what extent is the review method flexible enough to accommodate future changes in the sector?

A: To some extent

Additional comments submitted:

Discussion round significant changes to provision may arise as a consequence of the new funding and bidding approaches to HE and potential changes within the FE landscape, such as merger or the introduction of Higher Apprenticeships, is not covered here whereas there is some mention of significant change in the current IQER.

Q10 Is the rolling programme and thematic element sufficient to accommodate future changes in the sector?

A: Yes

Additional comments submitted:

But it may mean that colleges' experience is less consistent as a result should changes happen before a cycle is complete.

Q11 What other means of flexibility could be built into the method?

A: Ability to build in new policy directions subject to Q10 above.

Q12 Is the difference clear in the standards judgement for colleges that have taught or Foundation Degree awarding powers, and for providers that do not have degree awarding powers?

A: Yes

Q13 Could this difference be made clearer?

A: No

Q14 To what extent is the importance of the relationship between colleges and employers adequately addressed?

A: To some extent

Additional comments submitted:

It lacks any mention of IQER and Higher Apprenticeships.

Q15 Is the nature of work-related, work-based and employer-led provision sufficiently accommodated within the review method?

A: No

Q16 Could the method be adapted to make it more appropriate to employer-responsive and vocational higher education programmes?

A: Yes

Additional comments submitted:

Maybe through the make-up of the review team as well as some references which parallel the importance of student involvement with that of employers – meeting with them, possibly some sort of submission of evidence if employer-led, clarity over the role of the employer in QA process too for example the action plan.

Q17 To what extent is enhancement sufficiently promoted by the review method?

A: To some extent

Q18 Is the role of the action plan as a tool for enhancement adequately described?

A: Yes

Q19 Will Core and Thematic elements allow colleges to evaluate their strengths as well as their areas for improvement?

A: Yes

Q20 What challenges do you identify in the implementation of the review method, and how can these challenges be overcome?

A: The inclusion of a student reviewer for a number of reasons:

- It may be difficult to find a sufficient pool of student reviewers with relevant experience of HE in FE
- In order for them to have this experience, they will have to have been on courses for enough time to have the expertise and also to undergo the training and apply the training in a review – this would seem to be a bias towards three year undergraduates rather than those on shorter degrees.
- Many HE students combine study with paid employment and/or family responsibilities and to take on the commitment to this process would disadvantage some of those students.

Flows in demand and core and margin may well lead to new providers as well as to peaks and troughs in student numbers and degrees within a short space of time with a potential risk to quality. A cycle and review method which is devised for more stable and predictable times will need to be flexible enough to address this environment. New methods of delivery – blended, online and in the workplace- as well as the introduction of Higher Apprenticeships and the potential inclusion of professional Level 4 and 5 part time courses in the wider definition of HE through access to loans add to this picture and may require a different evidential base – contact with students and employers in the workplace may need to be something other than face to face for example.

The inclusion of private providers, such as Pearson, who may have FDAP themselves in the near future, may also challenge the review methodology which is constructed on the basis of an educational institution being the main provider. It will be important to retain a consistency of judgement across public and private organisations. In addition, new partnerships between FE Colleges and private organisations both within England and internationally may challenge the model. QAA Terms of Reference for review teams should be clear about whether the review

is aimed at the FEC as a direct contractor to HEFCE, to their HEI as a franchise partner, or to an Awarding Organisation.

MEG welcomes the suggestion that current IQER reviewers would stay on for this review method as it will lead to a greater sense of continuity. We would also suggest that as the current IQER cycle has enabled all participating colleges to develop their skills and expertise that more reviewers could be drawn from the sector in future.

Q21 Are there different challenges for different stakeholders (for example students, the college, awarding bodies, QAA and HEFCE)?

A: Please see above