

# Assuring public confidence in an increasingly diverse higher education sector

**Dr. Jayne Mitchell**

Director: Research, Development and Partnerships,  
Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

**HE Beyond 2015**  
**Thursday 14<sup>th</sup> June 2012**



# Improving quality in a diverse Higher Education sector

## **QAA strategic aims:**

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

# Content

- Context
  - drivers for change and diversification of HE sector
  - implications for quality assurance
- Key developments
  - opportunities and challenges for quality assurance
- Summary
  - areas for reform
  - essential elements to be retained

# 'Students at the heart of the system'

## Key themes

### **i. Diversity and competition:**

- Diversity: a diverse sector with new providers
- Competition: higher quality delivered at a lower cost

### **ii. Better public information:**

- Better information to inform student choices

### **iii. A level playing field:**

- Private access to public funding

### **iv. Reduced regulation**

- Removing barriers to entry for alternative providers (e.g. DAPs)
- Reduced regulation, including new risk-based approach to quality assurance



# Implications for quality assurance

*“The UK approach to quality assurance is highly regarded and influential around the world. Maintaining and enhancing our reputation for high-quality higher education provision is crucial for the UK’s image as a destination of choice for international students. But **the quality assurance regime must also adapt to a changing environment.**”*

From *Students at the Heart of the System*,  
(chapter 3: paragraph 15, BIS white paper, June 2011)



# Developments and challenges for quality assurance arrangements

1. maintaining UK HE standards and quality of learning opportunities
2. publicly available information about HE
3. responsive to further diversification of the HE sector
4. appropriate balance of accountability and 'burden'
5. a more flexible approach, with a greater emphasis on providing public assurance

# 1. Maintaining standards and quality of learning opportunities

## ***UK Quality Code for Higher Education***

- Nationally agreed, definitive point of reference
- All HE providers, reviewed by QAA, commit to meeting the expectations set out in the Quality Code

Published by QAA in three parts:

- A. setting and maintaining academic standards
- B. assuring and enhancing academic quality
- C. information about Higher Education provision

Purposes:

- *safeguard the academic standards of UK HE*
- *assure quality of learning opportunities*
- *promote continuous and systematic improvement in UK HE*
- *ensure information about UK HE is publicly available*



## 2. Better quality publicly available information about HE

Better information to inform student choices

UK Quality Code

- Part C: Information about higher education
  - Expectations about how providers make available information about HE that is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy
- from September 2012 IRENI will include judgement on public information

### 3. Responsive to further diversification and competition in the sector

#### QAA position:

***“The QAA proposes that all providers of English higher education fit within the new regulatory framework.”***

[From QAA response to the BIS Technical Consultation]

- while quality assurance can, and should, be flexible and proportionate, the principle applied to ‘public providers’ should also apply to ‘private providers’
- all HE provision must be subject to rigorous quality assurance procedures
- Protects public and students’ interests and the UK’s reputation for higher education

### **3. Responsive to further diversification and competition in the sector**

#### **Update on QAA review methods:**

- **IRENI: Institutional Review in England & Northern Ireland**
  - First year of operation, 2011-12
  - Judgement on information provision from Sept 2012
- **IQER (Institutional Quality Enhancement Review)**
  - Final year for IQER in FE Colleges
  - Introduction of RHEFE for 2012-13
- **REO (Review of Education Oversight)**
  - Major new QAA programme for 2012

## 4. Appropriate balance of accountability and 'burden'

*We will put in place a new regulatory system that protects standards and quality, gives power to students to trigger quality reviews where there are grounds for concern, yet cuts back the burden of review for high performing institutions. ....*

*We will strip back excessive regulation on providers wherever it is possible including: reducing burdens from information collection;.....; and adopting a risk-based approach to quality assurance.*

(White Paper, Paragraph 14, page 6)

**QAA position:**

***important to balance deregulation with assuring public and students' interests***

# Interim Regulatory Partnership Group for England



**QAA**



**UCAS**



## 4. Appropriate balance of accountability and 'burden'

### Interim Regulatory Partnership Group for England

Project A: mapping regulatory and financial connections and links

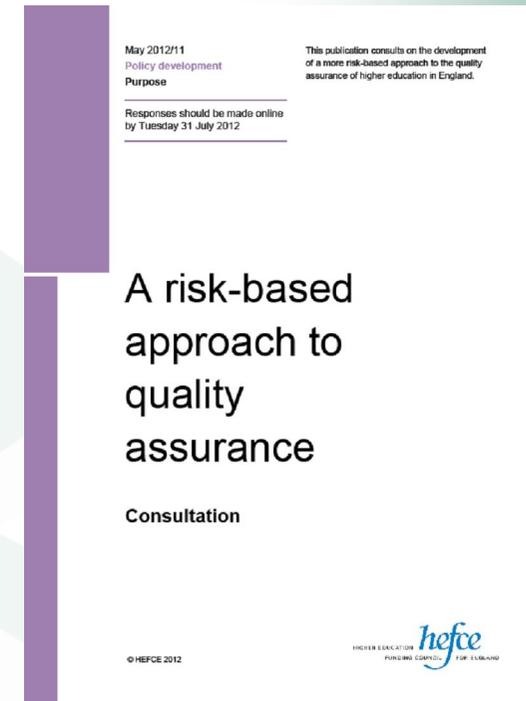
Project B: mapping information connections and links

## 5. More flexible approach with greater emphasis on public assurance

Government invited HEFCE to consult on “*the criteria against which overall risk should be assessed and the frequency of review, with a view to achieving very substantial deregulatory change for institutions that can demonstrate low risk; [and] a set of ad hoc triggers which would prompt QAA to carry out a full or partial review when this was not otherwise expected.....*”

(BIS, Technical consultation, August 2011)

- Introduction of a more risk-based approach to quality assurance, focussing Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) effort where it would have the most impact.



## Government Response – implications for quality assurance

- No HE Bill - reform agenda will move forward *'primarily through non-legislative means'*
- clear commitment to bring all providers of UK HE into the quality assurance framework operated by QAA.
- reduce the numbers criterion for University Title to 1,000 FTE (min' 750 studying for a degree) and >55% total FTE studying HE courses.

# Summary

- Existing policy and direction of quality assurance regime change is already in line with the future vision for the UK HE sector
- Further change could be incorporated into planned reforms
- Vital elements of existing quality assurance regime should be preserved

## Contact details

Jayne Mitchell: [j.mitchell@qaa.ac.uk](mailto:j.mitchell@qaa.ac.uk)

Southgate House,  
Southgate Street,  
Gloucester  
GL1 1UB

Telephone: 01452 557 000

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

email news alert service:

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/news/list.asp>