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## The common approach to quality assurance and enhancement for colleges and universities - FAQs

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This document is intended to answer key questions around the development and implementation of the Common Approach (CA) to quality assurance and enhancement for colleges and universities.

### **Why do we need a tertiary approach?**

The [SFC Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability](#) set out a vision for a coherent and better integrated tertiary education system that puts students at its centre. We believe that enhanced collaboration across the sectors is necessary to support the continued development of a quality culture across our institutions and that this is best achieved through a tertiary approach. We also want to support more seamless learning pathways for students, and to support more effective collaboration across colleges and universities, removing barriers to the sharing of innovation and learning, across the tertiary system to deliver better and clearer student outcomes.

### **Why a tertiary approach now?**

We believe, with the conclusion of the ELIR 4 cycle (AY 2017-22) in the university sector, and the wider educational reforms currently underway – including the recommendations of the Muir and Withers reviews, that ‘now’ would be the optimum time to secure greater alignment and coherence across the post-16 education system. The system wide pressures on institutions’ capacity and resource has also been a driver for SFC to seek to streamline and enhance reporting on quality as part of its wider review of assurance and accountability. And while the current quality arrangements for both colleges and universities are highly regarded, we feel there is an urgent need to strengthen the outputs of both approaches to better demonstrate the value and impact of the Scottish Government’s investment in our colleges and universities.

### **Who owns the Common Approach?**

The CA is a partnership between SFC, colleges, universities, the quality agencies, and students, reflecting our belief that in Scotland quality assurance should be done with and not to institutions; that institutions retain ownership of the quality of the provision that they deliver; and that students should be full partners in their own learning. SFC will have oversight of the CA with responsibility for ensuring that all the component parts work effectively and coherently to provide assurance on academic standards and the quality of the student experience – in line with its statutory duties. SFC will be supported in this by an independent advisory group with membership drawn from all the CA partners. SFC will review and assess the outputs of the CA to support its accountability to the Scottish Government for the effective use and impact of public funding for learning and teaching and delivery of its statutory duties.

## **How has the Common Approach been developed?**

SFC has taken a co-creation approach to the development of the CA with its key partners and stakeholders from inception through to implementation. In taking forward its Review recommendation SFC has worked with its partners in developing a shared understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement in both sectors, and identifying areas of commonality and differences to refine a set of shared principles that will underpin and inform every aspect of our new arrangements. Building on this shared understanding SFC has convened cross-sector workshops and workstreams to help shape different aspects of our new approach, supported by guidance from the [Tertiary Quality Steering Group](#).

## **How will the Common Approach be delivered?**

There will be five interconnected pillars of the CA that, taken together, will provide the assurance on quality and support institutional and sector wide enhancement. These are:

- A cycle of external peer review and follow up activity.
- Annual evaluation including institutional self-evaluation and action planning.
- Institution-led activity including review and annual monitoring of programmes and professional services.
- National thematic enhancement activity across the tertiary sector.
- The enhanced use of data and evidence for reporting.

## **How will the pillars of the Common Approach be developed and refined?**

SFC has commissioned the QAA to lead on the design, planning and delivery of a multi-year external peer-review cycle for colleges and universities for implementation in AY 2024-25. QAA will work closely with Education Scotland in this work to utilise their collective experience and understanding of the college and university sectors. A series of co-creation workstreams will shape other aspects of the CA and make final recommendations to SFC. And while each workstream has an identified lead agency, they will be collaborative endeavours with engagement from all the CA partners. You can [find more about the workstreams here](#).

## **Why has QAA been asked to develop and implement a single external review methodology?**

Effective collaboration between QAA and Education Scotland will be critical to the development and implementation of an external review methodology for the tertiary sector. Following evaluation and extensive sector engagement on a range of options, including guidance from the Tertiary Quality Steering Group, SFC decided that one agency should be asked to take the lead on the development and implementation of a single external review method to meet the ambition set out in the SFC Review, and the expectations of the tertiary sector. SFC has commissioned QAA to lead this work as it is independent from government, and is a longstanding member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), which will ensure continued compliance with European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) in line with Scottish Government commitments as a signatory to the Bologna Process. SFC also recognises that continued

compliance with ESG is necessary to maintain the reputation and standing of Scottish higher education.

### **Does QAA have sufficient understanding of the college sector to develop a single review method?**

As part of its commission from SFC, QAA is required to work in close partnership with Education Scotland HMIEs in the development and implementation of a review method that has the flexibility to meet the developing needs of both sectors. Like other aspects of the CA, the review methodology will be an exercise in co-creation. The knowledge and expertise of Education Scotland HMIEs developed over many years will be critical to the effectiveness and success of the new method.

### **Is the college sector ready for enhancement-led peer review?**

Colleges already invest significant resource in their existing annual engagement and review arrangements that can be reframed and repurposed to deliver the new approach. And although suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the processes and capacities developed following the introduction of Evaluative Reporting and Enhancement Planning (EREP) have now become embedded practice in the college sector. Our mapping of quality assurance arrangements also shows significant commonalities and increasing alignment around an enhancement-led, peer review approach across both sectors. QAA will work with Education Scotland and the College Development Network (CDN) on a development programme, preparation events, and review training for college sector colleagues in the new method. We also anticipate that colleges will be phased later in the external review cycle to enable review team members from the college sector to shadow university review teams earlier in the cycle, creating space for them to develop their understanding of the process and better prepare their colleges for external review.

### **When will the Common Approach be implemented?**

The CA will be implemented from AY 2024-25, including the introduction of a new external review cycle for colleges and universities. Some aspects of the CA, including a template for institutional self-evaluation and reporting on quality, will be piloted by some institutions on a voluntary basis in advance of their full implementation.

### **How will we ensure that the Common Approach is effective and fit for purpose?**

As an enhancement-led approach, mechanisms for reviewing, assessing, and refining the CA will be identified as part of its development and embedded within its processes. There will also be periodic reviews of the wider approach at the end of each external review cycle – with appropriate external input and guidance – to ensure its continued effectiveness and relevance. Our intention in developing the CA is to create a self-sustaining ‘quality culture’ in institutions and across the sector where everyone involved in teaching, learning, and supporting students has the capacity to reflect on and improve their performance.

**How will we ensure the quality of provision during the development of the new approach?**

SFC has issued [Quality guidance to colleges and universities for AY 2022-23 and AY 2023-24](#) to ensure that it continues to meet its statutory duties and remains compliant with ESG guidelines. The guidance will be refreshed for AY 2023-24 in response to the development of the Common Approach and to support the transition into the new arrangements.