

[Link for consultation](#)

HEFCE consultation

## List of consultation questions

Question 1:

Do you agree with our proposed principles to underpin the future approach to quality assessment in established providers?

*This response relates to Mathematics. There are no subject specific concerns here and we broadly agree with these principles.*

Question 2:

Do you agree that our current proposals for the use of meaningful external scrutiny as set out in paragraphs 32-34 are sufficient? If you do not agree, please indicate what additional or different external scrutiny you propose and provide the reasons for this.

*No comment*

Question 3:

Do you agree that future approaches to quality assessment should be based on an assumption that 'one size' can no longer sensibly fit all?

*This response relates to Mathematics. Yes, provided that the proposals in paragraph 36 are adhered to, and the subject benchmark for mathematics is observed.*

Question 4:

Do you agree that there should be a baseline requirement for the quality of the academic experience for students, and that this should be published and maintained?

*This response relates to Mathematics. Yes, in principle, but there would need to be consultation on the baseline requirements to be demanded.*

Question 5:

For England, do you agree with the proposal that an individual provider, once it has passed the gateway for entry into the publicly funded system in England, should not be repeatedly externally retested against the baseline requirements for an acceptable student academic experience, unless material evidence suggests otherwise?

*This response relates to Mathematics. No. While there should not be too many retests, at least one follow up external test should be made within two years of the start of the new providers activity.*

Question 6:

For Northern Ireland, do you agree that providers should provide annual evidence and assurance that they are meeting the baseline requirements for an acceptable student academic experience?

*No comment*

Question 7:

Do you agree that the funding bodies' verification of an institution's review methodology provides a reasonable mechanism through which to operate risk-based scrutiny of a provider's arrangements to secure a good and improving student academic experience and student outcomes?

*This response relates to Mathematics. We believe that external examiners' reports should be used in any institutional review.*

Question 8:

Do you agree that student outcomes data should provide the basis for continuous improvement activities within an individual provider?

*This response relates to Mathematics. No. While we of course believe that such data has a role, caution is required in using metrics. For instance using the proportion of 'good honours degrees' might imply that institutions should be continuously raising the proportion of such degrees, which would not be sensible behaviour to encourage. It is essential that the academic judgment of both external advisers in Mathematics, and academic staff in Mathematics departments within the institution, is called upon and used. The introduction of the NSS has led to an industry trying to optimise institutional scores; it is far from clear that this activity is driving any real improvement. The statistical robustness of the NSS needs to be investigated*

Question 9:

Do you agree that we should take forward into detailed design and pilot phases further work on the use of student outcomes data to identify patterns and trends and on the development of approaches for monitoring and supporting institutions as they address areas of concern?

*This response relates to Mathematics. As indicated in our response to question 8, data on its own will not be sufficient. Ways of effectively responding to academic judgment must be found.*

Question 10:

In Northern Ireland, do you agree with the approach outlined to introduce more effective and consistent arrangements for collecting and analysing feedback from higher education learners?

*This response relates to Mathematics. No comment beyond the comments above on the NSS.*

Question 11:

Do you agree with the proposal that more emphasis should be placed on the role of a provider's governing body to provide assurances about the quality of the student academic experience and student outcomes in line with the Higher Education Code of Governance? If you agree, please indicate what, if any, additional support they should receive to provide such assurances.

*This response relates to Mathematics. This could be useful but detailed mechanisms for any increased role of governing bodies in quality assurance should be carefully developed, possibly with piloting. Careful scrutiny is needed to make sure that this is not simply a tick box exercise based on naively understood*

*numerical data. Quinquennial review in more depth may be better than an annual exercise.*

Question 12:

For England, do you agree that, for English institutions, HEFCE should develop and use the existing external accountability mechanisms, particularly the HAR, in the ways described?

*No comment*

Question 13:

For Northern Ireland, do you agree that DEL should develop and use the existing accountability mechanisms in the ways described?

*No comment*

Question 14:

Do you agree that there should be a 'probationary period' for new entrants to the publicly funded sector in England?

*This response relates to Mathematics. Yes.*

Question 15:

Do you agree that international activities should be included in the remit of future quality assessment arrangements as described?

*This response relates to Mathematics. Yes.*

Question 16:

Do you agree that a future quality assessment system must provide reliable assurances to students and other stakeholders about the maintenance of academic output standards and their reasonable comparability across the UK higher education system?

*This response relates to Mathematics. Broadly, yes, but the issue of comparability is a difficult one. There should be information available to make it clear that the nature of a degree course in mathematics will vary from institution to institution, a one-size-fits-all model would not be appropriate. This is part of the issue of differentiation within HE institutions; in the UK the term 'university' is used rather broadly compared to other countries where titles can indicate (say) a high level of technical rather than academic education.*

Question 17:

Do you agree that the external examining system should be strengthened in the ways proposed, ie through additional training and the establishment of a register?

*This response relates to Mathematics. No. We have grave doubts about the establishment of a register. This is likely to limit the range of academic staff acting as external examiners, and change the nature of external examining for the worse. It is sufficient to require say 5 years of experience working within a UK HE Institution in a role where one's work has been subject to scrutiny by external examiners. Most of the work an external examiner does depends on an understanding of the local system in the Mathematics Department of the HEI concerned. Documentation and the meetings between external examiners and*

*local Mathematics department staff should be sufficient. Generic training would be a wasteful extra cost, likely to discourage potential external examiners. Any information needed on generic national procedures should be given in documentary form.*

Question 18:

Do you agree that our proposals in relation to the external examining system are sufficient, ie do they go far enough to provide the necessary assurances about academic output standards to students and other stakeholders?

*This response relates to Mathematics. The issue is not one of sufficiency. See 17 above.*

Question 19:

Do you agree that it would be helpful to explore approaches to the calibration of academic output standards in different disciplinary and multi-disciplinary contexts?

*This response relates to Mathematics. Broadly yes. Mathematics degrees are currently accredited by the IMA, and by answering yes to this question we do not wish to imply that we are not happy with this. However from time to time it is beneficial to consider at discipline level the issues of comparability and diversity which arise, without any prior expectation of significant change being made to current procedures.*

*The subject community was involved in the recent Subject Benchmark Review. It is essential that the Mathematics community continues to take a leading and decisive role in the reviewing the MSOR benchmark.*

Question 20:

Do you agree that providers should use the accreditation activities of at least some PSRBs more centrally in future approaches to quality assessment?

*This response relates to Mathematics. This possibility could be explored, but with no prior assumption of any change in current procedures. (See 19 above.)*

Question 21:

Do you agree with the proposal that we should place more emphasis on the role of the governing body of a provider with degree awarding powers to provide assurances about security and reasonable comparability of the academic output standards of students?

*This response relates to Mathematics. Our expertise here is limited, but we are surprised that there is no mention of compatibility of systems with subject benchmarks. For mathematics this is an issue as many HEI have global credit systems which are not compatible with the MSOR benchmark.*

Question 22:

Do you agree with the proposal to develop guidance to providers on a sensible range of degree classification algorithms at the pass/fail and 2i/2ii borderlines?

*This response relates to Mathematics. Yes. These algorithms must vary from discipline to discipline, it is important that the Mathematics subject community is*

*involved in this process, and that algorithms compatible with the MSOR benchmark are constructed.*

Question 23:

Do you agree with our proposals to develop and implement a strengthened mechanism to investigate rapidly when there is an indication of serious problems within an individual provider which has not been addressed in a satisfactory and timely manner?

*No comment*

Question 24:

Should the mechanism to investigate problems in an individual provider require, in addition to the investigation of the specific issue of concern, the re-testing of the arrangements in the provider under review against the baseline requirements set out for the gateway for entry to the higher education system?

*No comment*

Question 25:

Do you agree with the proposal that providers seeking entry to the publicly funded sector in England and Northern Ireland should be tested, through an external peer review scrutiny process, against a set of baseline requirements for quality?

*This response relates to Mathematics. Yes, we believe this should be required.*

Question 26:

Are there any particular areas of our proposals that you feel we should concentrate on as we undertake a more detailed design phase?

*No comment*

Question 27:

Are there proposals not referred to above that you feel we should have in consideration? If so, what are they and what is the rationale for their inclusion?

*This response relates to Mathematics. The elephant in the room here is the proposed Teaching Excellency Framework (TEF).*

*We presume that there will be a separate consultation on the TEF proposals, and expect that this will take into account discipline-specific issues.*

Question 28:

Are there any particular areas pertinent to the devolved nature of higher education in Wales and Northern Ireland that you feel we should have considered further? If so, what are they and what is the rationale for their inclusion?

*No comment*