



Annual Monitoring for Specific Course Designation Purposes

1 Purpose of the monitoring process

1.1 This guidance note applies only to alternative providers undergoing annual monitoring for specific course designation purposes. This includes alternative providers that have previously had a Review for Specific Course Designation (RSCD), Higher Education Review or Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers). Alternative providers that subscribe to QAA and have courses specifically designated are also required to undergo the annual quality monitoring process. A separate guidance note is available for alternative providers that require educational oversight. Providers that require annual quality monitoring for both educational oversight and specific course designation should follow the educational oversight guidance note.¹

1.2 This process forms part of the transition arrangements for 2018-19 as responsibility for specific course designation in England transfers from the Secretary for State for Education to the Office for Students (OfS).

1.3 The QAA Specific Course Designation review process consists of periodic reviews, an annual return and interim quality monitoring visits between reviews. The annual return and the monitoring visit are an integral part of the overall review process; they will serve as a short check on the provider's continuing management of academic standards, the management and enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities, and the information it publishes about its academic provision. The annual return will be an opportunity to reflect upon developments made in the management of higher education provision by the provider since the previous review or monitoring visit, and for QAA to note any matters that will be of particular interest to the team that conducts the provider's next review or monitoring visit.

1.4 The monitoring process has a developmental aspect, in that it will also serve to support providers in working with the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code).² The Quality Code gives all higher education providers a shared starting point for setting, describing and assuring the academic standards of their higher education awards and programmes, and assuring the quality of the learning opportunities and information they provide. The existing Quality Code will continue to be used for the annual monitoring process for the 2018-19 academic year.

1.5 Material changes in circumstances, or complaints or concerns raised about a provider, may trigger a Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) instead of a monitoring visit (see sections 4 and 5).

¹ Please note that alternative providers with degree-awarding powers that have a Tier 4 sponsor licence are exempt from annual monitoring for educational oversight purposes, but if these providers are institutionally designated or have specific courses designated, they are required to undergo annual quality monitoring for specific course designation purposes.

² Available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code.

2 Overview of the monitoring process

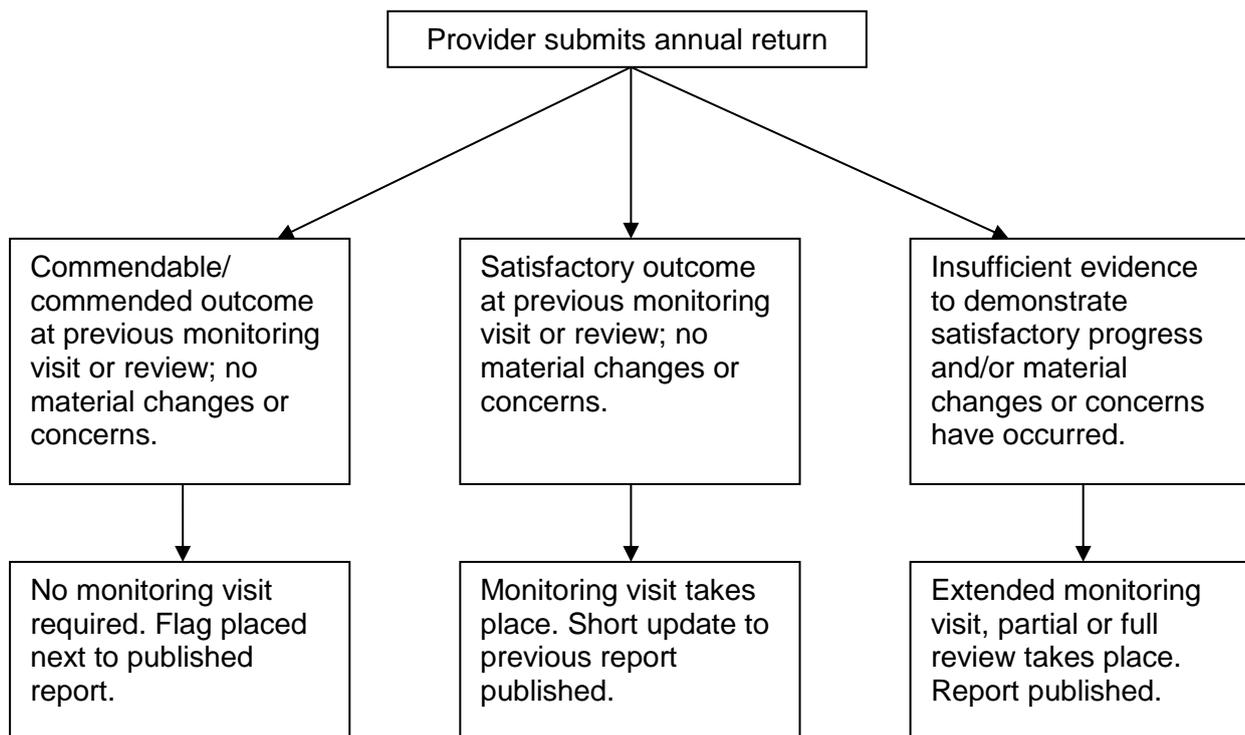
2.1 All alternative providers should submit an annual quality return to QAA, normally 9-10 months after their previous review or monitoring visit. QAA will notify providers of the date when the annual return should be submitted.

2.2 Based on the annual quality return, QAA will determine whether a monitoring visit, extended monitoring visit or a partial or full review visit is necessary (see paragraph 2.15 and section 4). Providers who make commendable progress in one monitoring visit may not be required to receive a monitoring visit the following year. Providers that have had a Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers), where all relevant expectations were met and the risk was low, and at least one commendable judgement was achieved, may not be required to receive a monitoring visit the following year.

2.3 The monitoring visit will result in a short update to the published review or annual monitoring report.³ If a full review takes place a new report will be published and the monitoring cycle will start again.

2.4 The flow chart below outlines the monitoring visit process, which takes place each year between full review visits.

Flow chart: the quality monitoring process



³ Where providers do not have a monitoring visit because they exceeded expectations the previous year, this will be flagged on the QAA website.

The annual quality return

2.5 The annual quality return will normally be submitted 9-10 months after the previous QAA visit. If a provider does not have a monitoring visit in one year, the annual return will be due approximately one year after the previous return.

2.6 The annual return should be submitted electronically to QAA. Details will be given to providers on how to do this when they are advised of the date for submission.

2.7 The provider is required to update QAA on:

- current programmes offered, awarding bodies/organisations and student numbers
- student retention and achievement data for the last three years
- any material changes since the last QAA visit (see section 4)
- progress on implementing the action plan arising from the previous QAA review or monitoring reports and any subsequent developments
- the provider's internal quality monitoring processes, and how these are used to identify good practice and areas for improvement within the provider
- any specific thematic areas that are to be explored across the sector (these will be clarified on the annual return template)
- actions taken to address any recommendations in other recent external reports (such as awarding organisation or professional, statutory or regulatory body reports)
- progress in working with relevant external reference points to meet UK expectations for higher education.

2.8 The annual quality return will take the form of a short briefing paper, which should be referenced to the supporting evidence (see Annex 2).

2.9 In the first year following a full quality review, the annual return should report in detail on how the provider has effectively implemented the action plan in response to the review report. Providers should supply evidence that the actions have been implemented effectively, and identify any enhancements to the student experience as a result of these actions.

2.10 Providers should maintain an action plan on an ongoing basis to ensure continual monitoring, review and enhancement of their higher education provision. In subsequent years, the monitoring visit will assess the effectiveness of the provider's actions to support continuous improvement. The annual quality return is the main mechanism by which the provider can communicate to QAA that it is continuing to evaluate and enhance its management of academic standards, quality and information.

2.11 Providers should also include a commentary on recruitment, retention and pass rates over the period covered by the data return form, within the annual return form.

2.12 QAA may also ask providers to comment on their management of other areas of interest or concern through the monitoring process. Additional topics of interest will be management of admissions and assessment.

2.13 Providers should consider how their quality assurance policies and processes allow them to meet the UK expectations for higher education. Providers should reflect on their use of relevant external reference points, including the Quality Code, in the annual return.

2.14 Providers should engage students in their quality assurance processes. Students may be involved in implementing the action plan and/or in measuring the outcomes of actions taken.

2.15 The provider's annual return and supporting evidence will be read by a QAA Officer, together with additional information received from other bodies such as the Department for Education (DfE), the OfS or the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). QAA may decide that an extended monitoring visit, partial or full review is required instead of, or following, a monitoring visit if:

- there is evidence that material changes in circumstances have occurred, either through the annual return or through intelligence gathered by other bodies such as DfE, the OfS or HESA (see section 4)
- there is a lack of demonstrable progress against the published action plan
- QAA has received complaints about academic standards, quality, information or enhancement that are being investigated through the concerns scheme (see section 5)
- there are other serious concerns about the provider's ability to maintain academic standards effectively and/or manage and enhance the quality of learning opportunities or the information the provider publishes about its academic provision.

The monitoring visit

2.16 The standard monitoring visit will normally last for one day, and will include meetings with the provider's staff and students. The monitoring team will normally consist of a review coordinator and one reviewer. The team will produce a short update to the existing review or annual monitoring report that will comment on:

- any changes since the last QAA review or monitoring visit
- the progress that has been made in the monitoring, review and enhancement of its higher education provision, including reference to associated reports from awarding bodies/organisations
- any other thematic areas of interest, for example, admissions or assessment (these will be advised on an annual basis)
- the engagement of students in quality assurance
- progress on working with external reference points to meet UK expectations for higher education
- any matters that should be followed up in the next monitoring/review visit
- a conclusion on the progress made in responding to the previous review or monitoring visit.

Table 1: Indicative timeline for the monitoring process

Time +/- visit (in weeks)	Actions required
-8 weeks	Provider submits electronic copies of the annual return and supporting evidence to QAA.
-7 weeks	<p>QAA Review Support Officer (RSO) reads the annual return and determines whether a monitoring visit, extended monitoring visit, partial or full review will take place.⁴</p> <p>If the monitoring visit is to take place: QAA administrator confirms the monitoring team to the provider, and agrees the date of the visit. QAA administrator notifies the provider's awarding bodies/organisations of the visit. (If a partial or full review is required, DfE will be notified and the visit will be rescheduled to take place within five months of submission of the annual quality return.)</p>
-6 weeks	<p>Monitoring team analyses the annual quality return and prepares its agenda for the monitoring visit.</p> <p>The team may ask for additional evidence/raise points for clarification before and/or during the visit as required.</p>
-4 weeks	Coordinator agrees the arrangements for the visit with the provider, and copies in the awarding bodies/organisations.
0 weeks	The (extended) monitoring visit takes place: monitoring team visits the provider, meets with staff and students, and considers any other evidence provided.
+1 weeks	Monitoring team drafts the update to the report, and Coordinator sends it to the QAA RSO for editing.
+2 weeks	QAA RSO edits the update. Coordinator then sends the update to the provider and its awarding bodies/organisations for comment, and to DfE and the OfS for information.
+4 weeks	Provider returns comments on factual accuracy to QAA. Comments from awarding bodies/organisations should be incorporated into the provider's comments.
+5 weeks	Coordinator discusses the provider's comments with the reviewer and QAA RSO , and makes final amendments to the update.
+6 weeks	QAA publishes the monitoring report on the QAA website.

⁴ If a full review is required, the process will be followed as outlined in the Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) Handbook. The review cycle will then begin again. DfE and the OfS will be notified if a partial or full review is required.

3 Outcomes of the process

3.1 Conclusions reflect the provider's continuing management of academic standards, management and enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities, and the information it publishes about its academic provision. An overall conclusion will be graded as follows:

- the provider is making commendable progress
- the provider is making acceptable progress
- the provider is making progress but further improvement is required
- the provider is not making acceptable progress.

Guidance on how conclusions are reached is provided in Annex 1.

3.2 Providers should engage effectively with relevant external reference points, including the Quality Code, to manage their higher education. They should actively engage students in quality assurance processes. Monitoring teams will note instances where providers are not managing these responsibilities effectively, in addition to identifying areas where the provider has made commendable progress.

3.3 Academic standards and quality must be maintained in order for a provider to pass the monitoring process. Where there is evidence to demonstrate that a provider is making commendable progress, the next monitoring process may take place in two years' time,⁵ unless the next annual return provides insufficient evidence that the provider is continuing to make good progress, or the provider undergoes a material change in circumstances, or other concerns are raised about the provider's management of its academic provision.

3.4 Where there are weaknesses in the provider's maintenance of academic standards and/or quality, and/or where action plans have not been implemented fully or have not been effective in all areas, further action will be required to maintain specific course designation. The following outcomes are considered to be unsatisfactory:

- the provider is making progress but further improvement is required
- the provider is not making acceptable progress.

3.5 Where a provider receives one of these outcomes, it must submit a new action plan within 30 days of the monitoring visit. In order to maintain specific course designation, the provider must request a full Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) to take place within a maximum of **six months** of publication of the outcome of the monitoring process. QAA will advise providers about the timing of their follow-up review based on their findings, allowing time for providers to implement measures within their action plan and demonstrate progress against these. Providers may request an earlier follow-up review, but they would do so at their own risk.

3.6 A draft of the monitoring team's findings will be sent to the provider for comment on factual accuracy. The final update will also be shared with DfE, the OfS and the provider's awarding bodies/organisations, and will be published on the QAA website.

4 Material changes in circumstances

4.1 Material changes in circumstance (as identified in paragraphs 4.2 and 4.3) may trigger an early monitoring visit, partial or full review. Providers must inform QAA within 28

⁵ If a full review is planned for the following year as part of the four-year cycle, this exemption will not apply.

days of meeting one of the triggers outlined in paragraph 4.2. Failure to do so will result in referral to DfE for further consideration.

4.2 The following changes in circumstances are likely to require an extended monitoring visit, at additional cost:

- change of 20 per cent or more of permanent teaching staff
- change of 30 per cent or more on the type of provision/course offered, including changes of awarding body/organisation
- where a provider had fewer than 50 higher education students, an increase in total student numbers⁶ of more than 50 students
- where a provider had more than 50 students,⁷ an increase in total student numbers by more than 20 per cent or 100 students, whichever is greater.

4.3 Additionally, QAA may be advised by the provider, the OfS or DfE of the following material changes:

- change of address
- acquisition of a new building or a new site
- extension of premises with an increase in capacity by 25 per cent or more
- change of legal or trading name
- change of principal and/or proprietor or equivalent
- merger with another provider.

4.4 Significant changes in student numbers or of type of provision, or notification of changes described in paragraphs 4.2 and 4.3 may require a partial or full review instead of an extended monitoring visit.

4.5 In addition, QAA may decide that an extended monitoring visit, partial or full review is required based on the evidence submitted in a provider's annual quality return, where this is insufficient to demonstrate that satisfactory progress is being made, or otherwise raises concerns about the provider's management of academic standards or quality; or where the DfE or the OfS raise concerns about the provider.

5 Concerns about the standards and quality of higher education

5.1 As well as undertaking reviews of higher education providers, QAA can also investigate concerns about the standards and quality of higher education provision, and the information that higher education providers produce about their learning opportunities. Where there is evidence of weaknesses that go beyond an isolated occurrence, and where the evidence suggests broader failings in the management of quality and standards, we can investigate. These concerns may be raised by students, staff, organisations, or anyone else. Further details about the Concerns Scheme are provided on our website.

5.2 When a concern becomes known to QAA in the immediate build up to a specific course designation monitoring visit, we may investigate the concern within that monitoring visit rather than conduct a separate investigation. If we choose to investigate through the monitoring visit, we will pass the information and accompanying evidence to the reviewers. QAA may need to extend the duration of the visit or add extra reviewers to the monitoring visit team. We will explain the nature of the concern to the provider and invite them to

⁶ Changes in student numbers should include all students studying at level 4 or above, whether or not they are on specifically designated courses, including international students.

⁷ Changes in student numbers should include all students studying at level 4 or above, whether or not they are on specifically designated courses, including international students.

provide a response to the reviewers. The reviewers' view of the validity and seriousness of the concern may affect the monitoring visit outcome.

5.3 Where a concern becomes known to QAA during a monitoring visit, we may investigate the concern during the monitoring visit. If we choose to investigate the concern in this way, we will pass the information and accompanying evidence to the reviewers. We will explain the nature of the concern to the provider and invite them to provide a response to the reviewers. The reviewers' view of the validity and seriousness of the concern may affect the monitoring visit outcome. Alternatively, we may choose to investigate the concern after the monitoring visit has ended and this may also affect the visit outcome, and delay publication of the visit report.

5.4 We may also use specific course designation monitoring visits to follow up on a provider's response to the outcomes of a Concerns full investigation following the publication of the investigation report, or its response to Concerns initial inquiries. If we intend to use the monitoring visit for this purpose, the QAA Officer will inform the provider and describe how the monitoring visit is likely to be affected. It may, for instance, involve the submission by the provider of additional evidence, or an additional meeting at the monitoring visit. The reviewers' view of the provider's response to the Concerns investigation may affect the monitoring visit's outcome.

Annex 1: Conclusions for the specific course designation quality monitoring process

Teams will draw a conclusion on the progress that has been made by the provider against their action plan, since the last review or annual monitoring visit and on working with relevant external reference points, following the criteria below. Conclusions reflect the provider's continuing management of academic standards, management and enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities, and the information it produces about the learning opportunities they offer.

The provider is making commendable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision.	The provider is making acceptable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision.	The provider is making progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision but further improvement is required.	The provider is not making acceptable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision.
The provider is maintaining the academic standards and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities of its provision.	The provider is maintaining the academic standards and quality of learning opportunities of its provision.	There are weaknesses in the provider's maintenance of the academic standards and/or quality of learning opportunities of its provision which have the potential to put academic standards and/or quality at risk.	There are weaknesses in the provider's maintenance of the academic standards and/or quality of learning opportunities of its provision which currently put academic standards and/or quality at risk.

<p>All actions (identified by a QAA team or by the provider through its own quality assurance processes) have been implemented fully and have led to improvements in the provider's management of its higher education.</p> <p>Where actions have not been completed fully, they are on target and progress towards achieving them can be demonstrated.</p>	<p>Most actions (identified by a QAA team or by the provider through its own quality assurance processes) have led to improvement. Actions that have not been addressed fully do not have the potential to put academic standards or quality at risk.</p>	<p>Actions that have not been addressed fully or effectively have the potential to put academic standards and/or quality at risk</p> <p>and/or</p> <p>the provider demonstrates insufficient engagement with relevant external reference points, including the Quality Code</p> <p>and/or</p>	<p>Actions that have not been addressed fully or effectively currently put academic standards and/or quality at risk.</p>
<p>The provider demonstrates highly effective engagement with relevant external reference points, including the Quality Code.</p>	<p>The provider demonstrates appropriate engagement with relevant external reference points, including the Quality Code.</p>	<p>improvement is required to ensure information produced by the provider for their intended audiences about the learning opportunities they offer is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy.</p>	
<p>Information produced by the provider for their intended audiences about the learning opportunities they offer is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy.</p>	<p>Information produced by the provider for their intended audiences about the learning opportunities they offer is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy.</p>		

Outcome of the monitoring visit			
<p>The provider may not receive a monitoring visit in the following year, if no material changes have taken place which may require a visit. (If a full review is due the following year, there is no exemption.)</p>	<p>The provider will receive a monitoring visit or review in the following year.</p>	<p>To maintain specific course designation, the provider must apply for and undergo a full Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) within six months of the publication of the outcome of the monitoring visit.</p>	<p>To maintain specific course designation, the provider must apply for and undergo a full Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) within a maximum of six months of the publication of the outcome of the monitoring visit.</p>

Annex 2: Annual monitoring for specific course designation: Monitoring process annual return form

Provider name	
Date of submission	

Please complete this form electronically and send to QAA by the date requested (normally 9-10 months after your last QAA visit or annual return). All comments in Sections 2-6 of this form should be supported by evidence. Please append all evidence to this document.

Important note: the provider should notify QAA **within 28 days** of any of the material changes outlined in section 2 taking place. Failure to do so will result in referral to the Department for Education for further consideration.

Section 1.1 - Student data

Please complete and return the AP data return, which will have been sent to you in advance.

In addition, please list below all higher education programmes (level 4 and above on one of the UK qualifications frameworks)⁸ currently offered, with the number of students currently studying on each programme. (Please note that level 3 qualifications should also be included if they are designed to enable entry to a specified degree programme on completion).

Course code	Programme title	Awarding body/ organisation	Award level	Date programme was approved	Current number of students (headcount)
XXXXX	<i>Example: HND Business Studies</i>	<i>Pearson</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>2010</i>	<i>25</i>
Total student numbers					

[Insert more rows as required]

Section 1.2 - Data commentary

Please provide a commentary on the information provided on the data return form and in the table above. The commentary should explain trends in recruitment, retention, completion and pass rates over the period covered by the data return form. This is in addition to any remarks in the 'Comments' column on the data return form, which are intended to clarify how the form has been completed.

⁸ The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ), the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF); the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF); and the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW)

[Type text here; expand as necessary. Please reference and append all supporting evidence.]

Section 2 - Recent changes

Please indicate if any of the following material changes have taken place since the last review or monitoring visit.

Material change (notify QAA within 28 days of one of these changes taking place)	Check box
For providers with fewer than 50 students at the last QAA visit, an increase in total student numbers (international and domestic) of more than 50 students	
For providers with 50 or more students at the last QAA visit, an increase in total student numbers (international and domestic) by more than 20 per cent, where this amounts to more than 100 students	
Change of 20 per cent or more of permanent teaching staff	
Change of 30 per cent or more on the type of provision/course offered, including changes of awarding body/organisation (calculated by student headcount on new programmes)	

If you have ticked any of the above, or have undergone any other changes relevant to QAA, please provide further details below.

[Type text here - expand as necessary. Please reference and append all supporting evidence.]

Section 3.1 - Update on the annual monitoring for specific course designation action plan and internal quality monitoring processes

<p>One year after a full review: please provide an evaluation of the impact of the actions taken in response to the good practice, affirmations and recommendations from the last review. Each good practice point, affirmation or recommendation should be accounted for separately.</p> <p>or</p>
<p>One or two years after a monitoring visit: please provide an evaluation of the effectiveness of the provider's actions to support continuous improvement, derived from the provider's own internal monitoring processes. Please also provide an update on any actions that had not been fully completed at the previous monitoring visit.</p>

Provide documentary evidence to demonstrate the achievement, success and internal evaluation of all actions taken. Please provide a copy of your action plan.

[Type text here - expand as necessary. Please reference and append all supporting evidence.]

Section 3.2 - Admission of students

The Quality Code sets out the following Expectation about recruitment, selection and admission to higher education, which higher education providers are required to meet.

- Recruitment, selection and admission policies and procedures adhere to the principles of fair admission. They are transparent, reliable, valid, inclusive and underpinned by appropriate organisational structures and processes. They support higher education providers in the selection of students who are able to complete their programme (Quality Code, *Chapter B2*).

Please comment on how you meet this Expectation in general, and specifically in regard to the following questions.

- How do you manage the recruitment process, including the use of agents (if applicable)?
- How do you ensure students have sufficient English language competence to complete their programme of study?
- How do you assess applicants' prior qualifications and their suitability to study the subject and academic level for which they are applying?
- How do you assess that applicants have a genuine intention to study?
- What processes are used to test the integrity of the admissions process?

[Type text here - expand as necessary. Please reference and append all supporting evidence.]

Section 3.3 - Assessment of students

The Quality Code sets out the following Expectation about the assessment of students and the recognition of prior learning, which higher education providers are required to meet.

- Higher education providers operate equitable, valid and reliable processes of assessment, including for the recognition of prior learning, which enable every student to demonstrate the extent to which they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the credit or qualification being sought (Quality Code, *Chapter B6*).

Please comment on how you meet this Expectation in general, and specifically in regard to the following questions.

- How do you assure that assessment is carried out with rigour and integrity, that students' work is genuine, and that students have not engaged in academic malpractice?
- How do internal and external verification processes ensure that student work is genuine, achieves the learning outcomes required and is marked fairly and securely?

[Type text here - expand as necessary. Please reference and append all supporting evidence.]

Section 4 - Other external reviews

Please provide details of any other external reviews/accreditations that have taken place since the last QAA review - for example, British Accreditation Council (BAC), Accreditation Service for International Colleges (ASIC), professional or statutory body, or awarding organisation - along with the outcomes (conditions, recommendations, and so on).

[Type text here - expand as necessary. Please reference and append all supporting evidence.]

Section 5 - The provider's use of relevant external reference points relating to academic standards and quality for higher education

Please provide details of how the provider has taken account of relevant external reference points, including the Quality Code, in managing its higher education provision. The existing Quality Code will continue to be used for the annual monitoring process for the 2018-19 academic year.

[Type text here - expand as necessary. Please reference and append all supporting evidence.]

Section 6 - Any other information

Please note any other information that may be relevant to the monitoring process.

[Type text here - expand as necessary. Please reference and append all supporting evidence.]

Appendices

Please list all evidence appended to this document.