

Terms of reference for UUK development of charter for enhancing portfolio reviews

The UK higher education sector has a reputation for excellence, our universities are a force for good in our society making a strong contribution to wellbeing, the economy, and communities. Research also shows that a degree provides a range of benefits for graduates who on average earn more, are less likely to be unemployed, and more likely to be engaged in civic and community life.

Universities want to enhance their impact further, and are committed to providing high quality and value, taking action to address any challenges that may undermine public confidence.

This includes ensuring students receive a high quality and high value university education. It is not in the interests of students or the higher education sector for low-value or low-quality provision to go unchecked. Something that has rightly also been a focus for the government in its review of post-18 education and training.

Universities are committed to providing well-designed courses that offer a high-quality academic experience for all students, with robust [assurance processes in place](#) for upholding quality and standards. In ensuring students receive a high-quality education, universities rightly focus on those areas, over which they have direct control and are wholly accountable for, in some cases in close partnership with professional bodies or other providers (for example course content, assessment, feedback, learning resources and facilities).

In contrast, assessing whether a course is high or low value is more challenging. The perception of value will depend on who is making the assessment, be that students, graduates, employers, or the government. While an assessment of value will incorporate measures of quality, it will be also be broader, more subjective and will reflect outcomes that may only come to light in the long term and are not within the direct control of institutions (for example, graduate career satisfaction, long term employment outcomes and earnings).

All universities undertake [monitoring and review of the programmes](#) they offer in considering how learning opportunities and outcomes for students from a diverse range of backgrounds may be enhanced. As part of these 'portfolio reviews', universities may consider a range of measures when assessing the value and quality of courses, from outcomes for students to alignment with strategic missions and goals – for example supporting local economies or public sector employers – or ensuring financial sustainability of courses.

To tackle courses where value or quality may be an issue, the sector should proactively strengthen these portfolio review processes.

Students and the public wish to be reassured that there is a consistent approach across the sector in assessing the value of courses as is the case with quality and standards. This should ensure that review processes are as strong as possible – integrating metrics reflecting value, in addition to quality of courses, and how this is delivered for the full diversity of students (for example student satisfaction, retention and employability rates) – and that rapid actions are taken where this may indicate ‘low-value’ or ‘low quality’ provision.

To support this, Universities UK is launching the development of a charter in England, for enhancing portfolio review processes to tackle ‘low-value’ provision.

This will:

- demonstrate the sector’s commitment to consistency and transparency in portfolio review processes, with a focus on providing high-value and high-quality sustainable courses
- highlight best practice where universities are currently identifying and acting on ‘low-value or low quality’ courses
- provide guidance that universities would be expected to follow in identifying and acting on ‘low value or low quality’ courses, including appropriate use of metrics and rapid actions to take, which may include closure, merging or reforming courses

Work will be undertaken in a staged process over 12 months. This will involve an initial focus over the course of 2020 and early 2021 on:

- Publication of a Statement of Intent signaling the sectors commitment to taking strong action in tackling ‘low value or low quality’ courses, through enhancement of portfolio review processes
- Identifying best practice in how universities identify and tackle ‘low value or low quality’ courses, including the use of metrics and benchmarking and the approaches that support rapid action in addressing issues

Further work over the course of 2021 will focus on:

- Publishing guidance, informed by best practice, on enhancing portfolio review processes that universities will be expected to follow in tackling low value or low-quality courses
- Exploration of options for a longer-term ongoing charter for enhancing portfolio review processes to tackle ‘low-value or low quality’ provision, including facilitating peer support for universities, benchmarking and potential options for external assurance or independent review and recognition of progress.

It is envisaged that the principles and aims outlined in the Statement of Intent, will represent a binding commitment by the sector to action in tackling 'low value or low quality' provision.

As autonomous institutions universities will decide how they achieve this in practise, and approaches will reflect the diversity of universities and students across the sector, however it is expected that the guidance published as part of this work will be a key part in informing this. As part of the longer-term development of a charter, options for recognising and highlighting where institutions are taking best practise approaches will be considered.

The work will be led by a working group of UUK members, engaging closely with key stakeholders across institutions and wider sector organisations. The group will be responsible for overseeing development of the statement of intent and guidance, and in exploring longer term development of a charter for enhancing portfolio review processes to tackle provision where value or quality may be an issue.

The advisory group currently comprises of the following UUK members:

- Professor Julia Buckingham CBE (Chair of advisory group), Brunel University London
- Professor Graham Baldwin, University of Central Lancashire
- Professor Dame Janet Beer DBE, University of Liverpool
- Professor Frances Corner OBE, Goldsmiths University of London
- Professor Susan Lea, University of Hull
- Professor Edward Peck, Nottingham Trent University
- Professor Malcolm Press, Manchester Metropolitan University
- Professor Lisa Roberts, University of Exeter
- Professor Andy Schofield, Lancaster University
- Professor Mark Smith CBE, University of Southampton
- Professor Wendy Thomson CBE, University of London

While development of the charter will focus on England, it will also consider UK-wide implications and involve engagement with institutions across the UK, including areas of best practice that can be drawn from the devolved administrations.