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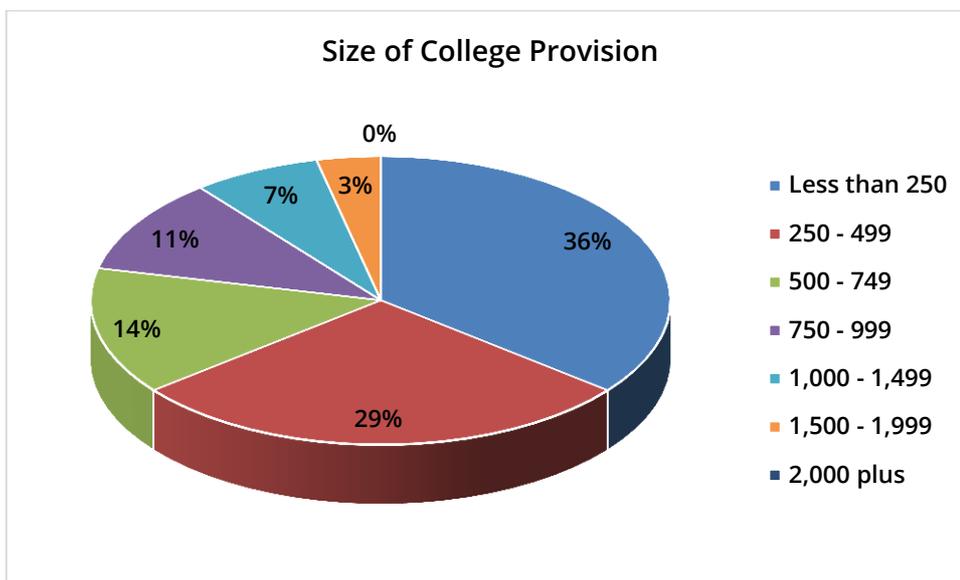
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AoC Survey of Colleges' Experience of the QAA Higher Education Review

March 2015

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This survey has been conducted by AoC to inform its response to HEFCE's review of future approaches to quality assessment in HE. 41 colleges which had undergone the new review process in 2013 and 2014 were consulted and 28 responded. Of these 22 were GFE, five were landbased and one was a sixth form college. The size of provision is distributed as shown with the largest group of contributors deriving from the smallest provision.



The survey is two parts: the first section deals with responses to the review experience and the second section canvasses views from the colleges on key elements and principles of the quality assurance (QA) process. The survey has elicited a widely nuanced range of perspectives. Please note that in Section 1 comments were only solicited in respect of less favourable responses.

Executive Summary

1. Overall the colleges demonstrated a very positive engagement with the review process.
2. However, colleges did identify some of the discrete problems they had experienced during review. These were mainly logistical, related to the size of provision and emerged from cultural differences.
3. In terms of the principles underpinning Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Higher Education Review (HER) the main area of contention is the degree to which the review focuses on learning and teaching with many colleges favouring involvement in the classroom, though not necessarily at the expense of the scrutiny of systems.
4. The survey also elicited concerns around the specific nature of college HE and how far any review system could and should flex to accommodate different kinds of provision. This was evident in, for example, responses about the way review might take account of the college mission statement.
5. Colleges were also keen to make suggestions to improve the fit between the current review system and college HE.

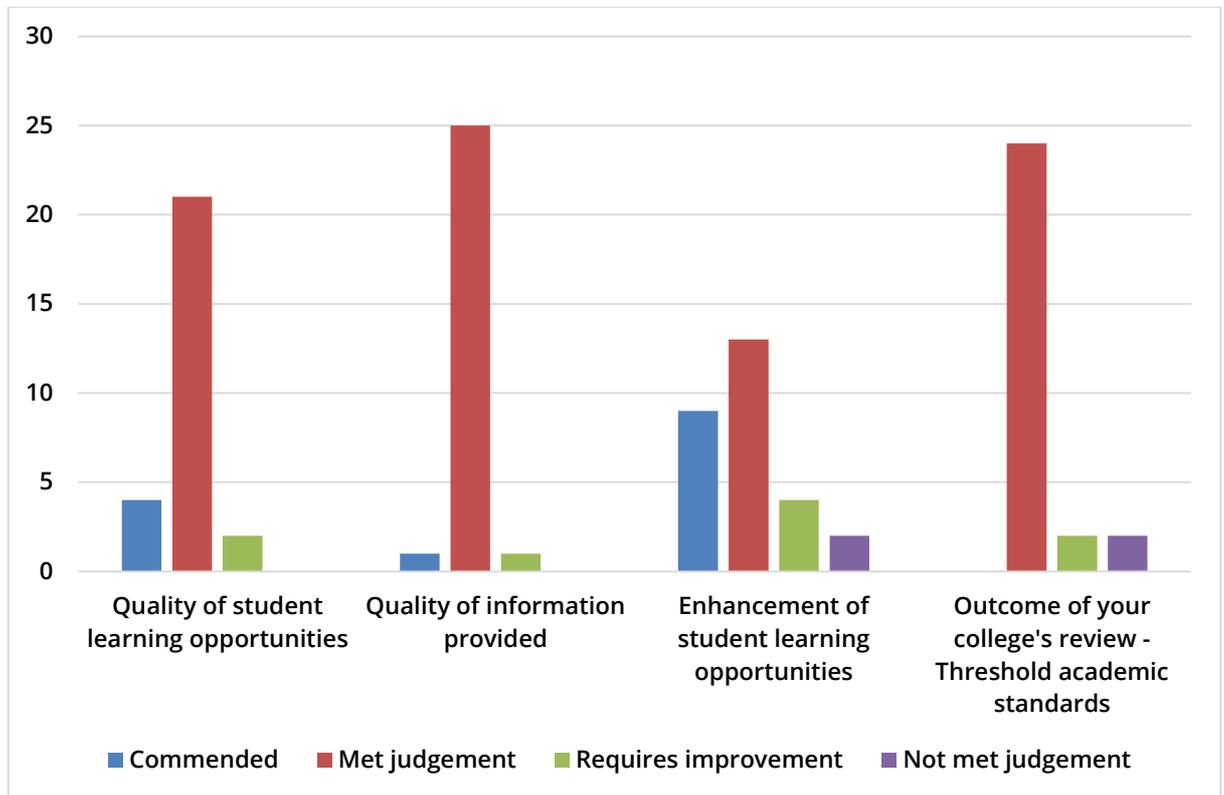
Introduction

While the review process had not been problem free for some colleges, overall the survey demonstrated a high degree of satisfaction with HER. Colleges were also thoughtful about the wider issues underpinning HER and this was at its clearest in the issue of the whether review should include learner outcomes or focus on systems. Many colleges while accepting the logic of HER felt that some scrutiny of provision was nearer to the values and modus operandi of college HE. There was also an interesting debate around the review principles in terms of the contending needs for absolute standards on the one hand and the accommodation of individual circumstances on the other. The perception that college HE has a specific culture and ethic which were not always taken account of in the review process appears from time to time in individual concerns and in a close difference of opinion about whether the college mission should be included in the review. While the experience of HER reviews is positive for the majority there is for some respondents an underlying question about the capacity of the system to take account of different cultures and deal with them even-handedly.

SECTION 1

Questions 6 and 7

Outcome of your college's review

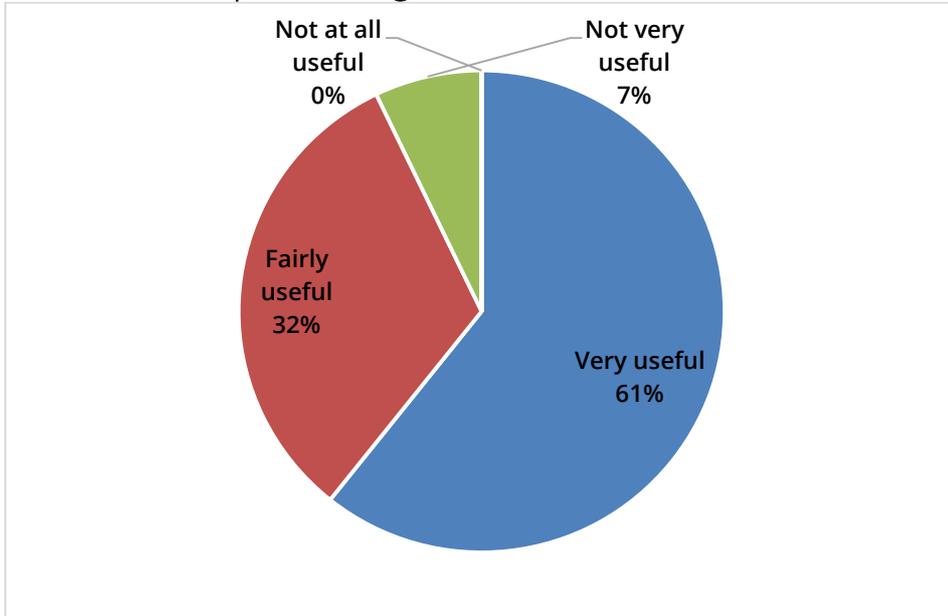


Overall six colleges sustained an adverse judgement in one or more of the four areas. 24 respondents met the threshold and there were 14 commendations across all judgment areas.

Paradoxically enhancement was the area which generated most difficulty but also the most commendations. It is not possible to relate size of provision to outcomes as, of the six colleges which received an adverse judgment, two were of moderate size and four had the smallest level of provision, while colleges in all size categories received commendations. It is worth noting that four of the land based colleges were commended in one or more areas.

Question 8

Please rate the usefulness of your preparatory advice meeting with QAA before the HER process began

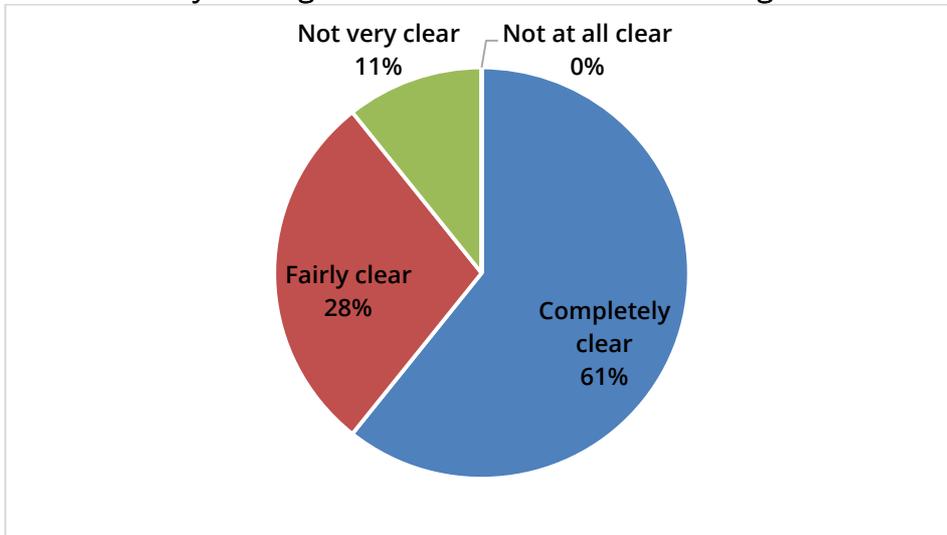


There is a consensus that the preparatory meetings have a good level of usefulness.¹ The two colleges that did not find the meeting very useful are at opposite ends of the size range.

¹ 17 colleges found the visit very useful and nine colleges found it fairly useful.

Question 9

Did you feel that after the preparatory meeting with QAA you were clear about what criteria your organisation was to be reviewed against?

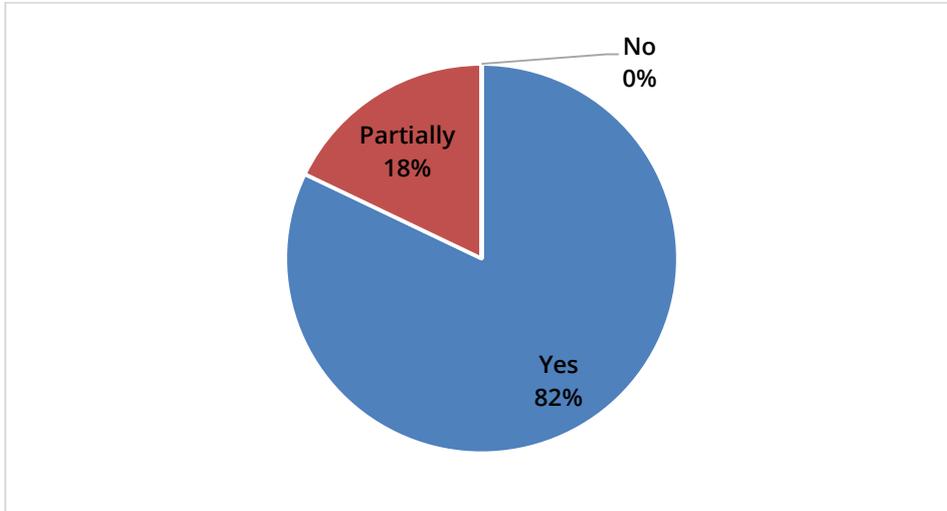


The response was very similar to that of the last question with a consensus² around the clarity of the criteria against which review would take place. The two colleges who had found the preparatory visit not very useful also found the criteria not very clear. However, three colleges who found the visit very useful found the criteria only fairly clear and three colleges who found the visit fairly useful found the criteria completely clear. This implies that the perceived success of a preparatory visit does not always imply equal success in clarifying criteria and vice versa.

² 17 colleges were completely clear and eight colleges fairly clear.

Question 10

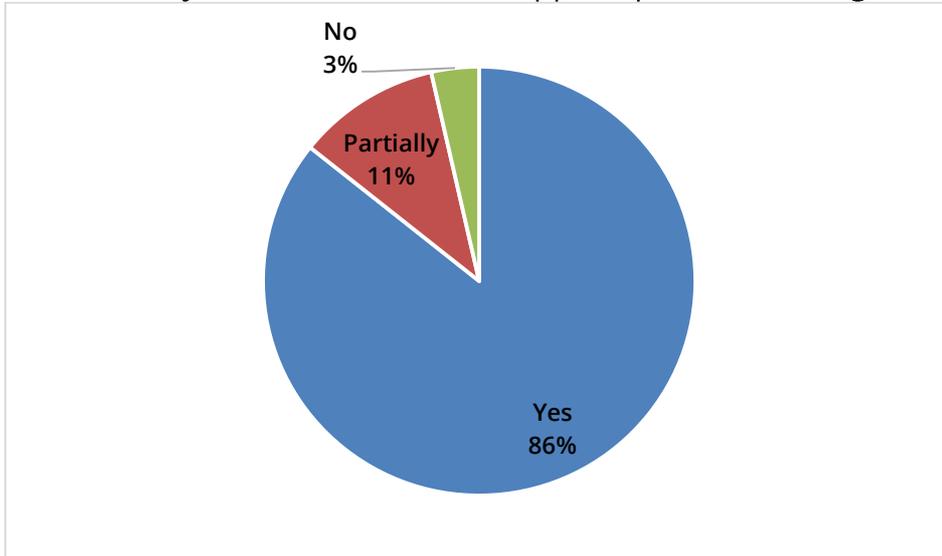
Did you receive clear instructions of what documents you needed to send before the visit?



Most colleges were happy with the instructions. Five colleges said that the instructions were only partially clear. One college commented on the lack of a list of required documentation, having been asked for the validating university's policies and procedures together with "many additional examples of meeting minutes etc." Another said that expectations were not clear in terms of quantity or breadth of documentation and it would have been helpful if they had been told that QAA wished to see everything from the last three years. Four other colleges commented on the amount of supplementary information required describing it as "excessive and unexpected", "time intensive" and difficult for a small college to manage.

Question 11

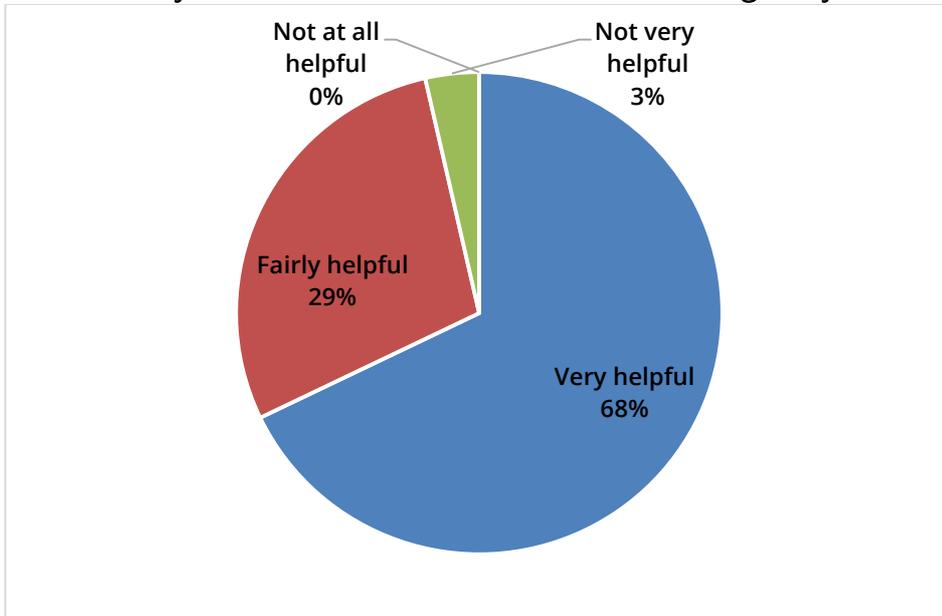
Did you feel that you had the opportunity to prepare and provide additional documentary evidence needed to support questions during the visit?



Again the majority of colleges answered affirmatively with only three agreeing partially and one, who did not comment, negatively. One respondent welcomed the fact that they could provide information during the period when QAA released the lines of enquiry. Another said that they were asked for very little and online information was not looked at, while a third remarked that while they were able to provide everything which was requested it was not always clear what reviewers thought was missing.

Question 12

How would you describe how the review was managed by the interview team?

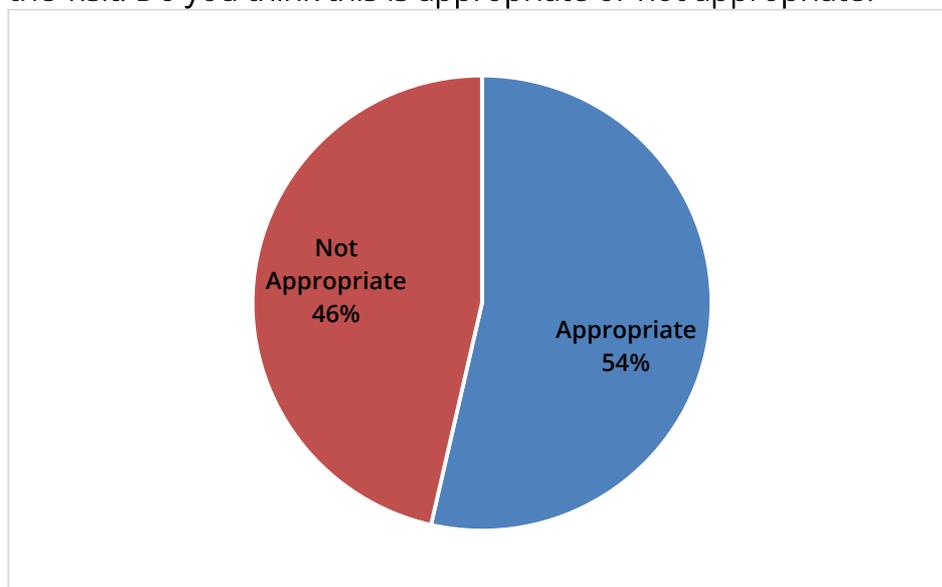


The colleges were supportive of the process with 19 finding it very helpful and eight fairly helpful. Only one college³ found it not very helpful. Five colleges commented, three of whom had responded, that the visit was very helpful and two who had found it fairly helpful. Colleges appreciated that the teams were supportive and professional and worked well with college staff, that there was a clear order for each day and that reviewers showed their understanding of the preparatory documentation. However one college said the staff found reviewers distant and students were quite intimidated while another pointed out that though the visit was “fine” as they were at the beginning of the cycle their preparation had been hampered by the unavailability of the final version of the review handbook.

³ This college has small provision, sustained an adverse judgment and has returned largely negative responses to the process

Question 13

In the QAA HER process reviewers are advised not to provide feedback during the visit. Do you think this is appropriate or not appropriate?



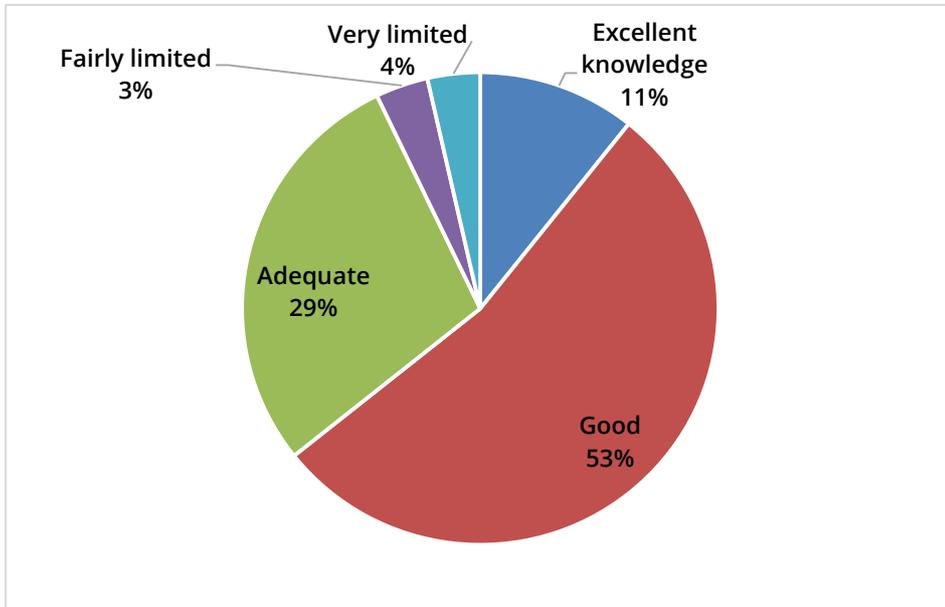
Opinions were fairly equally divided (15 colleges to 13) with the small majority in favour of not providing feedback. Of the 15 comments, nine were from colleges who found the lack of feedback inappropriate.

Those who favoured the status quo felt that feedback might have biased the response of the HE team, and that it would be preferable to wait for an outcome based on sufficient reflection. However two of those who favoured the status quo also felt that there could be some relaxation to deliver some feedback at the end of the visit and one college said that it had been made clear that there was to be no feedback but it would have been good to have had some.

Those that felt feedback was appropriate argued that staff were left without any indication of their performance, that a two-week wait seemed unnecessary, and that QAA was out of line with other organisations such as OFSTED. One college commented that as the process is characterised as peer review leading to improvement feedback during the review process is essential and would enable more rapid progress on changing processes. Another made the point that while the college had not expected feedback it would have enabled staff to provide better evidence to the panel. Suggestions for involving feedback in the review process included a summary on each day, headline judgments for the four main areas, a provisional top-line indication at the end of the visit, and findings given without formal statements of outcomes.

Question 14

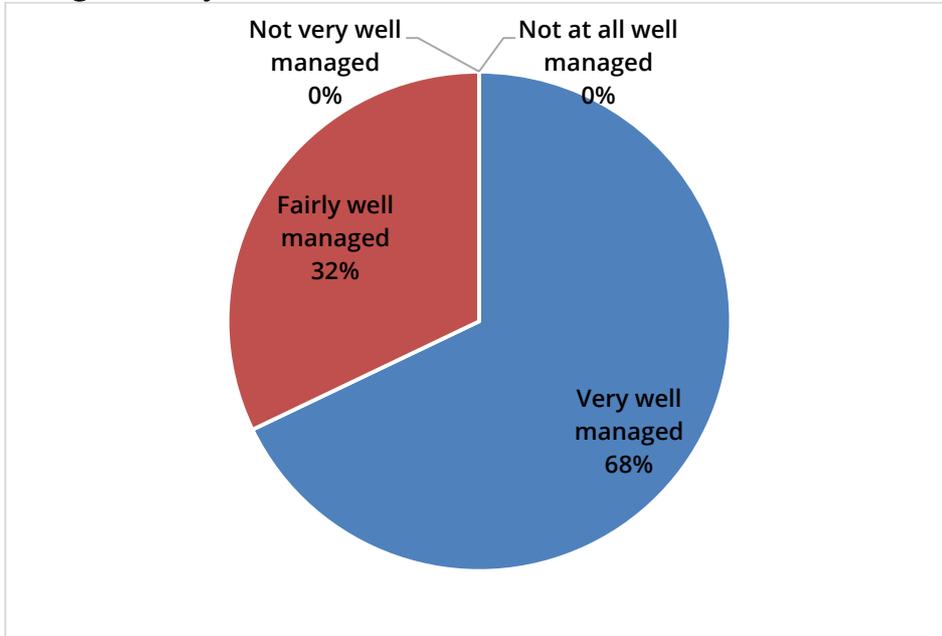
How would you describe the review team's level of knowledge of college HE and vocational and technical education?



A comfortable majority of colleges thought this was excellent (three) or good (15) but ten colleges were less positive with eight colleges considering levels of knowledge on vocational and technical education adequate, one fairly limited and one very limited. Colleges were not invited to comment.

Question 15

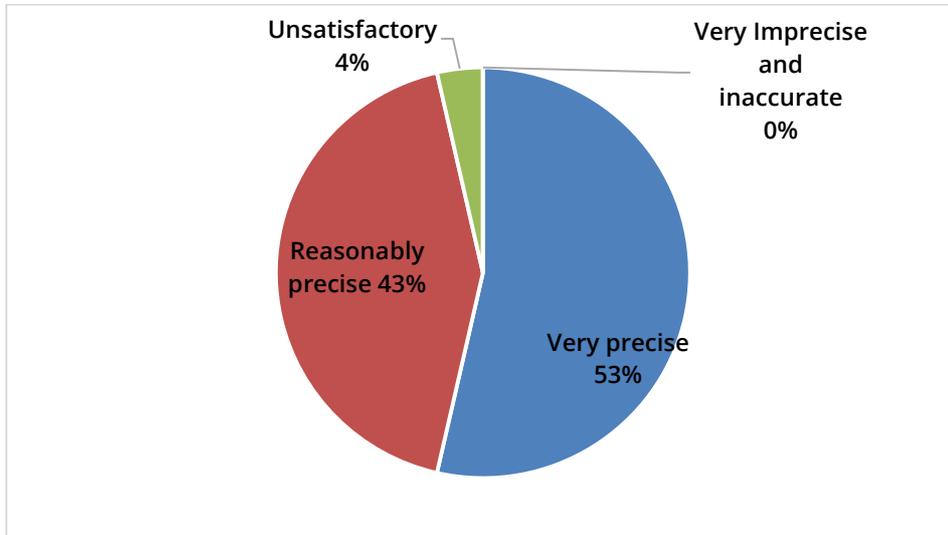
How would you describe the management of the various review meetings with college staff by the review team?



The response to this question was completely positive with 19 and nine responding that the review was very well or fairly well managed. Colleges were not invited to comment.

Question 16

How would you describe the quality of your draft report provided after the visit?



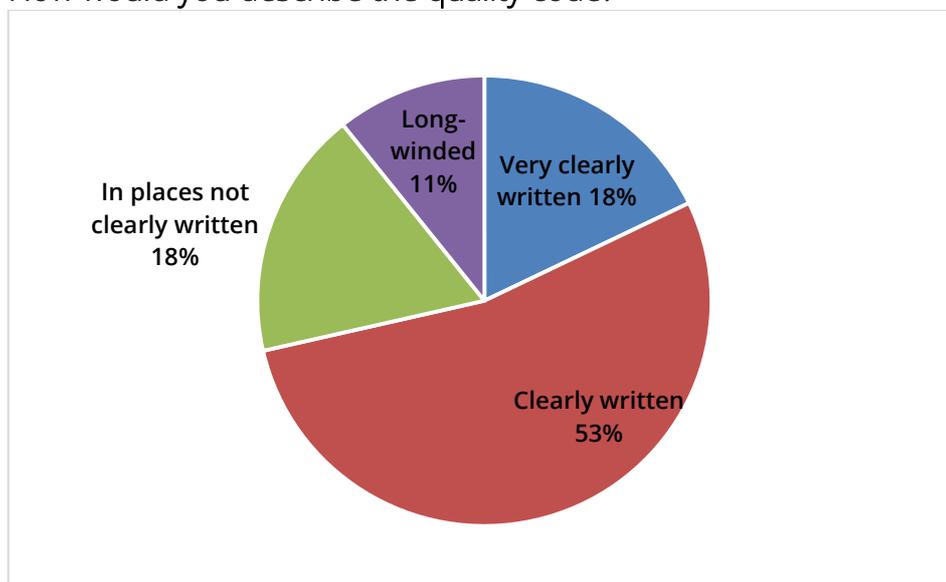
The response was almost completely positive with 15 colleges finding the report “very precise and accurate with clear evidence to support judgments in the text” and 12 finding the report “reasonably precise and accurate with evidence to support judgments in the text”. Only one college considered the report “unsatisfactory - a combination of several inaccuracies and limited provision”.

The comments ranged from four colleges pointing out that while they requested amendments these were for minor changes such as titles and the occasional factual inaccuracy to one college complaining of several inaccuracies and limited precision. One college pointed out that the structured approach to writing the SED enabled reviewers to access the relevant evidence. There were a few issues around perception with one college with a small provision feeling that sometimes the reviewers had not understood the way college HE operated alongside FE and another that “a misconception of the facts” still remained in the report. One college observed that the report was not couched in accessible language, and required a degree of interpretation before the findings could be understood.

SECTION 2

Question 17

How would you describe the quality code?

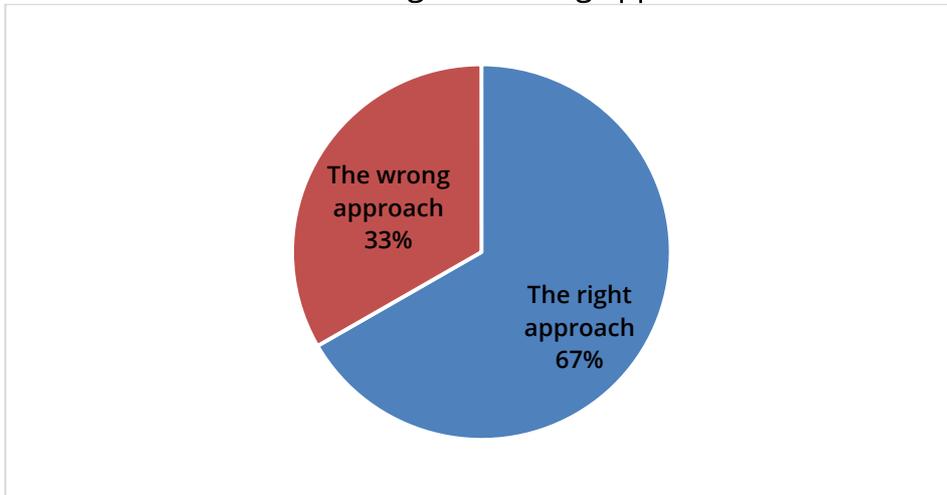


While the response to the quality code was very largely favourable there was a degree of dissent. Twenty colleges found the quality code either “very clearly written and fit for purpose” or “clearly written and fit for purpose”. Five colleges found it “in places not clearly written and some sections not fit for purpose” and three found it “long winded and difficult to interpret”.

Of the 11 comments, three included positive responses to the code as an improvement on previous iterations, to the guidance for reading around the topics, and to the way in which the key areas (expectations, indicators, further guidance) deliver appropriate levels of information. The two main criticisms are that it is too long to be a working document and is repetitious with elements repeated across chapters, creating complications for the production of the SED. Specific problems included inconsistencies between chapters of the QAA Quality Code in relation to the varying number and range of indicators, confusion in Part A for institutions without awarding powers, and difficulty in quantifying elements of B3 when preparing evidence. Additionally three colleges questioned whether a code written for the breadth and diversity of the HE sector is appropriate for college HE, given that it requires “some interpretation as to how the relevant expectations relate to the college HE context”.

Question 18

QAA HER is inclined to concentrate and check on internal processes rather than outcomes. Is this the right or wrong approach?



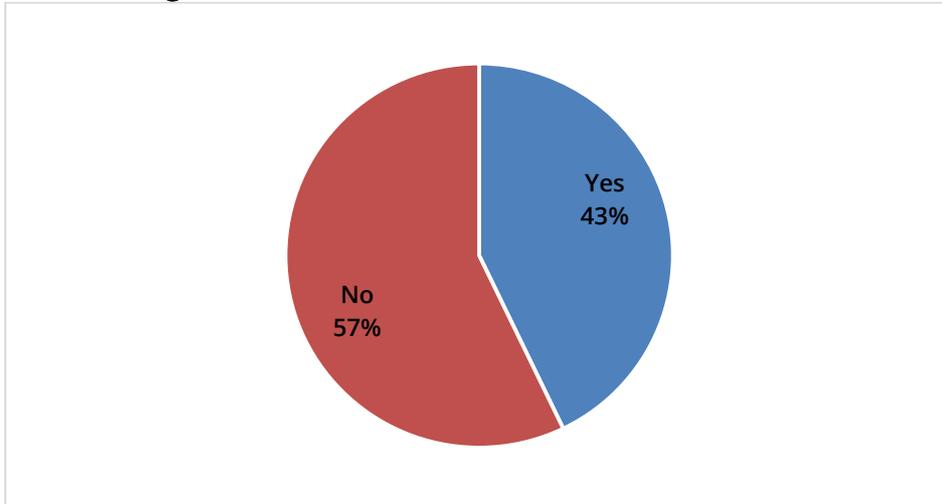
While the responses split 18 to nine in favour of the current process the 19 comments suggested that the issue was more complex.⁴ The debate turned largely on whether assessment of quality systems yields an assurance of quality in teaching and learning or whether the QAA should also look at provision. Two colleges were unequivocally happy with the status quo, pointing out that QAA's role is to ensure appropriate processes are in place to manage, monitor and enhance student learning opportunities. The remaining responses, while acknowledging that the current process does not exclude some consideration of outcomes, demonstrated some ambivalence. Most argued that outcomes were evidence of the robustness of the quality systems and that while the focus on process was important there should also be a focus on outcomes either through more extensive discussion of evidence related to student learning or, for most colleges, a scrutiny of learning and teaching in action.

One college commented that it depended whether the Government wanted to find out about the standardization of systems or the effective education of students. The consensus, however, was for a balanced approach which incorporated a review of systems and processes together with some engagement with provision and/or discussion of outcomes for learners. In some answers there was a sense that outcomes were more relevant and familiar territory for FE.

⁴ Five out of the six colleges which received adverse judgments felt QAA had adopted the wrong approach.

Question 19

Should external QA in HE concentrate more on reviewing against the mission of the college?



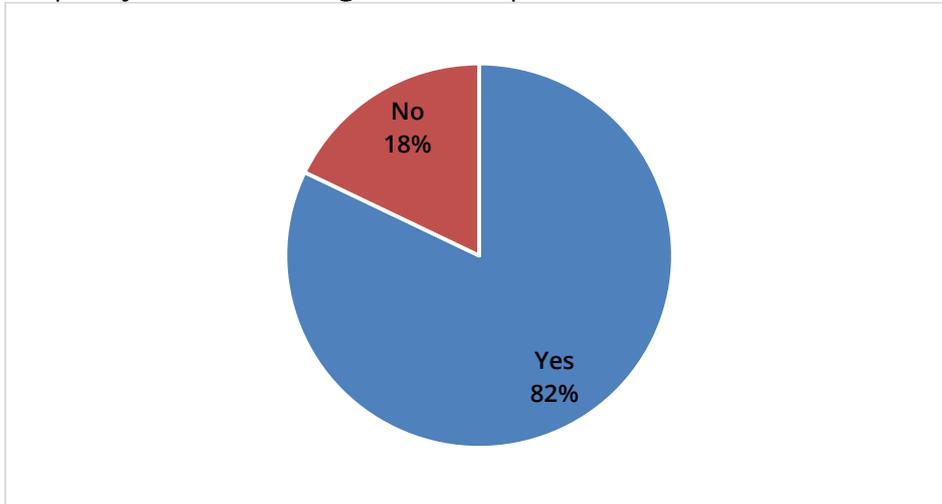
There was a fairly balanced split in the responses with 16 against the proposal and 12 in favour. All of the colleges with adverse judgments were in the latter category. There were 19 comments.

Some respondents pointed out that the process already involves some focus on the mission and the mission can include a focus on quality. The main argument against a mission-focused review was that the mission was “broad brush” and not HE specific, it was liable to change, and as it provided a position against other providers there was a diversity of mission statements across the sector which would complicate HER processes. Other comments turned on the need for uniform quality measures with one college stating that the quality should be good regardless of the college’s mission.

The arguments for a mission focussed review were that it would provide an appropriate context, identify the core values of the college which informed provision, and create a better understanding of the nature of HE in FE.

Question 20

Can one external QA review method be used to make an accurate assessment of quality and still hold good for all providers?



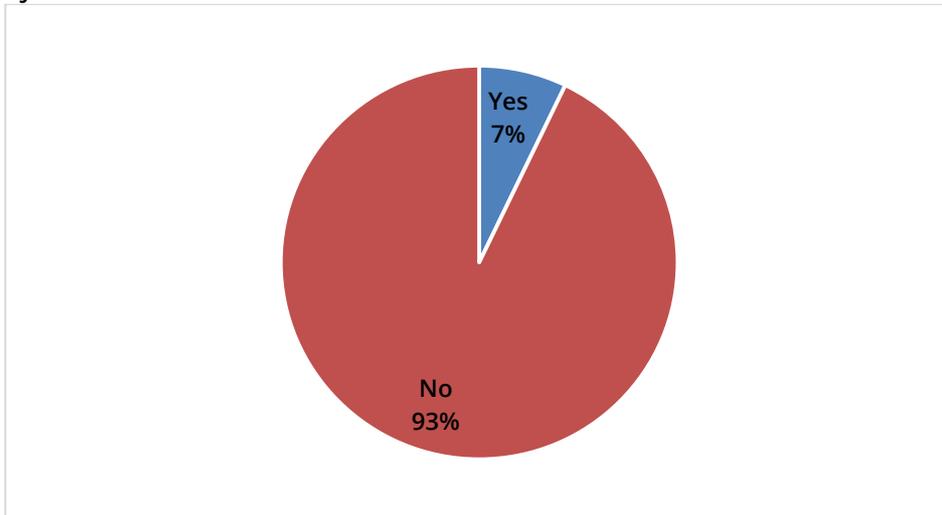
This question returned a significant positive response from 23 colleges. There were 20 comments.

The comments in favour focused on the uniformity of the standard and judgment operating against the quality code which facilitated comparability. It was acknowledged that there were differences between providers but that they should be assessable under the same process, that the review methodology had scope for providers to explain their approach, and that the main issue was the fair and consistent operation of the review system. The possibility of a variety of methodologies tailored to different kinds of HE provision was seen as potentially delivering a less authoritative and transparent system. One college with experience of both Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review and HER found HER more rigorous.

Nevertheless there were still residual concerns about the omission of a focus on outcomes in the methodology, the reviewers' understanding of HE in FE and the ability of colleges to be confident about their interpretations of the quality code. One college with less than 50 part-time students suggested that reviewers might be more sensitive to the difficulty of student availability. Two colleges remarked that IQER or some other more tailored methodology was more appropriate for colleges as HER was designed for universities.

Question 21

Is it possible to assess and accredit an institution's internal quality assurance system without some form of review visit?



26 colleges felt that a review visit was essential. The main argument concerned the need to see the reality which underpins the college's documentation so that the latter is critiqued by the former. The preview process was seen as providing opportunity for cross correlation with inputs at all levels, enabling staff to elaborate on the documentation and stakeholders to engage with the system, promulgating a supportive and developmental approach, and reinforcing the quality process.

Some comments suggested that it would be possible to operate without a visit as most judgments were based on paperwork, although this, together with the suggestion of using Skype, were not seen as necessarily desirable.

Question 22

To what extent do you think the student centred engagement in the HER process can be gauged through the inclusion of student reviews?

22 colleges responded. The question caused some respondents a little difficulty as they were not confident whether it referred to student reviews or reviewers. Most respondents assumed both.

This was a contested area for the colleges. While the majority of responses thought that the student reviews were a positive means of ensuring student engagement in the process, there was a significant minority who were either negative or felt that the student review had limited value. One logistical problem was the availability of students: small cohorts and students off campus, the lack of a student union, and reviews held outside the academic year all created difficulties. The student review process had also proved difficult for some colleges: individual colleges variously stated that the student reviewer was not involved by the review team, was not present at the review, used “overly formalised language”, asked standardised questions, and that students felt intimidated and did not engage as much as they could have. The wider issue of the sample and how representative it was of student opinion was raised by several respondents.

However, there was a range of positive comments. The student written submission was seen as beneficial, the involvement of student reviewers was welcome and described as constituting “an excellent and balanced approach” and the student engagement element in the review was very positive. Colleges were pleased that the student experience was placed at the centre of discussions and felt confident that the judgments made were informed by the student views appropriately cross correlated with other evidence.

Question 23

How could employers be more involved in the review process?

26 of the 28 colleges responded to this question with a majority in favour of more effective engagement. There was a general sense that employer engagement provided colleges with a good opportunity to showcase their work with employers and it was pointed out by some institutions that the HER rubric allows colleges flexibility on the amount of employer participation. One college described how their employers had been fully engaged in the process, actively expressing their views to the reviewers and acting as critical friends to the college.

Another college, however, was surprised that employer views were not more central to the review and said that their employers felt excluded from the process. Yet another college said that decisions by the students about their involvement in the quality process had meant that there was no involvement by employers. As with student participation there were logistical issues concerning the availability of employers and appropriateness issues around the match of the potential multiplicity of employers to lines of questioning and their ability to engage with QAA discourse.

However, the main discussion was not so much whether there should be further engagement but how to refine the current practice. Suggestions included surveying employers as part of the process, facilitating an employer written submission, the involvement of an “employer reviewer” with a possible role in establishing the development of employability within the enhancement of learning opportunities, meeting with appropriate employer representatives to consider employability in relation to specific occupations, taking the review to the workplace, and engaging employers earlier in the process along with guidance - or even on-line training - from the review team on the level of involvement expected.

Question 24

What could be the characteristics of a quality assessment system that would incentivise, support and recognise outstanding learning and teaching?

This question was answered by 20 of the 28 colleges and reiterated some of the points made earlier about the appropriate focus for external quality review. However, as with the previous debate in Question 18 many who felt that some combination of a systems based and an outcomes based approach would lead to an appropriate recognition of learning and teaching quality.

A number of colleges advocated a quasi OFSTED or outcomes based review, a revival of IQER, or the incorporation of learning and teaching observations into the process, which could be undertaken in association with HEA or aligned to the UK Professional Standards framework. This approach, it was felt, would deliver the appropriate metrics for measuring teaching and learning and through national recognition drive reward and recognition for high quality practitioners. Two colleges were more favourably disposed to developing peer review rather than an OFSTED type process, feeling that this would make for a better professional exchange, but it needed to involve reviewers who had similar backgrounds to college staff and an element of peer teaching observation.

However, one college commented that the system already supported excellence in teaching and learning, identifying good practice in approaches to its enhancement, while another commented that providers should be encouraged to develop their systems and evaluate their own approach to supporting quality in learning and teaching. Others felt that some combination of quantitative and qualitative processes would make for a “more rounded and balanced approach to QA” or that a review of teaching and learning observations should be adopted.

Conclusion

While the review process had played differently in different colleges, there was a considerable degree of support for the process as it had been implemented. Colleges which had received adverse judgments were less favourably inclined, some experiences had been better than others, and there was some sense that smaller colleges had size-related difficulties but in the main colleges found the process positive, efficient, and comprehensible.

This does not mean that they believe it to be the best process. The debate about the inclusion of outcomes was strongly contested as was the issue over the degree to which a quality review system should accommodate difference and/or apply absolute standards. However, the plethora of suggestions for improvement is testimony to the colleges' buy-in to the quality review process and their willingness to make it yet more effective in relation to the individual culture of college HE.



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