

26 May 2022

Assessors and Lead Assessors – quality of higher education courses

The Office for Students

The Office for Students (OfS) was established by the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (HERA) and became fully operational in April 2018. The OfS's primary aim is to ensure that English higher education is delivering positive outcomes for students – past, present, and future. Our objectives are to ensure that students, from all backgrounds, particularly those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds:

- are supported to access, succeed in, and progress from, higher education
- receive high quality academic experience and their interests are protected while they study or in the event of provider, campus or course closure
- are able to progress into employment or further study, and their qualifications hold their value over time
- receive value for money.

Driving up quality

The OfS has recently announced changes to our regulation of quality in English higher education providers, following comprehensive consultation.¹ These changes, encapsulated in our revised 'B' conditions of registration, came into effect on 1 May 2022. The revised B conditions set out our minimum requirements for quality.² They will allow us to intervene where higher education courses fall below our expectations and help us to ensure that all students, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, have meaningful choices of high quality courses and are effectively supported to succeed.

We are now initiating a programme of work in 2022-23, through which we will identify individual universities and colleges that may not be meeting our minimum requirements. This work reflects our risk-based approach to regulation, set out in the regulatory framework and articulated in the published outcomes from our recent consultations on our approach to the regulation of quality. We are seeking experienced academics to help us assess the quality of higher education courses in these circumstances. In particular, we are looking for academic experts willing and able to

¹ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultation-on-quality-and-standards-conditions-outcomes/

² The OfS has also consulted on setting minimum requirements for the outcomes that universities and colleges deliver for students (under proposed revisions to initial and general ongoing condition of registration B3). We expect to publish the outcomes of that consultation, together with any revised conditions of registration, in Summer 2022. These assessor roles do not relate to investigations in relation to B3.

challenge established norms where these are not delivering a high quality academic experience for students.

As part of a team, you will use your expert academic judgement to assess whether, for example, a particular course provides educational challenge and is effectively delivered. This might include considering whether the balance of learning activities is appropriate, or whether students are sufficiently independent in their learning. Or we might ask you to judge whether students on a particular course are assessed effectively, in a way that provides stretch and rigour consistent with the level of the course.

We may ask you to judge what more a provider needs to do to meet our minimum requirements, if you consider that they may not yet be met. Or, where you consider that the requirements are likely to be met, what more a provider needs to do to meet them more securely.

We are much less interested in an institution's quality assurance arrangements, and we will want you to focus on academic rather than administrative matters.

Your expert judgements will inform our regulatory decision-making. They will underpin our decisions about whether quality is good enough to register a provider on the OfS Register. Or whether we need to take action to ensure that a provider is meeting our quality requirements at all or more securely. You will therefore play a key role in identifying issues that need to be improved at providers that are not meeting our minimum requirements for quality. In turn, you will play an integral role in driving up the quality of higher education across the sector and so in safeguarding the reputation of English higher education.

Your expertise

You will be an academic expert, with experience in designing and delivering learning, teaching and assessment in higher education. You may be an expert within your academic discipline, or you may have experience across disciplines, and in one or more institutions. Either way, you will be able to use your expertise, both subject specific expertise and broader pedagogical expertise, to reach academic judgements about the quality of higher education in a range of different contexts. You may be at the beginning of your academic career or have more extensive experience.

You will be employed by a higher education provider as academic staff, or have recently been employed as such. We are particularly interested in applications from those from a university or college with the strongest performance in providing a high quality student experience which enables positive student outcomes.

Where your subject specific expertise relates to an area in which doctoral-level qualifications are the norm for academic staff, we will expect you to be qualified to doctoral level. Where your expertise is in a subject area in which there is a greater variation in the qualifications of academic staff, we will expect you to have expertise that is equivalent to doctoral-level qualification if you do not hold a qualification itself.

We are not seeking expertise in the design and operation of quality assurance processes. We are seeking academics who are able to reach and explain robust and defensible academic judgements, focusing on the learning, teaching and assessment provided for students, rather than the processes that the provider follows to deliver those things.

You will be able to contribute to designing the scope of an investigation, identifying questions and themes for exploration through meetings with staff and students, and by scrutiny of course documents and other written material. You will also have excellent drafting skills, with the ability to describe complex evidence, the judgements you have reached about that evidence, and the reasons for your conclusions.

Successful applicants will also be able to demonstrate the ability to work within a team, to reach collective academic judgements.

In this recruitment round, we are particularly, but not only, interested in hearing from applicants who have academic expertise in subject areas relating to business and management.

Available roles

We are recruiting to a panel of expert academic assessors. The panel will be constituted as a committee of the OfS board. Appointment will be for a one year period, initially, with the possibility of reappointment.

For each investigation of a university or college, we will select assessors from the panel, based on their specific skills, experience and expertise, their availability and the nature of the issue(s) to be investigated.

Assessors will work as part of a small investigation team, led by a lead assessor.

In this recruitment round we are seeking assessors and lead assessors and applicants will have an opportunity to express interest in one or both roles. Unless the context requires otherwise, references in this document to 'assessor', includes 'lead assessor'.

Time commitment and remuneration

For each investigation undertaken in 2022-23:

- Assessors will be remunerated at a flat fee, calculated as £430 x number of days set out by the OfS in advance.
- Lead assessors will be remunerated at a flat fee, calculated as £480 x number of days set out by the OfS in advance.

The estimated time commitment for each investigation in 2022-23 is 9 to 11 days, with 2 to 3 additional days for lead assessors for preparation of the investigation report. The time commitment may include training and some overnight travel to visit a provider's premises, and may vary depending on the scope of the investigation. The flat fee payable for an investigation will be set out in advance.

Lead assessors may also have a role in the quality assurance and moderation of reports of investigations in which they have not participated. They will be remunerated at the same applicable lead assessor rate for this activity, and the time-commitment for that work will be agreed with the OfS.

Lead assessors may be asked to participate in investigations in an assessor role, and will then be remunerated at the applicable assessor rate rather than the lead assessor rate.

Training and continuing professional development

Each assessor will be required to undertake initial training in the OfS's regulatory approach, the requirements we impose for quality and how these may relate to your academic expertise, and investigation methods. Each assessor will also be required to maintain their knowledge through continuing professional development activities.

Assessors will be remunerated for training activities.

Application process and other requirements

Each applicant will be required to upload a CV and answer some online questions setting out how they meet the experience, knowledge and skills requirements of the role(s) for which they are applying (assessor and/or lead assessor).

Applicants who are shortlisted will be invited to participate in an assessment centre. The OfS will pay reasonable expenses for attendance at the assessment centre. Successful applicants will be appointed to our pool of assessors.

We may wish to retain applications from applicants who are not appointed at this stage, in our application pool for further consideration in subsequent recruitment rounds when, for example, our business needs may require academic expertise in other subject areas. We will contact relevant applicants if this is the case.

The deadline for receipt of applications in this initial recruitment round is **24 June 2022**.

Role description

Assessors:

- Working effectively as part of a team to reach academic judgements about the quality of a provider's higher education courses, in accordance with the relevant investigation scope and the OfS's regulatory requirements.
- Identifying, analysing and triangulating relevant quantitative and qualitative information, which may be imperfect or contradictory, to reach robust and defensible judgements which are well-reasoned, evidence-based and outcomes-focused.
- Attending meetings with provider representatives, students and OfS staff, either in person or remotely (via Microsoft Teams, Zoom, etc.).
- Contributing to the writing of an investigation report setting out the investigation team's judgements, writing in a rigorous and coherent style and in accordance with the OfS's requirements.
- Contributing to the ongoing evaluation and development of the OfS's approach to the assessment of quality.
- Maintaining confidentiality in accordance with the OfS's requirements and relevant data protection laws.

Additional responsibilities for lead assessors

- Responsibility for the conduct of investigations, commanding the confidence of teams and ensuring the maintenance of appropriate standards of professional conduct by assessors.
- Acting as a professional mentor to assessors, monitoring the quality of their work and investigatory approach.
- Accountability for the production and quality assurance of a report setting out the investigation team's judgements.
- Undertaking quality assurance and moderation of investigation reports for investigations that the lead assessor has not been involved in.

Person specification

Experience

- Employed by a higher education provider as academic staff, or have recently been employed as such.
- Academic expert with experience in designing and delivering learning, teaching and assessment in higher education. You will have subject specific expertise that meets the OfS's business needs, and broader pedagogical expertise.
- Where your subject specific expertise relates to a subject area in which doctoral-level qualifications are the norm for academic staff, you will be qualified to doctoral level. For a subject area in which there is a greater variation in the qualifications of academic staff, we will expect you to have expertise that is equivalent to doctoral-level qualification if you do not hold a qualification itself.
- (Desirable) Employed, or recently employed, as academic staff in a provider with the strongest performance in providing a high quality student experience which enables positive student outcomes.

Knowledge and skills

- Understanding of different approaches to higher education delivery and assessment and ability to challenge norms where necessary, being open minded about the relationship between subject matter, delivery methods and quality of provision.
- Understanding of the diverse learning needs of students from different backgrounds or who have different academic support needs.
- Ability to use academic judgement to interrogate on the basis of the OfS's principles-based approach, focusing on the assessment and evaluation of what is delivered to students and the student experience rather than policies and processes, and to apply that approach in a broad range of higher education settings.

- Ability to identify, analyse and triangulate relevant quantitative and qualitative information, which may be imperfect or contradictory, to reach robust judgements which are well-reasoned, evidence-based and outcomes-focussed.
- Confident in own decision-making, even on the basis of incomplete or imperfect information.
- Ability to work collaboratively and flexibly as part of an investigation team, contributing to the judgements of the team in a robust and constructive manner and observing the conventions of collective responsibility in respect of those judgements.
- Ability to engage credibly, constructively and with authority with senior leaders and staff at higher education providers, and with other stakeholders, valuing and respecting other people and differing viewpoints.
- Ability to hold and facilitate constructive discussions with students to collect views on their experiences of higher education.
- Communicates clearly and fluently, using appropriate style and language tailored to the audience. Facilitates discussions effectively and with excellent presentation skills.
- Writes in a clear, concise and polished manner, using appropriate grammar, style and language, which is tailored for the reader. Writing will set out information in a way that is evidence-based, intelligible for non-experts, and provides confidence to decision-makers.
- Personally resilient, capable of maintaining own levels of performance in challenging circumstances and working to tight deadlines.

Additional requirements for lead assessors

- Ability to provide strong leadership of an investigation team which:
 - draws appropriately on the skills and experience of team members and inspires them to utilise their abilities to their full potential; and
 - results in the team reaching robust and defensible judgements that are well reasoned, evidence-based and outcomes focussed.
- Ability to lead meetings and discussions, balancing different perspectives.