

Regulatory advice 23: Arrangements for initial condition B7 quality assessment visits

Guidance for providers

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Context

1. 'Regulatory advice 3: Registration of English higher education providers with the Office for Students' sets out information on the initial submission requirements of initial condition B7.¹
2. Regulatory advice 3 sets out that:

To assess compliance with initial condition B7 we will determine whether it is necessary to undertake an assessment visit to your provider, the form that visit should take, and whether it should be undertaken by assessors able to provide expert academic judgement.

3. An assessment in relation to condition B7 will normally involve a visit to the provider by assessors able to provide an expert academic judgement.
4. This guidance applies to those providers where the Office for Students (OfS) has decided that a visit should take place to gather and test the evidence relevant to compliance with initial condition B7 and that the visit should include assessors able to provide expert academic judgements.

¹ See OfS, [Regulatory advice 3: Registration of English higher education providers with the OfS](#).

Introduction

5. This document provides operational guidance about:
 - a. The OfS's approach to quality assessment visits for condition B7.
 - b. The members of an assessment team and their roles.
 - c. The assessment visit.
 - d. The assessment report.
6. This guidance should be read in conjunction with the regulatory framework,² and any relevant regulatory advice documents published by the OfS (including Regulatory advice 3).³ If there are any inconsistencies between the regulatory framework and this document, then the regulatory framework will prevail.

² See OfS, [Regulatory framework for higher education in England](#).

³ See OfS, [Regulatory advice 3: Registration of English higher education providers with the OfS](#).

The OfS's regulatory approach

7. The OfS regulatory framework sets out that a provider wishing to access the benefits of registration must register with the OfS.
8. As part of the registration process, the OfS will assess whether a provider satisfies the initial conditions of registration, including initial condition B7 (which applies to all providers seeking registration). Condition B7 requires a provider to have credible plans for complying with ongoing conditions B1, B2 and B4 if it is registered and the capacity and resources to deliver those plans in practice. The condition is further described in the regulatory framework.
9. The OfS recognises that a provider seeking registration may not have a track record of delivering higher education. A provider that is already delivering higher education will often have plans to change and expand its current offer. The requirements are therefore designed to test the credibility of a provider's plans to meet the OfS's quality requirements on an ongoing basis if it is registered, and the extent to which it has the capacity and resources to deliver those plans in practice.
10. Regulatory advice 3 contains guidance on how the OfS will assess condition B7. It sets out that a provider applying for registration should submit a quality plan and supporting evidence. Together, these should show how the provider will be compliant with the ongoing quality conditions B1, B2, and B4 that would apply from the date of registration, if the OfS decides to register the provider. A provider is expected to explain how it is compliant with the ongoing conditions, or plan to be compliant, in detail.

The assessment team

The assessors

11. Where the OfS has decided that a visit should take place to gather and test the evidence relevant to compliance with initial condition B7, the visit will be conducted by a team of assessors. There will be a minimum of two assessors in each team. Assessors are contracted or employed directly by the OfS and an assessment team is likely to consist of a combination of academic experts and OfS staff.
12. We have recruited academic experts with expertise in designing and delivering learning, teaching and assessment in higher education to join assessment teams. Collectively, each team will have appropriate expertise to gather information and reach judgements to inform our decisions about a provider's compliance with initial condition B7.
13. We may add to the membership of an assessment team at any point during an assessment if, for example, we decide that additional or different expertise is required within the team.
14. Each assessor will complete appropriate training before being assigned to a team. This means that assessors will have current regulatory knowledge alongside their professional or other relevant knowledge and experience.

The assessment manager

15. The visit will be managed by a member of OfS staff referred to as the assessment manager. The assessment manager is a full member of the assessment team. The assessment manager is responsible for managing the visit process. They will normally attend the visit, brief the assessment team at the beginning of the process and will ensure that assessors conduct a visit in accordance with the OfS's expectations.
16. The assessment manager will act as liaison between the assessment team and the provider. If the provider has any questions about the conduct of the visit, it should address these to the assessment manager.

The assessment visit

General approach to a visit

17. Before a visit, the assessment team will assess the written evidence that the provider has submitted in relation to initial condition B7, including its quality plan.
18. The length and structure of an assessment visit will depend on the size and complexity of the provider under assessment. We expect a typical visit to involve two days at a provider's premises. We will set out the planned duration and timings for an assessment visit for a provider in advance but may adapt or extend the visit as it progresses as we consider appropriate.
19. During their time at a provider's premises, assessors will normally want to meet a range of the provider's staff, including teaching staff and the management team in a mixture of scheduled and unscheduled sessions, and to visit relevant resources and facilities. If a provider is already delivering higher education, they will also normally want to meet with a range of students and they may want to observe teaching and assessment sessions. Where a provider does not yet have premises, we will discuss with the provider the format a visit might take. More information about the content and format of a visit is set out below.
20. To ensure that the OfS can conduct assessment activities in an efficient and effective manner, we expect a provider to facilitate the assessment team's visit to its premises, including any activities the assessors wish to undertake during their visit. During the duration of a visit, the assessment team will expect to have free access to public spaces at a provider's premises.

Provision of information before, during and after the visit

21. The assessment team may request further information before, during or after its visit. To help ensure that the OfS can conduct its assessment activities in an efficient and effective manner, we expect a provider to provide further information requested by the assessment team.

Information gathering by the assessment team

22. Before a visit and during their time at a provider's premises, assessors will approach information gathering in a way they consider appropriate. We expect that assessors will gather information from different sources to triangulate the evidence from their discussions and observations, in order to build a clear picture of the provider's courses and practices, or its plans for its courses and education delivery. Assessors may therefore want to meet the same staff or students on more than one occasion, for example to test information gathered from other sources.
23. Below is a non-exhaustive list of activities that assessors may wish to undertake. The activities may not all be relevant to every assessment and every visit and will depend on a provider's stage of planning and delivery.
 - a. Direct observations of teaching, training and assessment.

- b. Direct assessment of physical and digital learning resources and the use students make of them; or direct assessment of the plans for learning resources and teaching spaces.
 - c. Evaluation of learning materials and the use students make of them; or plans for learning materials.
 - d. Review of students' assessed work.
 - e. Discussions with heads of department and their senior team, course directors or equivalents.
 - f. Discussions with academic, technical and other staff.
 - g. Discussions with students and student representatives, for example students' union officers.
 - h. Discussions with employers, awarding bodies, validating, franchise or delivery partners.
 - i. Analysis of documents relating to courses, their development and delivery, and course leadership and management.
24. Assessors will not normally give feedback to staff or students following their discussions.
25. Assessors will record the information gathered. This will reflect discussions with staff and students, observations of teaching and other activities, and documents reviewed. The assessment team will work in a way consistent with data protection law.
26. The assessment team will request information and prepare an agenda of meetings and activities it considers appropriate to conduct its assessment. A provider may suggest meetings and activities that it considers would be helpful to the assessors and the assessment team will decide whether it is appropriate to have those meetings. Similarly, a provider may provide information to the assessors which the provider considers is relevant to the assessment. In such cases, the provider should specify how it considers the information relevant to the assessment.
27. During the duration of a visit, the assessment team will expect to have free access to public spaces at a provider's premises.
28. Following an assessment visit, the team may request further information from a provider in relation to any points discussed during the visit or otherwise relevant to the assessment. The assessment team may also request further meetings with a provider's staff or students if these could not be accommodated during the visit, for example to speak to a particular individual who may have been absent. Where the assessment team considers it appropriate, such follow-up meetings may be held virtually.
29. In the course of its assessment, the assessment team may, where relevant, consider other information or data gathered by the OfS as it considers the provider's application for registration, for example financial information or information submitted by the provider for the assessment of condition B8. Assessments may also be informed by other regulatory intelligence held by the OfS.

Engaging with students

30. Students can provide important information about the quality of their academic experience, the resources and support available to them, and the way they are assessed. It is therefore important that, where there are students at a provider, they have the opportunity to share their views with the assessment team and assessors will normally want to meet with students. This may happen in face-to-face meetings during a visit or remotely, through online meetings.
31. Any meetings with students will be held in private, with no members of the provider's staff present. This is important to ensure that students can give their views freely. The assessment team will communicate in advance its preferred approach to selecting the students it wishes to meet.

Engaging with staff and others

32. The assessment team will want to meet a provider's staff and may also wish to meet members of its governing body. The team may also wish to meet other third parties such as validating, franchising or delivery partners where applicable, and employers where a course involves an element of work-based learning. This may happen in face-to-face meetings during a visit or remotely, through online meetings.
33. Meetings will be held in private, with no members of the provider's staff present other than those invited by the assessment team. This is important to ensure that participants can give their views freely. The assessment team may identify specific individuals or types of individuals for a meeting – for example the head of a particular academic department or a group of personal tutors.

Observations of teaching, training or assessment

34. Where possible, the assessment team is likely to want to observe teaching, training or assessment activities which are relevant to its assessment.
35. Assessors may wish to observe a range of sessions and will identify the teaching, training or assessment activities they wish to observe at least one hour in advance of the scheduled start time for that activity. An observing assessor will identify themselves to the staff and students taking part in an activity at the beginning of the session.

Reviewing students' assessed work

36. Assessors may want to review students' assessed work and records showing how that work has been assessed by the provider. This would be in addition to any assessed work that was reviewed during an assessment of condition B8. Their role is not to re-mark students' work. The information gathered by assessors from a review of students' assessed work will be used as assessors consider appropriate in formulating judgements about quality.

Practical arrangements for a visit

37. We will ask the provider to nominate a member of the provider's staff to act as the provider contact for the visit. The assessment team will engage with the provider contact to plan the activities, and manage the logistics and practical requirements of the visit.

The assessment report

Draft assessment report

38. The assessment team will set out its findings in a draft assessment report. The provider will be sent a copy of the draft report and will be invited to comment on the report including whether there is anything in the draft report that it considers to be factually inaccurate.
39. If a provider does not have any comments to make, it does not need to do anything further. If the provider does want to submit comments, it must do so within 14 calendar days beginning from the day after it receives the draft assessment report. If it does not submit any comments by this deadline, the OfS will record that no comments have been received. If no comments are received the OfS will send the provider a copy of the final report after the 14-day response period has ended.
40. The OfS will not normally extend the 14-day response period unless there are exceptional circumstances that mean a provider is not able to meet the deadline for submission. If a provider thinks that there are exceptional circumstances, it should contact the OfS as soon as it becomes aware that meeting the deadline may not be possible.
41. In making any comment about the draft report a provider can tell the OfS about:
 - typographical or numerical errors
 - information that the provider considers is factually inaccurate
 - any information that is relevant to the assessment process that the provider thinks has not been considered by the assessment team.

Information the provider considers to be factually inaccurate

42. When making a comment of this type, a provider must explain why what is written in the draft report is factually inaccurate and refer to supporting evidence. The provider should label any evidence submitted in attachments as numbered appendices with an explanation of which appendix relates to which comment.
43. The provider must set out, with no ambiguity, the wording in the draft report that it is referring to for each comment it makes. If the assessment team cannot see which wording in the report each comment relates to, it may not be able to consider it.

Information that is relevant to the assessment process that the provider thinks has not been considered by the assessment team

44. If a provider thinks there is material information or evidence that it provided for the assessment that has not been considered, it can tell the OfS about it.

Considering provider comments

45. Any evidence submitted in support of any comments made about the draft report, must have been available during the period the assessment was conducted. When evidence is submitted (in support of a provider's comments) that was not available during this period because it was created after the period of assessment, the assessment team will not normally consider it as it was not available at the time of the assessment.
46. The assessment team will consider each comment made and determine whether the relevant part of the draft report should be amended.
47. A response to the comments will be provided and the provider will be informed about any amendments that have been made to the report when it is sent a copy of the final report.

Final assessment report

48. The OfS will use the assessment team's final report to inform its decision about whether initial condition B7 is satisfied. If a provider does satisfy all applicable initial conditions (as required for registration), the report will also inform the OfS's consideration of any risk of future breach of ongoing conditions B1, B2 or B4, and any associated mitigations. The OfS may also use the assessment team's report, and any information gathered by the assessment team, for the purposes of any of its functions, including those relating to compliance with any initial or ongoing condition of registration or enforcement.

Publication

49. For guidance about our policy on the publication of assessment reports, please see Regulatory advice 21.⁴

⁴ See OfS, [Regulatory advice 21: Publication of information](#).



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