

# Access to Higher Education Concerns Scheme

## Introduction

1 The Scheme provides an opportunity for students, staff and other parties to raise with the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) concerns about:

- the delivery and management of a particular Access to Higher Education (HE) course
- the way in which an Access Validating Agency (AVA) is undertaking its responsibilities in relation to the Access to HE Diploma, or
- an AVA meeting the regulatory requirements as set out in QAA's Recognition Scheme.

## Who can raise a concern?

2 We welcome concerns from anyone, including students, staff, external examiners, members of the public and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies.

## What if I have a compliment, comment or complaint about QAA?

3 The Access to HE Concerns Scheme is designed to provide an opportunity for students, staff and other parties to raise concerns about the delivery and management of Access to HE courses, or the way in which an AVA is undertaking its responsibilities or meeting regulatory requirements. In circumstances where you wish to register a compliment, comment or complaint about QAA, you can do so by following the [QAA Comments, Compliments and Complaints Procedure](#).

## How can I raise a concern?

4 Before raising a concern with QAA, any concern about a particular Access to HE course should be first raised with the course provider, following their published procedures. If the provider cannot resolve the concern satisfactorily, this should then be investigated by the AVA. If, at this point, the concern has not been resolved, it should then be raised with QAA (see Figure 1).

5 Similarly, any concern about the way in which an AVA is undertaking its responsibilities should first be raised with the AVA. If the AVA cannot resolve the concern satisfactorily, this should then be raised with QAA (see Figure 1).

6 Concerns that relate to an AVA meeting the regulatory requirements as set out in the Recognition Scheme should be raised directly with QAA (see Figure 1).

7 You should raise a concern with QAA by completing our [Submissions Form](#) and sending a copy to [AHE@gaa.ac.uk](mailto:AHE@gaa.ac.uk).

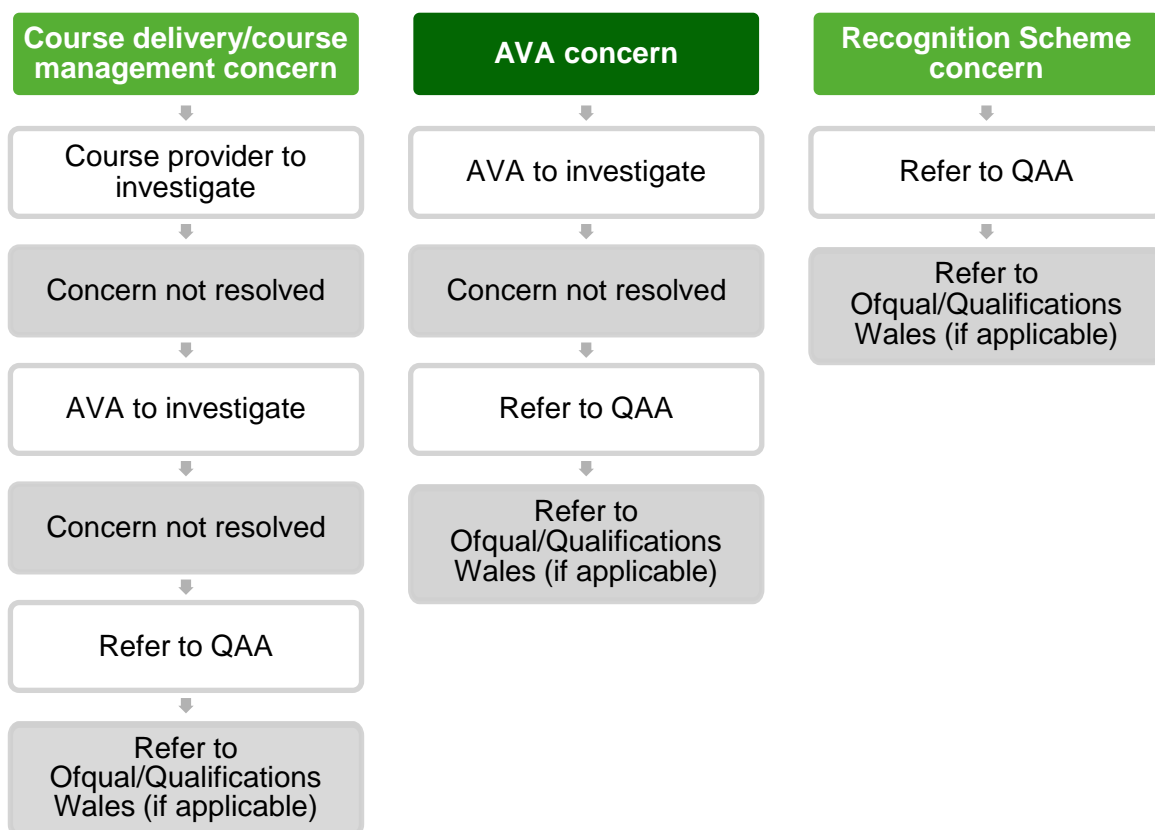
8 We work by the principle that in our work in Wales, we will treat the English and Welsh languages as equal and meet our Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011 compliance notice.

9 We will therefore deal with any concern as set out in this procedure, regardless of whether the concern is received in English or Welsh, and reply in the language in which the concern is submitted, unless the notifier provides an alternative preference.

10 QAA cannot investigate wholly unsubstantiated concerns. As such, your submission should, where reasonably practical, be accompanied by evidence. This might be in the form of correspondence, committee papers or reports. You may be able to make a request to the provider under the Freedom of Information Act, or to providers and AVAs by means of a Subject Access Request, to obtain information to support your submission. If you are unable to obtain copies of documentation that you wish to include as evidence, but can demonstrate a reasonable belief that it exists, please explain this in your submission.

11 Where a concern relates to an AVA located in England or Wales, QAA may notify the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) or Qualifications Wales (as applicable) of the outcome of any investigation undertaken to address the concern (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Concerns procedure**



## What about confidentiality?

12 We are committed to considering concerns from all sources, including from students or staff who fear that raising concerns may invite some kind of penalty from the provider or AVA about whom they are concerned.

13 If you feel uncomfortable about raising your concerns with the provider or AVA before raising it with us, we may be able to approach the provider or AVA directly and can ask for evidence about the issue you are concerned about. Please contact us at [AHE@qaa.ac.uk](mailto:AHE@qaa.ac.uk) and we can talk to you about our approach, including the things we can do to protect your identity.

## How we investigate concerns

### Screening

14 The purpose of screening is to determine whether the concern falls within the scope of what QAA can investigate. Concerns that are clearly out of scope will be screened out at this stage. If a concern is screened out, we will explain why.

15 If your submission to us is incomplete or if you have not provided documentary evidence to support your concern, we may ask you for more information at this stage. If you do not respond to our request for more information, and we consider we do not have enough information to proceed with an investigation, we will screen out the concern.

16 Regardless of whether or not we can investigate, we will inform the AVA involved of the matters raised, taking steps to protect your identity as appropriate. We may also pass information to another organisation, such as a professional, statutory or regulatory body (including Ofqual and Qualifications Wales), if we think it may assist them to discharge their duties.

### Investigation

17 If we think the concern is within the scope of what we can investigate, QAA's Director - Assessment Services and Access to Higher Education or Access to Higher Education Diploma Manager will make a decision to open an investigation. An investigation team will be appointed to conduct the investigation and will normally comprise one QAA Officer and up to two reviewers. QAA will check to make sure that members of the investigation team do not have a conflict of interest with the AVA as per the QAA policy. We will inform the AVA of the names of all members of the team to give the AVA an opportunity to raise any conflicts of interest presented by the appointed reviewers.

18 We will inform the AVA in writing that it is under investigation and outline the scope of the investigation. Where we require further information beyond what has been submitted to us as part of the Concerns Scheme, we will request this from the AVA.

19 An investigation will normally include a combination of some or all of the following activities:

- an investigation meeting with key members of staff and stakeholders
- a desk-based review of evidence (hard and/or electronic copies)
- an investigation visit to observe actions taken by the AVA to meet associated AVA licensing criteria and/or standard conditions of the AVA licensing agreement.

## Outcomes

20 The investigation team will complete an AVA investigation report which summarises the team's findings on:

- compliance with the AVA licensing criteria and/or standard conditions of the AVA licensing agreement
- required AVA actions (with dates for completion)
- follow-up AVA actions (with dates for completion)
- AVA risk rating.

21 We will share a draft of the report with the AVA so that it has the opportunity to comment on the factual accuracy of the content. Where appropriate, the investigation team may amend the report based on the AVA's response.

22 Once the final report has been produced, it will be presented to the Access Regulation and Licencing Committee (ARLC) for them to consider and confirm the compliance outcomes, actions and risk rating. Once ARLC have approved the report, it will be sent to the AVA.

23 There are a range of potential investigation outcomes - these will be outlined to you when we acknowledge receipt of your concern.

## Timescales

24 Once your concern has been received, it will be logged and acknowledged within three working days of receipt.

25 Should the concern fall outside the scope of QAA, you will normally be advised of this in writing within five working days of receipt of the concern.

26 We strive to investigate concerns quickly and thoroughly. Normally, the investigation process will be completed within 12 weeks of receipt of a concern. In some circumstances it may be necessary to extend this period - for example, if the issue is particularly complex, or if evidence gathering has taken longer or been more difficult than first anticipated.

27 Where we decide to investigate your concern, we will keep you informed of progress by providing updates at appropriate points throughout the investigation. We will let you know in writing if the investigation process is going to take longer than 12 weeks.

## Privacy and data protection

28 We process the personal information of individuals who submit concerns to the Scheme on the basis of legitimate interest - the regulation of the Access to HE Diploma and the promotion and maintenance of quality and standards in higher education.

29 Where we share concern information with other bodies (as described above), we will never share personal data (including name and contact details) relating to the person raising the concerns if they have asked to remain anonymous. Where the person has asked to remain anonymous, we will either anonymise or pseudonymise the details we share, making every effort to protect the individual's identity.

30 The personal details provided by individuals who submit concerns will be stored securely on our internal systems, with restricted access permissions applied. We retain information about concerns investigations for three years, before securely destroying it. After the closure of a case, any personal details held on file are removed, and the information is either anonymised, pseudonymised or encrypted for the remainder of the retention period.

31 If you have any questions about how we process your personal information, please contact us.

32 Should you wish to register a complaint about the processing of your personal information, you can do so by following the [QAA Comments, Compliments and Complaints Procedure](#).

Published - January 2025

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Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786  
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