



# Evaluation of International Pathway Programmes

Commissioned by Universities UK

July 2024



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## Executive summary

1 This report provides the evaluation that QAA undertook between 28 February 2024 and 3 July 2024 into International Pathway Programmes that are designed to support the entry of international students into UK higher education courses. We have considered both International Foundation Programmes (IFPs) and International Year One Programmes (IYOs).

2 The questions we sought to answer were set out in a scoping document agreed between QAA and Universities UK (UUK) that we published on 28 February 2024.

3 QAA's approach to considering these matters was to engage with higher education providers across the UK that were offering provision in scope of the evaluation, and ask them to participate. Following an initial information gathering process, 36 providers came forward to engage with the evaluation. Two providers stood down during the process, and therefore our findings in this report relate to an assessment of the evidence provided by 34 providers.

4 Providers submitted details of around 700 courses that were reported as running in the academic year 2023-24, with just over 15,000 students being reported as being registered on these courses. In total, QAA selected 185 programmes that we determined covered 20 different subject areas.

5 QAA asked providers to submit evidence regarding the programmes selected for evaluation. This was to allow us to consider whether standards were being set effectively in practice, and for us to be able to understand the approach individual providers were taking to the operation of these courses. This part of the evidence submission required the submission of standard course information, for example, published admissions requirements, programme specifications, module descriptors, academic regulations and assessment materials, that would be consistent across all students studying on a programme.

6 QAA also required evidence to determine how arrangements were operating in practice. This includes whether students appeared to be admitted in line with the admission requirements, and whether the standards being achieved in practice by these students met the expected level (in line with the applicable national standards). In this regard, our evidence base comprised of a further 4,794 pieces of evidence, made up of 2,731 individual student admissions records and 2,063 pieces of assessed student work (of which 1,427 were for International Foundation Programmes, and 636 for International Year One Programmes).

7 QAA appointed 36 reviewers to consider the evidence. For this evaluation, QAA reviewers are academic and professional services staff drawn from across the sector. In appointing reviewers and in allocating reviewers to the work, QAA ensured there were no conflicts of interest between the reviewers and the providers they were evaluating. Reviewers completed a QAA-specified Reviewer Findings Record based on the evidence they had considered. QAA officers then compiled the information in these records to make the findings set out in this report.

## Key findings

8 Following our consideration of the evidence, QAA has made the following key findings.

### Programme nomenclature and titles

9 QAA noted there was significant variance within the naming conventions being used by providers to describe these programmes. Some providers were using naming conventions that distinguish programmes as being focused for international students, in other cases providers were using alternative naming but promoting these courses only to such students.

10 QAA recommends that the higher education sector should consider how there can be greater consistency in the approach to naming programmes covered by this evaluation to ensure international students and other stakeholders understand the nature of these programmes. QAA considers that the section on titling conventions for qualifications in The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) may be helpful in this regard (including for the International Foundation Programmes not covered by the FHEQ). Further, this is something that QAA will consider when it next updates the Characteristics Statement for International Pathway Courses and develops the next version of the Advice and Guidance on Partnerships as part of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.

### Entry requirements for International Foundation Programmes and International Year One Programmes

11 QAA considered whether the entry requirements for International Foundation Programmes and International Year One Programmes were consistent to any equivalent domestic programme, and were applied in line with the published requirements.

12 QAA noted that determining equivalency can be challenging in some cases because international students are likely to come to these programmes with a range of qualifications and grades from their own country and therefore this requires specialised knowledge and resources for admissions professionals in the sector.

13 QAA found that there was broad equivalence between the entry requirements for the International Foundation Programmes and their equivalent domestic programmes (which are mainly foundation year provision). There was also equivalence between International Year One Programmes and where there was a declared equivalent domestic programme (which for International Year One programmes were the first year of undergraduate programmes). However, for both programme types, QAA considered it was notable that there were significantly more options for international students than for domestic students, meaning that international students appear to have more options available to them.

14 In considering the evidence provided regarding the qualifications demonstrated by students on entry to these programmes, QAA found no concerns that providers were not following their published entry requirements.

### International Foundation Programmes

15 QAA considered programme, module and assessment documentation to assess whether the standards set in these documents were in line with the relevant national qualification frameworks. In the vast majority of cases, QAA found that the International Foundation Programmes were being set in line with the expectations of a course at that level. We identified a few minor discrepancies, although nothing that would give us cause for

concern that students were unlikely to be able to achieve an appropriate standard at the end of the course.

16 We also considered evidence of students' completed work, and we were assured that in the vast majority of cases the evidence showed that students were achieving at an appropriate level and marking and assessment were effective.

17 QAA also considered whether students were offered similar opportunities to complete and achieve the intended outcome of the courses, compared to domestic students that had studied A Level or Scottish Higher qualifications. In this area we did find a difference, with International Foundation Programme students generally having more opportunities and under more varied conditions to achieve successful progression through, for example, resitting assessments than the opportunities available to A Level/Scottish Higher students.

18 QAA recommends that higher education providers, collectively, could seek greater standardisation of approach towards assessment practice and regulations on International Foundation Programmes. We have observed a range of approaches being employed for programmes that outwardly would appear otherwise similar. It is for higher education providers to determine their own policies and regulations regarding, for example, allowable attempts at assessment. However, in doing so they may wish to consider whether matters of perceived fairness with other potential applicants to the intended course for progression are relevant. In any decisions taken by individual providers they should ensure that the strategic approach to securing academic standards, quality assurance and enhancement is published, communicated clearly and accessible to staff, students and external stakeholders. Such an approach would be in line with the Key Practice set out in Sector-Agreed Principle 1 of the UK Quality Code.

19 Finally, QAA observed that there can be notable differences in the rates of progression to the intended programme from students on International Pathway Programmes compared to equivalent domestic programmes. Differences were observed at the subject level within some providers - some subjects saw similar progression rates for domestic students, and some saw significantly different rates. In some cases, domestic student progression rates were higher, the opposite was also true. It was not possible to discern any general patterns of similarity or differences between International Foundation Programmes and equivalent domestic programmes students in terms of rates of progression.

20 QAA recommends that individual higher education providers should regularly assess progression rates for international and domestic students, and should ensure they are considering internal comparisons between both subject and international and equivalent domestic programmes. This activity would be in line with the Key Practices set out Sector-Agreed Principle 4 of the UK Quality Code. In all cases, providers should ensure they understand the underlying reasons for the outcomes and engage students as partners to understand and interrogate these reasons. This activity would be in line with Sector-Agreed Principle 2 of the UK Quality Code. Higher education providers should target quality enhancement activities where the provider can reasonably be expected to have a direct influence over progression (for example, by thoroughly investigating matters related to student attendance and the reason for poor attendance). Higher education providers should also ensure they have considered carefully their responses when factors are outside of their control (for example, in cases where the economic situation of a student's home country changes) to ensure their response is strategic.

## International Year One Programmes

21 The methodology applied by QAA to evaluate International Year One Programmes was substantially similar to the approach taken to International Foundation Programmes.

22 Having considered the evidence, QAA concludes in almost all cases the evidence demonstrates that the academic standards set on International Year One Programmes are equivalent to domestic Level 4/7 programmes, and that the assessment approaches used on programmes are appropriate to test the achievement of standards. We identified a few minor discrepancies, although nothing that would give us cause for concern that students were unlikely to be able to achieve an appropriate standard at the end of the course.

23 We also considered evidence of students' completed work, and we were assured that in the vast majority of cases the evidence showed that students were achieving at an appropriate level and marking and assessment were effective.

24 QAA noted that in the majority of cases, providers were applying the same academic regulations to both International Year One Programmes and other programmes at Level 4. However, it was noted that in some cases where the International Year One Programme was offered through a partner, there were differences in the regulations. This particularly was evidenced in varying approaches to the opportunities provided to students to resit failed components of assessment.

25 QAA recommends that providers should consider whether it is appropriate to harmonise the academic regulations across Level 4 courses within their portfolios, including where they are being delivered by a pathway provider. If a provider has reasons for why they consider this is not desirable, they should clearly state this in order that stakeholders can understand the strategic approach being taken and the justification for any differences. We note this is particularly important where pathway providers' provision may be largely indistinguishable from the provision offered by the university provider. Such an approach would be in line with Sector-Agreed Principles 1 and 8 of the UK Quality Code.

26 QAA's findings in relation to progression within the provider are similar to the findings in relation to International Foundation Programmes. Again, providers cited a range of reasons both within and outside of their control for this. We observed significant differences within providers including between equivalent domestic and these international programmes, and these matters are likely worth of further investigation.

27 QAA recommends, as with International Foundation Programmes, that providers should regularly assess progression rates for international and domestic students, and should ensure they are considering internal comparisons between both subject and international and equivalent domestic programmes. QAA further recommends that consideration of the student experience is undertaken when differences are observed. In doing so, providers should consider that with International Foundation Programmes they are preparing students for undergraduate study, whereas on International Year One Programmes they are delivering undergraduate study. Students requiring preparation will naturally come with a range of different knowledge and skills and will have been assessed by the provider to have needed that assistance in order to be able to access higher education. However, with students entering onto undergraduate study, providers should be reasonably confident regarding a student's ability to succeed, and therefore it is essential providers understand the detailed reasons why students may be achieving differently across different programmes, assuming there are broader similarities in entry profile. Such an approach would be in line with Sector-Agreed Principles 1 and 4 of the UK Quality Code.

## Introduction

28 This report provides the evaluation that QAA undertook between 28 February 2024 and 3 July 2024 into International Pathway Programmes that are designed to support the entry of international students into UK higher education courses. We have considered both International Foundation Programmes (IFPs) and International Year One Programmes (IYO).

29 IFPs are generally designed to act as bridges between the secondary education attainment of international students and the requirements for entry into the first year of study on UK university programmes. As such, they normally offer English language development skills (beyond the minimum requirements set by the UK government for study visas), academic skills development as well as entry-level development of subject matter related to the students' further study aspirations.

30 Successful IFP students may progress directly into university undergraduate programmes or might also progress onto an International Year One (IYO) programme where they continue to study subject-related content and receive continued support.

31 International Year One courses (IYOs) are the same academic level of study (Level 4) as the first year of other undergraduate courses. They normally provide a combination of subject-specific course content together with academic support to enable undergraduate students to transition into education in the UK. Such support normally includes academic English skills (beyond the minimum requirements set by the UK government for study visas) and research/study skills.

32 Although a number of universities still operate their own in-house programmes for international students, in recent years there has been a trend towards universities establishing partnerships with third party providers to deliver IFPs and IYOs. These third party providers operate nationally within the UK through individual agreements with partner universities, usually working across multiple partners, and may also operate internationally, utilising an extensive network of agents to recruit international students.

33 In 2022, QAA published an [International Pathway Courses Characteristics Statement](#). The Characteristics Statement for International Pathway Courses considers the context and purpose of these courses, as well as the institutions that typically deliver them. It explores key features of the content and structure, and the focus on English language, as well as academic skills, subject modules and delivery models. It is not a regulatory document and, therefore, providers are not obligated to ensure their provision is in line with the contents of the document.

## Background

34 In January 2024, following a focus in some media outlets on recruitment practices relating to international students to undergraduate courses at a small number of higher education providers, the Universities UK (UUK) Board was concerned that students (both international and domestic), their families, governments and other stakeholders can have confidence that practices are fair, transparent and robust.



35 Having discussed the matter with QAA, UUK commissioned a rapid review<sup>1</sup> to:

- compare the admissions requirements between foundation programmes for domestic students and international students
- assess the standards of the courses being offered to international students as both foundation programmes, and International Year One Programmes
- assess whether these standards are being achieved and maintained in practice.

36 QAA is the UK's expert quality body for tertiary education. We are internationally recognised and have over 26 years of experience delivering regulatory quality assurance and collaborative quality assurance in the UK and internationally. Independence and impartiality are fundamental to the work of any quality body, and QAA's model is widely regarded as an exemplar of good practice by quality bodies internationally. QAA is an independent charity - we advise governments and funding bodies on quality matters, and we respond and tailor our work to the legislative, regulatory and policy framework in every nation where we operate - but within those frameworks we devise quality assurance methods that deliver independent evaluation and judgements. QAA's reviews and evaluations are never influenced by governments, funders or regulators, or the institutions we review. QAA is politically neutral.

37 In line with best practice in peer review, QAA's reviews and evaluations are managed by QAA officers and undertaken by reviewers drawn from the wider sector, trained by QAA in the specific method. We ensure that the QAA officers and reviewers have no connection with the provider (or providers) under review. QAA always reports publicly the results of our evaluations, whether positive or negative, in line with international best practice.

38 The costs of the evaluation have been met by QAA, Universities UK, the Russell Group, and Guild HE. QAA is grateful for the funding provided by these stakeholders – this has enabled us to have a large pool of participating institutions, and the resource to conduct the analysis of several thousand pieces of individual evidence. While funding has been provided by these bodies, in common with our general approach they have not been offered any editorial control in relation to this report. This report, its findings and the underlying analysis work that has been undertaken has been exclusively the work of QAA and managed according to our internal quality assurance processes and requirements. For the avoidance of doubt, no stakeholder body or individual has sought to influence the contents of this report.

39 Following the initial request for QAA to undertake activity in relation to this matter, we agreed with UUK a scoping document that set out the questions we would seek to answer. These are replicated as Annex 1 to this report. The [scoping document and commissioning letter](#) were published on 28 February 2024.

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<sup>1</sup> In May 2024, QAA published an updated [External Quality Assurance Policy](#). This policy sets out that QAA will only refer to 'reviews' where they are compliant with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for Quality Assurance. The activity covered in this report was commissioned before the policy took effect and has in various places been referred to previously as a review. For the avoidance of doubt, this activity was not conducted in line with the ESG, and therefore this final report refers to it as an evaluation.



40 The QAA officers who have overseen activity in this evaluation were:

- Rob Stroud - Director of Assessment Services and Access to Higher Education
- Adam Surtees - Assessment Services Manager
- Jennifer Taylor - Assessment Services Manager
- Dr Judith Foreman - Quality Manager
- Dr Lynn Fulford - Quality Manager
- Dr Andrew Thomas - Quality Manager
- Althea Cusick - Quality Manager

41 QAA appointed 36 reviewers to undertake the evaluation activity. We are grateful for their contributions and careful consideration of the significant volume of evidence received that has enabled the production of this report. Additionally, administrative activity was supported by colleagues in QAA's Assessment Services and Access to Higher Education team, and significant support for the team, and providers, was provided by QAA's IT Services team.

## Method

42 UUK contacted its members in order to identify any providers that did **not** offer provision that would be in scope. Additionally, other representative bodies and mission groups were also contacted to highlight the activity to them. Once UUK had identified the providers that did not offer such provision and, as such, could not be evaluated, they provided a list of the remaining 124 providers to QAA. UUK played no further role in the recruitment or selection of providers to take part in the evaluation.

43 Utilising the list provided by UUK, QAA contacted providers in late March to seek their participation. Providers were asked to complete a standardised Provider Information Form using a template designed by QAA that allowed us to capture a high level of information regarding the relevant courses being offered by providers. Providers were asked to specify the names of the full range of programmes they offered for international students that they considered would be in scope, along with the number of students admitted in this and the previous academic year, the detail of any organisation they worked with to deliver the programme (for example, a pathway provider as referred to in paragraph 32), the entry requirements for the programme, and details regarding where those entry requirements are published.

44 Additionally, we asked providers to identify where the provider considered there was an equivalent offering open to domestic students - for example, if the provider also offers foundation programmes for domestic students, or, in relation to IYO programmes, which courses were equivalent as an undergraduate entry point. Similar information was sought with regard to these programmes as with the international programmes in relation to student numbers and entry requirements.

45 This stage was essential, as being able to disaggregate information on courses from publicly available sources is challenging. We considered this to be the most appropriate method to enable us to quickly get an understanding of the type and scope of provision within the sector.

46 Providers were informed that by returning a provider information form on time they would be confirming their participation. In planning our approach to evaluation, QAA determined that we were likely to be able to accommodate up to 40 providers participating,

which was a level that we considered would give us a view of a wide range of provision across the sector and from providers with different characteristics. QAA did not attempt to actively recruit or dissuade any particular providers from participating. It was not our plan to attempt to extrapolate any data or information to make claims regarding sector performance and therefore we have not sought to analyse or categorise information according to provider characteristics (such as typical entry tariff level, mission group, region and so on).

47 Following the conclusion of the collection of the Provider Information Forms, there were 36 providers that had returned sufficient information to allow QAA to proceed with the evaluation. Two further providers had initially sought participation but were unable to proceed at this stage due to the need to progress the evaluation activity before they had been able to return the necessary information. One provider withdrew from the process after it became apparent during the evidence collection stage that courses offered at their provider were not in scope for the evaluation, and a further provider withdrew during the evidence collection stage as they were unable to commit to providing the necessary information in time for assessment to take place. The findings of this report therefore represent the consideration of evidence from 34 providers.

48 As the number of providers seeking to participate was slightly below the capacity we had allowed for, QAA did not undertake any sampling activity at the level of the provider - all providers with an on-time, complete and valid Provider Information Form were included in the process. The providers being evaluated included at least one provider from each nation of the UK, and included provision that relates to providers that are represented, directly or indirectly, by the four large mission groups in the UK.<sup>2</sup>

49 Upon review of the provider information forms, we identified that the number of individual courses being reported by providers was significantly in excess of the capacity that could be assessed in the time available to review. Providers submitted details of around 700 courses that were reported as running in the academic year 2023-24, with a little over 15,000 students being reported as being registered on these courses.

50 In total, QAA selected 185 programmes across 34 providers, including 20 different subject areas. The subject areas are those defined under the Common Aggregation Hierarchy (CAH) which provides a standardised hierarchical aggregation (grouping) of subject codes and terms. The subjects included Engineering, Creative Art and Design, Business and Management, Biosciences, Economics, Health and Social Care, Law, Medicine and Dentistry, Politics, and Mathematical Sciences.

51 QAA noted that there were far fewer International Year One Programmes than International Foundation Programmes, and therefore included all International Year One Programmes. For International Foundation Programmes, we have excluded programmes that appeared to us to have fewer than 10 students studying in 2023-24,<sup>3</sup> unless these courses appeared to us be courses leading to medicine, dentistry, or other healthcare-related courses. This is because in medicine and dentistry student numbers are controlled in England, and we consider these courses are likely to be highly competitive, and therefore

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<sup>2</sup> The Russell Group, University Alliance, MillionPlus and Independent Higher Education (IHE). IHE represents a number of the providers of higher education that work in partnership with other higher education providers in providing higher education to international students. IHE members therefore were associated with this review as a result of offering provision that was included in the review through their higher education partner.

<sup>3</sup> Some providers reported the total number of students on a course across the year as a single total (but may have had multiple entry points). Other providers reported each entry point as a separate instance of a course. We therefore used rough estimation of the consolidated number of students in a year in these cases.

subject to particular public interest regarding their admissions arrangements, and the standards being employed.

52 For a small number of providers where this still would leave a disproportionately high number of courses compared to others, QAA staff removed some courses where it appeared there was subject overlap (for example Business, Business and Management) in order to produce what we considered was a manageable number of courses for the provider to then produce evidence for us.

53 In order to explore the areas identified for evaluation and seek answers to the associated research questions (see Annex 1), providers were asked to submit a range of evidence. This included information regarding entry requirements for pathway programmes, and documentation detailing expected programme learning outcomes, assessment regulations and practices to determine whether programmes align with the standards set out in the relevant level descriptors.

54 We also reviewed samples of evidence of actual student entry grades to programmes and reviewed samples of assessed student work to understand whether processes and standards were being applied and achieved in practice. A simple random sampling approach was used to select the students whose admission grades and assessed work we sought evidence for. To ensure that providers could not be accused of selectively choosing student admissions records or assessed work to include in the sample, providers were asked to submit anonymised lists of students. From these lists QAA used an inhouse tool to select the sample of students as the basis for requesting admissions information and assessed work.

55 In a small number of cases, providers identified that the sample size may be too large for them to collate the evidence in the timescale requested. In these cases we made some small reductions to the sample for those institutions - in no cases were providers permitted to choose the students from the population themselves.

56 Noting the expectation that this should be a rapid process, we have made some decisions that we consider to be pragmatic and respect the professional judgements of the staff in providers that we have engaged with throughout this process. We report these here for transparency, but do not consider they will have had the effect of influencing the findings in this report. This is because our approach has been to provide a cross-sector analysis, rather than individual reports for the institutions participating, and therefore the findings from each individual institution simply contribute an additional data point to the wider evaluation.

57 One of these decisions has been that providers have had discretion with regard to the choice of modules to select student work from; we have given broad guidance that this should relate to the 'first' and 'last' modules that students have studied. We specified that the choice of modules should be those that include academic subject content rather than any module an international student should study in order to meet specific English language requirements or related to general academic study skills. We acknowledge that in the vast majority of cases students will study a number of modules concurrently, and therefore we have anticipated that decisions around what is considered the first or last module may be influenced by the ease of compiling the evidence from certain modules compared to others.

58 Another decision has been around any consideration of what might represent an equivalent domestic programme, noting the relationship for many providers could be one to many. The same concept also applies to the destination programmes when students have completed an International Year One programme. In both cases we asked providers to use their professional judgement to select a course to create a (potentially artificial) one-to-one relationship, with guidance that they should choose the course that the programme most closely relates to the international programme under consideration. We note, considering the issues mentioned above regarding identifying these courses in publicly available data, that

further work would be required by a range of parties in order to produce robust quantitative information specifically about the courses in scope of this evaluation.

59 Finally, we have asked providers themselves to undertake some quantitative evaluation when presenting their data to us regarding progression. We have given broad instructions regarding which students we consider should be counted and which should not in order that we can achieve a consistent and comparable set of information across the sector. We have not sought in these cases to audit or otherwise validate this quantitative information that has been submitted, noting that it would have been burdensome to do and would likely step outside of the defined scope of the evaluation. Our expectation is that providers will have been internally consistent in their approach (that is, have produced data that can be safely compared with their other data), but we recognise as we did not prepare a detailed technical specification that there may be some difference in comparing between different providers. We consider this acceptable because the quantitative data represented a small part of our analysis, and the significant emphasis in our approach would be on analysis of the qualitative evidence that we were able to manage consistently through our reviewers.

60 To encourage the receipt of consistent and comparable evidence sets overall we offered all providers the opportunity to attend a live webinar in advance of any evidence submission, and made a recorded version available to all providers. Providers were actively encouraged to raise queries with us in order that we could both understand any potential challenges or issues, and also encourage the receipt of an evidence base that would be accessible for our reviewers.

61 Following the submission period of evidence that took place in April 2024, in addition to the standard documentation we sought to review that would be consistent across students at a provider (published admissions requirements, programme specifications, module descriptors, academic regulations, assessment materials) our evidence base for this exercise comprised 2,731 student admissions records,<sup>4</sup> and 2,063 pieces of assessed student work (1,427 for IFP and 636 for IYO).

62 We appointed 36 reviewers to conduct the analysis of the evidence. Reviewers were asked to look at specific parts of questions, rather than appointing reviewers on a one-to-one basis to whole provider submissions. We consider this was an efficient approach to the assessment, and allowed the reviewers to understand a cross section of the materials submitted across different providers. All reviewers were appointed in line with our standard [Conflicts of Interest Policy](#) to ensure independence and neutrality in their findings. Assessors were asked to complete a standardised template produced by QAA with their findings to allow for further internal analysis. QAA officers have then analysed these templates to draw together the findings in the subsequent sections of this report.

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<sup>4</sup> We observed during the evidence collection process that some providers had interpreted the evidence requirements for admission records differently. Some providers offered individual pieces of evidence per student (that is, actual copies of student certificates of prior qualifications), some had collated this information into a single output where it clearly listed the recorded student's qualifications on entry, and some simply confirmed that the student had met the published entry requirements. In relation to this latter group, we returned to the provider with clarificatory questions in order to enhance the standard of the evidence received. We have not sought to audit the information provided in the second group and have analysed it on face value.

## Findings

### Note regarding nomenclature and programme titles

63 Our approach for this work was to undertake an evaluation that is consistent across all relevant programmes across all nations in the UK. In undertaking our work, we have noted two particular issues regarding nomenclature that we consider are important for us to clarify regarding our approach.

64 Firstly, we note there is a significant number of different ways in which providers have chosen to name their programmes - for example, some with explicit naming conventions that distinguish programmes as being focused for international students, or in other cases using alternative naming but promoting these courses only to such students. In some cases, it would not be possible to discern from the name alone the demographic focus of these programmes. In our work, we have avoided any consideration of the naming of programmes and have instead focused on the level of the programme and its content and standards. We do consider, notwithstanding the need for providers to ensure the names of programmes accurately reflect their academic content, that it would be helpful across the higher education sector for there to be greater clarity regarding the naming of programmes of this type to provide clarity regarding their offering and focus.

65 Secondly, we wish to acknowledge the potential differences in provision in Scotland in relation to programmes of this type compared to the rest of the UK. In Scotland, it is common for undergraduate programmes to last for four years of study (progressing through SCQF Levels 7-10). In some providers, it is possible to study an International Year Two programme, which would allow an international student to complete the degree in three years. We have not considered these programmes as part of this work. This is because we consider the international year two programmes are likely to be studied at SCQF Level 8, which is equivalent to Level 5 on the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) used elsewhere in the UK. We do not believe any providers outside of Scotland are offering any international student specific programmes that would have an entry point at Level 5 as opposed to Level 4; therefore, we consider this to be a unique feature of the Scottish system due to the standard length of degree study being longer. Therefore, in this work we have only considered programmes at SCQF Levels 6 and 7 to ensure that all findings are comparable across the UK, and none of our findings should be interpreted as being applicable to Scottish International Year Two programmes.

66 **RECOMMENDATION:** QAA recommends that the higher education sector should consider how there can be greater consistency in the approach to naming programmes covered by this evaluation to ensure international students and other stakeholders understand the nature of these programmes. QAA considers that the section on titling conventions for qualifications in The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) may be helpful in this regard (including for the International Foundation Programmes not covered by the FHEQ). Further, this is something that QAA will consider when it next updates the Characteristics Statement for International Pathway Courses and develops the next version of the Advice and Guidance on Partnerships as part of the UK Quality Code.

## Entry requirements for International Foundation Programmes and International Year One Programmes

67 This section sets out our findings regarding the equivalency of entry requirements between the International Pathway Programmes and any equivalent programmes that providers identified are open to domestic students.

68 It is acknowledged that providers are autonomous institutions and responsible for their own admissions criteria, and QAA is not proposing that, beyond principles of fairness and transparency, they should otherwise be subject to outside influence.

### Entry requirements for International Foundation Programmes (IFPs)

69 Reviewers were asked to determine whether entry requirements for IFPs were equivalent to the entry requirements for domestic (UK) students onto equivalent Level 3 programmes being offered by higher education providers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and equivalent Level 6 programmes in Scotland.

70 By equivalence, we considered courses being offered at the same level, and where on successful completion they permitted entry on a standard undergraduate course to be equivalent. These are commonly known as foundation years.<sup>5</sup> We acknowledge that some IFPs may offer additional elements (such as English language tuition) that would not commonly be offered to domestic students on foundation year programmes; however, we believe the principal purpose of the courses - to support students that may not meet the provider's criteria to directly enter onto an undergraduate course - to be sufficiently similar that this is a meaningful comparison.

71 Reviewers were also asked to establish whether the entry requirements were applied consistently for entry to the IFPs and the equivalent Level 3/6 programmes.

### Evidence

72 In order for reviewers to determine whether entry requirements for IFPs were equivalent to the entry requirements for domestic Level 3/6 programmes, providers were asked to submit information about the entry requirements for their selected programmes. They were also invited to submit an optional written commentary to explain any known differences in the entry requirements for their IFPs and equivalent domestic foundation programmes.

73 To test the application of entry requirements through admissions decisions for both IFP and equivalent domestic foundation (EDF) programmes, evidence was requested to enable reviewers to evaluate the extent to which entry requirements were applied consistently.

74 The evidence base for exploration of the review questions relating to entry requirements was constructed through simple random sampling undertaken by QAA. All participating providers were asked to provide unique student identifiers for the students on the programmes in academic years 2022-23 and 2023-24 for all programmes that had been selected for evaluation. Using an in-house sampling calculator, QAA was able to generate a statistically significant random sample set at a 95% confidence level. Providers were informed of their individual samples and were asked to submit admissions records for all IFP and EDF programmes.

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<sup>5</sup> Not to be confused with foundation degrees, which are Level 5 qualifications.

75 Providers submitted 1,861 pieces of evidence relating to entry requirements and the application of entry requirements in the admission of students to programmes. The evidence was scrutinised by reviewers who were required to comment on whether entry requirements were equivalent and note any observable differences between the entry requirements for IFPs and EDFs, and to comment on whether the admissions records demonstrate that the entry requirements have been applied consistently. The sample consisted of 1,427 admissions records for IFP students and 434 for EDF.

76 The information submitted about the entry requirements for IFPs showed that admissions criteria were specified using the names of the local national qualifications that students would have studied in their home country. As the evidence showed that students on IFPs were drawn from a wide range of countries and education systems, determining any differences between entry requirements for IFPs compared to equivalent domestic foundation programmes for those unfamiliar with international qualification frameworks is challenging. QAA, therefore, selected eight reviewers with expert knowledge of the operation of International Foundation Programmes as well as experience of UK education systems and qualifications to examine the evidence base.

77 In exploring the equivalency of entry requirements between IFPs and EDFs it is noted that in addition to the entry requirements set by providers themselves for the admission of students to programmes and study pathways, there are minimum requirements set for international students' study visas by the UK Government. Although adherence to these regulations was not the subject of this evaluation, the key points are summarised below for information and context within which to understand IFP entry requirements and admissions decisions.

78 Under UK government regulations, international applicants can apply for a student visa to study in the UK providing they have been offered a place on a course by a licensed student sponsor (as is the case with all providers included in this report). If studying below degree level, that is, at Level 3 / Scottish CQF 6, students can usually stay for two years.

79 Critically, in contrast to domestic students, international students must demonstrate a sufficient level of English language proficiency for the level of study by passing a Secure English Language Test from a UK government approved provider, or by holding A Level or Scottish Higher awards. The minimum English language level to be demonstrated is set at B2 CEFR (Council of Europe - Common European Framework of Languages).

80 Furthermore, providers must undergo a Basic Compliance Assessment carried out by UK Visas and Immigration to ensure visa refusal rates are in line with stated norms, that student enrolment takes place (that is, that students turn up for the course) and that course completion (though not necessarily progression) is at the required level.

81 The measures above put in place minimum standards for international students to study in the UK.

## **Analysis**

82 In all, of the 32 participating providers offering IFPs, 18 providers indicated that they also offered an equivalent domestic foundation programme(s). Fifteen of the 18 providers submitted evidence relating to a total of 132 International Foundation Programmes and 47 equivalent domestic foundation programmes.

83 Providers submitted information clearly setting out the admission criteria for IFP and EDF programmes specifying the qualifications, subjects and exam grades required for entry. The information included details of the specific qualifications expected for each programme, including for IFPs the country-specific titles of qualifications, as well as the expected grade of



each qualification required for each subject area and any additional academic attainment for specific routes, that would be considered for admission of students from different countries and regions. English language requirements were also specified.

84 A key challenge in seeking equivalency of entry requirements is that education systems differ in design, curricula, grading and the placing of qualifications on the various national and international qualifications frameworks. The evidence of students' transcripts of attainment submitted for this evaluation demonstrated that IFPs draw students from a wide range of countries. For example, one provider's submission contained student transcripts from Egypt, Algeria, Korea, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

85 To assist in determining the value and equivalency of diverse qualifications, providers can make use of the services of ENIC, the UK National Information Centre for the recognition and evaluation of international qualifications and skills, and although not specifically required to do so as part of this evaluation, some providers indicated in their explanatory commentaries that they consider ENIC data in setting the entry requirements.

86 To establish whether entry requirements for IFPs were equivalent to the entry requirements for domestic (UK) students onto equivalent Level 3 programmes, reviewers examined the details of academic qualifications and grades required for each programme submitted by providers.

87 In most cases reviewers were able to confirm from their scrutiny of the admissions criteria that there is broad equivalence of entry requirements between IFPs and EDF programmes. This is because the country-specific qualifications required for entry onto IFPs were equivalent to Level 2, GCSE, which is normally required for entry to A Level or similar Level 3/6 programmes in the UK. In a minority of cases incomplete information from providers did not permit meaningful comparisons to be made.

88 The reviewers found that differences between the intended purpose and target student population for IFPs and domestic foundation programmes resulted in some cases in variations in the type of qualifications required for entry, making evaluation of equivalency between programmes more complex. Some of the optional commentaries submitted by providers explained that these apparent differences between the admissions criteria for programmes relate to the different purposes of IFP and EDF programmes and the different student target groups.

89 Provider commentaries showed, for example, that IFPs are mostly designed for younger students who require additional study before they can join an undergraduate degree in the UK. Entry to IFPs therefore relies heavily on academic potential demonstrated through stipulated years of school study and successful attainment of school qualifications, as well as demonstrated English language proficiency. In contrast, many UK foundation year programmes are designed for a variety of different purposes with different groups of students in mind. These differences have implications for admissions criteria which are sometimes more flexible for domestic students than the criteria applied on IFPs. One large provider explained that it provides foundation programmes for home and international students who do not require a visa to enable access to its degree programmes for those who are looking to change career pathway, are seeking a return to learning or may have experienced disrupted school education. Entry to these courses considers qualifications achieved at Level 2 as well as other criteria such as relevant work experience depending on the course. Individuals' skills and motivation are also reviewed as part of the application process. Other similar examples of the use of non-standard entry requirements for UK domestic foundation programmes were also provided.

90 To evaluate the extent to which entry requirements are consistently applied in the admission of students onto IFP and EDF programmes, providers were asked to submit

documentary evidence showing the basis on which the students included in the sample had been admitted to the IFPs and EDF programmes. This evidence submitted often included spreadsheets detailing the academic qualification and actual grades achieved by each student to gain entry to the programme and was accompanied in some cases by scanned images of individual students' transcripts and certificates of attainment.

91 Reviewers scrutinised this evidence which confirmed in the cases where the evidence was complete that the achievements of students reflected the published entry requirements for programmes and, therefore, that entry requirements are applied consistently for admission to the IFPs and equivalent Level 3/6 domestic programmes. In total, 83 programmes were deemed to have sufficient evidence to draw this conclusion. However, reviewers were unable to draw the same conclusion for the remaining programmes due to incomplete data within the evidence base.

92 Where optional commentary was provided, several institutions included information about the operation of discretion in the admissions process when, for example, students are on the borderline of demonstrating the required admissions criteria. The commentary indicates that in such cases institutions may take decisions about entry based on a more holistic assessment of the capability of a student to achieve success. For example, in some cases following the initial application, interviews were offered as an additional step. Students could then be admitted onto courses based on the answers given during this process. It was not possible from the evidence submitted for this evaluation to draw any conclusions about the extent of the use of discretion in the admission of students to IFP programmes. However, in so far as such decision-making is documented in this study, it suggests that this is common practice for the sector and confirms that admissions professionals are giving consideration to students' individual circumstances when making decisions.

93 In conclusion, the analysis confirms that where evidence was available for scrutiny by reviewers, the entry requirements for IFPs are equivalent to the entry requirements for domestic students onto equivalent Level 3 programmes in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and equivalent Level 6 in Scotland, and that entry requirements are applied consistently for admissions decisions.

### **Entry requirements for International Year One programmes (IYO)**

94 Reviewers were asked to determine whether entry requirements for IYO programmes were equivalent to the entry requirements for domestic (UK) students onto equivalent Level 4 programmes in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and equivalent Level 7 programmes in Scotland.

95 For the purposes of this review, IYO and equivalent domestic Level 4/7 programmes are considered to be equivalent when they offer entry to the next level of study on similar programmes. For example, where the IYO in Business Studies and the domestic equivalent programme in Business Management both offer entry to Level 5/8 of a Business Management degree, they could be considered to be equivalent.

96 Providers were given scope to determine which courses in their institutions were equivalent to the IYO programme. Where the IYO typically allows progression onto multiple degrees, providers were asked to select the closest equivalent. Where there was no closest equivalent, they were asked to identify the degree to which, historically, most students progress and to treat this as the equivalent domestic degree.

### **Evidence**

97 In order for reviewers to determine whether entry requirements for IYO programmes were equivalent to the entry requirements for domestic students onto equivalent Level 4

programmes in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and equivalent Level 7 programmes in Scotland, providers were asked to submit information about the entry requirements for their programmes. They were also invited to submit an optional written commentary to explain any differences in the entry requirements for their IYO programmes and equivalent domestic Level 4/7 programmes.

98 To test the application of entry requirements through admissions decisions for both IYO and equivalent Level 4/7 programmes, evidence was requested to enable reviewers to evaluate the extent to which entry requirements were applied consistently.

99 The evidence base for exploration of the application of entry requirements was constructed through simple random sampling undertaken by QAA. All providers were asked to provide unique student identifiers for the students on the programmes in academic years 2022-23 and 2023-24, for all programmes that had been selected for evaluation. Providers were informed of their individual samples and were asked to submit admissions records for all IYO and equivalent domestic programmes.

100 In total, 870 (636 IYO and 234 domestic) admissions samples were submitted by providers and scrutinised by reviewers who were required to comment on whether entry requirements were equivalent and note any observable differences between the entry requirements for IYO programmes and the equivalent domestic programme, and to comment on whether the admissions records demonstrate that the entry requirements have been applied consistently.

101 As with the IFPs, the information submitted about the entry requirements for IYOs showed that admissions criteria were specified using the names of the local national qualifications that students would have studied. As the evidence showed that students on IYOs were drawn from a wide range of countries and education systems, determining any differences between entry requirements for IYOs compared to UK domestic equivalents for those unfamiliar with international qualification frameworks is challenging. QAA therefore selected seven reviewers with expert knowledge of the operation of international year one programmes as well as experience of UK education systems and qualifications to examine the evidence base.

102 In exploring the equivalency of entry requirements between IYOs and equivalent domestic programmes it is important to understand the broader national context in which international study and admissions to programmes takes place. As has been noted in relation to IFP, the UK government sets minimum requirements for international study visas that are in addition to the entry requirements set by providers themselves for the admission of students to programmes and study pathways. While compliance with these requirements is outside the scope of this review, an outline of their key features is noted below.

103 As with the IFPs, student visa arrangements also apply for these programmes. Students 18 years old or over who enrol on most undergraduate degree courses are normally allowed a five-year study period in which to complete their programmes.

104 As with the IFPs, the student sponsor visa requirements regarding English language assessment and ongoing Basic Compliance Assessments also apply. These government requirements establish minimum standards for international students to study on IYO programmes in the UK.

## **Analysis**

105 In all, of the 20 providers offering IYOs, 10 indicated that they offered an equivalent domestic programme. Providers submitted evidence consisting of a total of 53 International Year One programmes and 24 equivalent domestic programmes. The programmes that

were deemed to be equivalent programmes that were submitted by providers were the first year of undergraduate programmes.

106 Providers submitted information setting out the admission criteria for IYO and equivalent domestic programmes specifying the qualifications, subjects, and exam grades required for entry. The information included details of the specific qualifications expected for each programme, including for IYO programmes the country-specific titles of qualifications, as well as the expected grade of each qualification required for each subject area and any additional academic attainment for specific routes, that would be considered for admission of students from different countries and regions. English language requirements were also specified.

107 To establish whether entry requirements for IYOs were equivalent to the entry requirements for domestic (UK) students onto equivalent Level 4/7 programmes, reviewers examined the details of academic qualifications and grades required for each programme submitted by providers and in the majority of cases were able to confirm from their scrutiny of the admissions criteria that there is broad equivalence of entry requirements between IYOs and the equivalent domestic programmes. This is because the country-specific qualifications and length of schooling requirements for entry onto IYO programmes were equivalent to Level 3, A Level, which is commonly required for entry to Level 4/7 programmes in the UK.

108 Reviewers found that in a few cases it was difficult to fully establish equivalency across individual programmes. This was due to the varied number of country-specific qualifications being considered which were not always submitted as part of the evidence base.

109 To evaluate the extent to which entry requirements are consistently applied in the admission of students onto IYO and equivalent domestic programmes, providers were asked to submit documentary evidence showing the basis on which the students included in the sample had been admitted to the programmes. This evidence submitted included a mixture of spreadsheets detailing the academic qualification and actual grades achieved by each student to gain entry to the programme and scanned images of individual students' transcripts and certificates of attainment.

110 Reviewers scrutinised this evidence which confirmed in the cases where the evidence was complete that the achievements of students reflected the published entry requirements for programmes and, therefore, that entry requirements are applied consistently for admission to the IYOs and equivalent domestic programme.

111 As with the entry requirements equivalency above, reviewers were similarly challenged by incomplete evidence submitted by providers and were unable to confirm that entry requirements had been applied effectively in all cases. Reviewers noted in these instances this was due to a lack of information only and did not identify any cases where admissions criteria had not been applied in accordance with the entry requirements.

112 All providers submitted commentary on the use of discretion in making admissions decisions where students are on the borderline of demonstrating the required admissions criteria, and some provided details of the processes used to make decisions in these circumstances. This included, for example, established committees comprising senior academic and admissions staff to consider such cases on an individual basis. It was not possible from the evidence submitted for this evaluation to draw any conclusions about the extent of the use of discretion in the admission of students to IYO programmes, or the domestic equivalent programmes.

113 Some providers explained how they reviewed the educational outcomes in relation to continuation, progression and achievement of IYO students on a regular basis, usually

annually, so that they could identify where programmes needed to embed more support for students and, in some instances, where adjustment to entry requirements was needed for future applicants.

114 In conclusion, the analysis confirms that where evidence was available for scrutiny the entry requirements for IYOs are equivalent to the entry requirements for domestic students onto equivalent Level 4 programmes in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and equivalent Level 7 in Scotland, and that entry requirements are applied consistently for admissions decisions.

## International Foundation Programmes

115 This section sets out our findings concerning our consideration of evidence related to International Foundation Programmes. The purpose of our analysis in relation to these programmes was to consider specifically matters related to academic standards - in broad terms, whether or not students studying at different institutions will have reached a comparable level of achievement and understanding at the end of the course and have been assessed as such.

116 Standards are considered with regard to a baseline. For programmes below degree level, such as those offered by IFPs, we have taken the baseline to be the standard for a Level 3 qualification in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (according to the relevant descriptor set by the qualifications regulator in each nation), and Level 6 in the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework.<sup>6</sup>

117 Individual providers may choose to set requirements above the baseline standard for achievement, and this is down to their individual discretion. We have used the Level 3/6 descriptors because they are the qualifications levels that a UK student would normally expect to enter higher education courses with if seeking entry direct from school or college (that is, with A Levels or Scottish Highers).

118 For the avoidance of doubt, we do not expect that students having completed an International Foundation Programmes are likely to be awarded a Level 3/6 qualification by the higher education provider. This is because these levels are below higher education and higher education providers are therefore not making those awards - generally the student is pursuing study for entry directly to a higher education provider's courses, rather than seeking a transferable qualification. We have used the Level 3/6 descriptors as we consider them to be a reasonable proxy to consider the likely standard a higher education provider will require a student to have achieved if they are seeking entry into an undergraduate programme.

119 In our analysis of programmes, we have not considered general matters related to academic quality - for example, the quality of teaching received, or learning resources such as library provision, and so on. These are matters outside of the scope of this evaluation.

## Evidence

120 In total, 32 providers were identified as delivering IFPs, directly or indirectly through a partner provider. From these, evidence for 132 IFP courses was submitted. These ranged across 20 different subject areas including STEM (for example, Applied Science, Computing, Engineering), Social Sciences (for example, Law, Health) and Arts (for example, Arts, Design and Media, Fashion) to provide balance in terms of content, level and progression. Of these 132 courses, 95 were operated through the pathway providers with the largest (for

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<sup>6</sup> The Scottish system uses a different system of numbering, but these are equivalent levels.

this exercise) covering 25 courses and the smallest four. Universities operating their own IFPs deliver the remaining 37 courses reviewed.

121 To determine whether the academic standards of IFPs are equivalent to domestic Level 3 requirements in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and domestic Level 6 requirements in Scotland, providers were asked to submit samples of course documentation, and learning and teaching and assessment materials. This included programme specifications and the module specifications for the first and last module delivered on the programme which set out the specific knowledge and understanding, and practical and cognitive skills that a student is expected to be able to demonstrate at the end of the IFP programme. This information was used by reviewers to evaluate the extent to which programmes are offered at comparable levels to domestic Level 3/6 provision and reflect the range of knowledge and skills contained in the national level descriptors.

122 To evaluate whether assessment approaches are likely to allow a student to demonstrate that they have reached Level 3/6 and enable students to demonstrate the extent to which they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the programme, details of assessment methods, marking and grading processes used on programmes were requested.

123 To establish whether the standards achieved by students on IFPs are equivalent to those of domestic students and are achieved on similar terms, providers were asked to submit the assessment regulations which govern the determination of student outcomes on IFPs, and samples of assessed student work.

124 The scrutiny of the assessment regulations enabled reviewers to identify whether students are offered similar attempts at success as available to A Level students or Scottish Higher students (for Scottish institutions) through, for example, consideration of rules regarding the number of times students are permitted to re-sit failed components of assessment on IFPs, arrangements for compensation and/or condonement of failed assessment and regulations and policies for considering mitigating circumstances.

125 To establish whether standards are achieved in practice, samples of assessed student work were submitted for each programme. Reviewers scrutinised student assessed work, the associated assessment tasks, and the providers' marking processes to evaluate the extent to which students' work demonstrated the achievement of the learning outcomes documented in programme and module specifications, and to understand how providers arrived at grading decisions.

126 To construct the sample of assessed student work for evaluation, providers were asked to submit anonymised lists of students. From these lists QAA used an in-house sampling tool to select a simple random sample of students as the basis for requesting the summative assessed work undertaken for the first and last module of each programme. For students that enrolled in 2022-23, assessed work from the last module studied was requested. For students that enrolled in 2023-24, assessed work for the first module studied was requested. The inclusion of summative assessed work from the first and last module provided reviewers with insight into the achievement of students at different stages of the programme. In total, 1,427 pieces of assessed student work were submitted and scrutinised by reviewers.

127 In order to establish whether students on IFPs are progressing onto higher education on equivalent terms to students on domestic foundation programmes, providers were asked in cases where there is an equivalent domestic foundation programme to the IFPs under review, to provide information about the number and proportion of IFP students and equivalent domestic foundation programme students enrolled in 2022-23 who progressed to higher education in 2023-24.

128 In addition to the provision of documentary evidence, providers were also invited to submit optional commentaries relating to the evaluation questions, and the information contained in these commentaries has been used in the analysis where relevant.

129 Twenty-two reviewers were assigned to the evaluation of IFP related to their personal discipline specialisms. This allowed the reviewers to use their subject knowledge to look across IFP courses relevant to their expertise and therefore make comparisons across programme specifications, programme and module curricula, assessment tasks, marking and grading criteria. Reviewers recorded their findings in a reviewer findings record, noting any issues or concerns identified with course documentation, assessment materials, assessment regulations and students' assessed work, and any additional comments relating to the programme being evaluated.

## Analysis

130 As indicated above, we have used the level descriptors for domestic Level 3/6 qualifications set out by Ofqual in England, the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales, and the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework as a reference point for the evaluation of the standards set and achieved on IFP programmes. Typical qualifications at this level include, for example A Levels, Scottish Highers, Access to Higher Education diplomas, advanced apprenticeships, and Level 3 NVQs.

131 The descriptors set out the generic knowledge and skills associated with a qualification at Level 3/6. These outcomes are what a holder of the qualification can know or do on successful completion of the qualification. Although the wording of the national descriptors vary slightly in the way in which expectations are expressed, there is consistency across the descriptors in terms of the level of difficulty expected at Level 3/6 and the broad types of knowledge and skills identified for Level 3/6.<sup>7,8,9</sup>

132 The exploration of the standards set and achieved on the IFPs was guided by the three review questions set out in the original scoping document for this evaluation. The analysis of the findings in respect of each question is set out below.

### **Review Question 2a. Is the academic standard of IFPs equivalent to domestic Level 3 requirements in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and domestic Level 6 requirements in Scotland?**

133 To explore the review question, reviewers considered programme documentation submitted by providers which described the academic standards set on the IFPs and compared this to the standards set in the UK Level 3/6 descriptors. Reviewers also looked at information about assessment methods used on IFP programmes to understand how student achievement of standards are tested.

134 The key finding arising from the review of IFP course documentation indicates that in almost all cases looked at by the reviewers the evidence demonstrated that the standards set on the IFP programmes reflect the generic knowledge and skills associated with the UK qualifications frameworks at Level 3/6.

135 Reviewers analysed the programme handbooks, programme and module specifications submitted by providers for all the IFP programmes to understand the student learning outcomes expected on the programmes and evaluate the extent to which these

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<sup>7</sup> [www.gov.uk/guidance/ofqual-handbook/section-e-design-and-development-of-qualifications](http://www.gov.uk/guidance/ofqual-handbook/section-e-design-and-development-of-qualifications)

<sup>8</sup> [www.gov.wales/credit-and-qualifications-framework-cqfw-level-descriptors](http://www.gov.wales/credit-and-qualifications-framework-cqfw-level-descriptors)

<sup>9</sup> [About the Framework | Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework \(scqf.org.uk\)](http://About%20the%20Framework%20|%20Scottish%20Credit%20and%20Qualifications%20Framework%20(scqf.org.uk))



outcomes reflect the outcomes specified in the UK level descriptors for Level 3/6. In most cases reviewers found the information on the educational aims of the programme, course structure and intended learning outcomes to be clear, well laid out and comprehensive. The scrutiny confirmed that the statements of knowledge and understanding, intellectual and practical skills which students are expected to demonstrate on successful completion of the programme contained in the course documentation align with the generic knowledge and skills contained in the UK descriptors for Level 3/6.

136 The programme documentation also contained details of the teaching and learning approaches used on programmes. Reviewers' scrutiny of this indicates that the teaching methods are appropriate to enable students to develop the knowledge and skills required to meet programme learning outcomes and that students on IFPs are expected to engage in similar kinds of learning activities as those on domestic programmes, including, for example, attending lectures, seminars and tutorials.

137 In addition to programme documentation describing the standards set on the IFP programmes, reviewers considered documentary evidence describing the assessment methods used on programmes by providers to test and measure students' achievement of the required standards. The reviewers found that in most cases assessment approaches are in line with the levels set out in the level descriptors for domestic Level 3/6 provision. Reviewers found that assessment tasks are effectively designed to ensure that programme aims and learning outcomes are addressed and enable students to demonstrate the achievement of learning outcomes. Assessment criteria and grading descriptors are aligned to the expected learning outcomes at the right level.

138 Reviewers were asked to note in their analyses instances of concern relating to the standards set on programmes and/or note any observations which may be of interest to the sector. While none of the reviewers noted any serious general concerns regarding the standards set on IFP programmes and their equivalence to domestic Level 3 programmes, the following points relating to a few isolated cases were noted:

- Reviewers found one instance in which a programme specification did not identify the aims of the programme or learning outcomes.
- Reviewers found one instance where the way in which the learning outcomes were expressed in the course documentation was not clear and did not effectively convey the intended level of the programme.
- Reviewers found one instance in which the learning outcomes for a programme were expressed in a way which indicated a lower level than that expected for Level 3/6.
- Reviewers found several examples where programme specifications did not make specific reference to the level of the programme against the UK qualifications frameworks. We consider this may be a feature of some programmes because the provider does not intend to make an award of a recognised Level 3 qualification.
- On two programmes it was noted that the providers' regulations permitted the inclusion of Level 2 modules up to 30 credits on Level 3 programmes. It is not uncommon in curriculum design for there to be a mix of credit levels, and this also takes place in some other Level 3 qualifications offered by awarding bodies to domestic students.

139 Regarding the assessment methods used to test the achievement of academic standards, reviewers made the following observations:

- In a very small number of cases, the assessment requirements on a module were set at a level below Level 3. For example, assessment which requires a lower level of cognitive engagement with the task than expected at Level 3. In such cases the

assessment task was not effective in testing the achievement of learning outcomes at the appropriate level and consequently the level of student learning is less.

- In one instance, the assessment task set did not enable students to demonstrate achievement of the learning outcome.
- Reviewers identified an instance in which the assignment brief on the IFP was generic to all disciplines for which they offer pathways, rather than making specific reference to learning outcomes related to the needs of the subject at the appropriate level. It could be argued that although generic assignments briefs provide a form of standardisation, they run the risk of not being relevant to the specialised subject matter and skills being studied.

140 In conclusion, the analysis shows that in almost all cases the evidence demonstrates that the academic standards set on IFPs are equivalent to domestic Level 3/6 programmes, and that the assessment approaches used on programmes are appropriate to test the achievement of standards.

**Review question 2b. Are the standards achieved by students on IFPs equivalent to those of domestic students and on similar terms?**

141 To explore the review question, reviewers considered the sample of students' summative assessed work selected by QAA. For students that enrolled in 2022-23, assessed work from the last module studied was scrutinised. For students that enrolled in 2023-24, assessed work from the first module studied was scrutinised. The programme assessment regulations were also considered to understand how assessment is operated and to explore whether students are offered similar attempts at success as available to A Level students or Scottish Higher students (for Scottish institutions).

142 In order to explore whether standards are being achieved in practice on IFP, 22 reviewers scrutinised the sample of student assessed work in the subject areas which reflected their own individual specialist disciplines. This amounted to 1,427 pieces of assessed student work in total.

143 Reviewers' scrutiny of the sample of student assessed work confirmed that in most cases standards are being achieved in practice. The assessed work shows that students are demonstrating the knowledge and skills expected at Level 3/6. Assessment is operated in line with providers' stated policies and processes for marking are in most cases applied appropriately utilising assessment and grading criteria which correspond to the requirements of the level.

144 In the very small number of cases where reviewers raised concerns or provided additional observations the following points were made:

- In one instance a reviewer identified an apparent mismatch between the comments internal markers made on a batch of student work and the grading criteria applied, resulting in grades that did not appear to reflect the marker's judgement.
- There were also two isolated examples where reviewers felt that the marking and grading of individual pieces of student work was overgenerous when students had not met the requirements of the assignment brief.

145 The review of assessment regulations used on IFPs shows some important differences in approach between IFP regulations and those which apply to domestic Level 3/6 awards such as A Level / Scottish Highers regarding students' opportunities to retake a course or resit an assessment in the event of failure.

146 Ofqual regulations state<sup>10</sup> that for all A Levels that are designed to meet Ofqual requirements, students must retake all of their exams when retaking the qualification in the event of failure. Non-exam assessment marks can be reused. Further, in unitised AS and A Levels that are designed to meet requirements set by Qualifications Wales and those designed to meet requirements set by CCEA Regulation in Northern Ireland, individual units can be retaken by students only once.

147 IFP assessment and reassessment regulations are set by the individual higher education institutions and, as such, it is common that regulations differ between providers. The review found that the regulations applied to IFPs were broadly inconsistent with A Level practice. International students generally have more opportunities to re-sit failed components of assessment and under a wider range of contexts, conditions and procedures relevant not just to the number of re-sits possible but also the criteria set for re-sit opportunities, how a re-sit is remarked (for example, whether re-sit marks are capped to a certain maximum), and how student progression may be impacted. This varied across providers, and notably policy and practice in pathway providers were influenced heavily by the host university's own policies and regulations.

148 For example, one IFP provider, following the host university policy, allowed international students four opportunities to complete each summative assessment set, including a repeat of a module if necessary. Another IFP allowed only one re-sit per module but allowed compensation or condonement (that is, a process that awards credit for a limited number of modules that have not been passed, often on the basis of good overall academic performance in a single academic year at a specific level). Another university did not allow any form of condonement.

149 It was noted in some cases that although students were permitted to re-sit a failed module within the terms of the university's regulations there were nevertheless consequences for progression. For example, progression requirements for some IFPs in specific areas (for example, courses leading to medicine programmes) require students to pass modules at first sitting - students are able to re-sit these modules if they do not achieve threshold grades, but this will not normally give them a further opportunity to progress.

150 As we have noted, unlike A Level / Scottish Highers, IFP provision is not intended to lead to a national award. Rather, IFP provision, though aligning to Level 3/6 descriptors, is often specifically tailored to the needs of the host university in subject matter, English language provision, study skills, and so on, and the entry requirements to particular programmes. Consequently, individual IFP assessment conditions may vary within and between providers.

151 While it is the case that IFPs and A Levels share a common purpose and outcome, in that they define and assess achievement of the knowledge, skills and understanding needed by students wishing to progress to undergraduate study in UK higher education, the review of IFP regulations undertaken as part of this evaluation confirms that there are differences between A Levels and IFPs, and also between IFPs at different providers, with regard to attempts at success. There is no single standard for IFPs and re-sit practice, and consequently opportunities for success vary considerably across IFPs and across the policies and practices of the host university.

152 In conclusion, evaluation of the sample of students' assessed work confirms that, in most cases, the standards set on IFPs are being achieved in practice. IFPs and domestic A Level and Scottish Highers are governed by different assessment regulations. This has

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<sup>10</sup> [www.gov.uk/government/publications/gce-qualification-level-conditions-and-requirements/gce-qualification-level-conditions-and-requirements--2](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/gce-qualification-level-conditions-and-requirements/gce-qualification-level-conditions-and-requirements--2)

resulted in IFP students generally having more opportunities and under more varied conditions to achieve successful progression through, for example, re-sitting assessments than the opportunities available to A Level / Scottish Higher students.

153 **RECOMMENDATION:** Collectively, higher education providers could seek greater standardisation of approach towards assessment practice and regulations on International Foundation Programmes. We have observed a range of approaches being employed for programmes that outwardly would appear otherwise similar. It is for higher education providers to determine their own policies and regulations regarding, for example, allowable attempts at assessment. However, in doing so they may wish to consider whether matters of perceived fairness with other potential applicants to the intended course for progression are relevant. In any decisions taken by individual providers they should ensure that the strategic approach to securing academic standards, quality assurance and enhancement is published, communicated clearly and accessible to staff, students and external stakeholders. Such an approach would be in line with the Key Practice set out in Sector-Agreed Principle 1 of the UK Quality Code.

### **Review question 2c: Do students on IFPs progress onto higher education on equivalent terms to students on domestic foundations programmes?**

154 In order to explore whether students on IFPs progress onto higher education when they have completed their studies and compare this to the experience of students on equivalent domestic foundation programmes (EDF), providers were invited to submit some quantitative information for QAA to consider.

155 For each IFP under review, and the EDF, providers were asked to state the number and proportion of full-time students enrolled in 2022-23 that progressed to the provider's degrees in 2023-24. Where the IFP and/or EDF could lead to multiple degrees, providers were asked to include all students that have progressed to a higher level of qualification.

156 The data were generated by the providers themselves, using their own records. Of the 15 providers who offered an EDF, 14 returned data. Providers were also invited to submit optional commentary to explain patterns of progression within their institutions.

157 The data showed a complex picture of enrolment and progression within and between providers, and subject areas for both IFP and EDF programmes. For example, on one IFP the progression rate was 74% compared to a progression rate on the EDF of 75% with similar student enrolment of 23 and 20 students respectively, demonstrating comparable outcomes. In contrast, within the same provider, an IFP course in another subject had a 62% progression compared to 88% on the EDF though enrolment numbers were similar. Data for programmes in similar subject areas at other providers showed different and varied progression for both IFP and EDF students.

158 Because of this complexity and the diverse range of programmes and subjects offered, and varying cohort sizes, we did not attempt to draw out general conclusions across providers or subject areas regarding progression. Nevertheless, the analysis did provide insight into the complex circumstances which effect progression for both international and domestic students which make simple comparisons difficult.

159 QAA understands that progression rates on IFPs could vary for several reasons, including, for example, students withdrawing or dropping out, absenteeism (and therefore a breach of visa regulations), difficulty of the subject content, student language and skills competencies, or poor initial advising meaning the student is on an unsuitable course. The analysis showed very low (below 50%) progression rates on six IFPs which varied between 22% and 48%. Where commentary was submitted by providers to explain these low rates, high levels of withdrawal due to non-attendance, or voluntary student withdrawal for personal

reasons were identified as the main reasons. For example, in the one case in a subject area where progression to the degree was 22%, the provider explained that this was due to a large proportion of students being recruited from one geographical region and high levels of non-attendance. Students were withdrawn from the programme by the provider, and this resulted in the very low progression rate. In another provider, the IFP progression rate was 38% in one subject area but 98% in a different subject. It was noted by the provider that there were only 16 student enrolments into the first, versus 52 in the second course. A number of international students on the first programme sourced from particular geographical regions withdrew from the course due to financial constraints.

160 Other reasons affecting progression were also highlighted. For example, on one IFP, where progression to the degree was 52%, the provider explained that one of the contributing factors to this outcome was that 10 of the students who completed the programme successfully did not pass the interview for their chosen degree and did not seek an alternative.

161 The possibility of transferring to another institution after successful completion of the IFPs and EDF programmes was highlighted by several providers as an explanation for internal progression rates. This was widely commented on in cases where progression rates were high as well as in cases of lower progression. For example, at two providers where success and internal progression rates on IFPs were high it was pointed out that some eligible students who did not progress internally did progress to other UK universities. At another university where progression rates on an EDF programme were comparatively low at 37% it was explained that the qualification gained by successful students was a stand-alone diploma that enables students to seek entry to programmes at other universities, and/or to interrupt their studies pending a later decision about continuing to study. The same university also highlighted the impact of financial difficulties experienced by some students on the EDF leading to lower progression rates. For the avoidance of doubt, the information available to QAA would not allow us to verify or track students across providers. While these claims are therefore unverified, we are of the view that they are plausible explanations.

162 The analysis revealed that several pathway providers make an alternative route available to students on IFPs who fail to meet entry requirements for the hosting university programmes as long as conditions are met. For example, one provider noted in their commentary that students who pass its own IFP award but do not meet agreed progression requirements into the programme of choice can access alternative offers onto an alternative provider through its internal placement service. This service is seen as a safety net for failing students by offering guidance and alternatives at other universities.

163 In conclusion, the data submitted by providers showed a complex picture of progression to undergraduate degree level study for IFP students and students on equivalent domestic Level 3/6 programmes which varied between subjects and between providers.

164 Due to this complexity, it was not possible to discern any general patterns of similarity or differences between IFP and EDF programme students in terms of rates of progression. However, the data and commentaries provide valuable insight in the complicated and varied circumstances which effect progression for both international and domestic students.

165 **RECOMMENDATION:** QAA recommends that individual higher education providers should regularly assess progression rates for international and domestic students, and should ensure they are considering internal comparisons between both subject and international and equivalent domestic programmes. This activity would be in line with the Key Practices set out Sector-Agreed Principle 4 of the UK Quality Code. In all cases, providers should ensure they understand the underlying reasons for the outcomes and

engage students as partners to understand and interrogate these reasons. This activity would be in line with Sector-Agreed Principle 2 of the UK Quality Code. Higher education providers should target quality enhancement activities where they can reasonably be expected to have a direct influence over progression (for example, by thoroughly investigating matters related to student attendance and the reason for poor attendance). Higher education providers should also ensure they have considered carefully their responses when factors are outside of their control (for example, in cases where the economic situation of a student's home country changes) to ensure their response is strategic.

## International Year One Programmes

166 This section sets out our findings in relation to our consideration of evidence related to International Year One Programmes. Compared to the International Foundation Programmes, there are fewer of these programmes being offered in the providers that engaged with this evaluation activity.

167 We also note that these programmes are higher education level, and therefore are also subject to the requirements in relation to quality from the funders or regulator, which differ in each nation of the UK. In this work, we have considered the evidence against clearly identifiable external reference points of Level 4 of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) or Level 7 of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF). The funders and regulators in each nation express their requirements differently; however, we are confident that these reference points provide a suitable basis for analysis as they are embedded within those requirements in each nation.

168 Unlike the International Foundation Programmes, International Year One Programmes are likely to lead to eligibility for a student to achieve an award of credit, and the potential to receive a UK qualification as an exit award if they were to leave their programme after successful completion. We therefore consider that our findings in this section are likely to be of particular interest as they relate to the core expectation in the UK Quality Code that academic standards of courses meet the requirements of the relevant national qualifications framework.

169 As with the International Foundation Programmes, our review in this area has focused predominantly on standards, rather than broader matters related to academic quality.

### Evidence

170 In total, 21 providers were identified as delivering IYOs, directly or indirectly through a partner provider. From these, evidence for 53 IYO courses was submitted. Of these 53 courses, 46 were operated through one of seven different pathway providers with the largest (for this exercise) covering 13 courses and the smallest two. Providers operating their own IYOs covered the remaining seven courses reviewed.

171 To determine whether the academic standards of IYOs are equivalent to domestic Level 4/7 requirements, providers were asked to submit course documentation and learning and teaching and assessment materials. This included programme specifications and the module specifications for the first and last module delivered on the programme which set out the specific knowledge and understanding, and practical and cognitive skills that a student is expected to be able to demonstrate at the end of the IYO programme. This information was used by reviewers to evaluate the extent to which programmes are offered at comparable levels to domestic Level 4/7 provision and in accordance with the descriptors within the qualifications frameworks for qualifications at those levels.

172 To evaluate whether assessment methods are in line with the requirements of Level 4/7 and enable students to demonstrate the extent to which they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the programme, details of assessment methods, marking and grading processes used on IYO programmes were requested.

173 To establish whether the standards achieved by students on IYOs are equivalent to those of domestic students on Level 4/7 programmes and are achieved on similar terms, providers were asked to submit the assessment regulations which govern the determination of student outcomes on IYOs, and samples of assessed student work.

174 To identify whether students are offered similar attempts at success as available to other Level 4/7 students through, for example, consideration of rules regarding the number of times students are permitted to re-sit failed components of assessment on IYO programmes, arrangements for compensation and/or condonement of failed assessment and regulations and policies for considering mitigating circumstances, assessment regulations were submitted and scrutinised by reviewers.

175 To establish whether standards are achieved in practice, samples of assessed student work were submitted. Reviewers scrutinised assessed student work, the associated assessment tasks, and the providers' marking processes to evaluate the extent to which students' work demonstrated the achievement of the learning outcomes documented in programme and module specifications, and to understand how providers arrived at grading decisions.

176 In total, providers submitted 626 pieces of assessed student work across 53 programmes within 11 subject areas.

177 In order to understand and compare progression rates on IYO programmes with domestic first year undergraduate programmes, providers were asked to submit information regarding the proportion of students that successfully progress from IYOs and equivalent domestic programmes at Level 4/7 on to the next level of study.

178 Eleven reviewers were assigned to courses based on their specialisms. This allowed the reviewers to use their subject knowledge to look across IYO courses relevant to their expertise and therefore make comparisons across programme specifications, course and module curricula, assessment format, tasks, criteria, marking/grading and feedback. In completing the Reviewer Findings Record, reviewers were asked to state whether they had any issues or concerns relating to the questions specified for each course allocated to them. They were asked to make any additional observations or raise further issues or concerns.

## **Analysis**

179 The exploration of the standards set and achieved on the IYO programmes was guided by the three review questions set out in the original scoping document for this evaluation. The analysis of the findings in respect of each question is set out below.

### **Review question 3a: Is the standard of IYOs being appropriately set at Level 4 of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications or Level 7 of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework?**

180 To explore the review question, reviewers considered programme documentation submitted by providers which described the academic standards set on the IYO programmes and compared this to the standards referred to in the UK Level 4/7 level descriptors. Reviewers also looked at information relating to assessment methods used for programmes to understand how student achievement of standards are tested.



181 The review of course documentation indicates that in almost all of the courses considered in this evaluation, the evidence demonstrated that the standards set on the IYO programmes reflect the generic knowledge and skills associated with the equivalent UK qualifications frameworks at Level 4/7.

182 Reviewers read the programme handbooks, and programme and module specifications submitted by providers for all the IYO programmes to understand the student learning outcomes expected on the programmes and evaluate the extent to which these outcomes reflect the outcomes specified in the relevant level descriptors. In the majority of cases, reviewers found the information on the educational aims of the programme, course structure and intended learning outcomes to be clear, well laid out and comprehensive. The scrutiny confirmed that the statements of knowledge and understanding, intellectual and practical skills which students are expected to demonstrate on successful completion of the programme contained in the course documentation align with the generic knowledge and skills contained in the equivalent UK level descriptors.

183 The programme documentation also contained details of the teaching and learning approaches used on programmes. Reviewers' scrutiny of this indicates that the teaching methods were appropriate to enable students to develop the knowledge and skills required to meet programme learning outcomes.

184 Reviewers were asked to note in their analyses instances of concern relating to the standards set on programmes and/or note any observations which may be of interest to the sector. While none of the reviewers noted any concerns regarding the standards set on IYO programmes and their equivalence to domestic Level 4/7 programmes, one reviewer observed that on one programme at module level, learning outcomes were not well developed, making it difficult to determine the level at which they are set. This may be confusing to students who may not know what is required of them to demonstrate the level, and to the markers of assessed work. For the avoidance of doubt, we do not consider there to be any significant issues with regard to the standards of the courses considered.

185 In addition to programme documentation describing the standards set on the IYO programmes, reviewers considered documentary evidence describing the assessment methods used to test and measure students' achievement of the required standards. The reviewers found that in the majority of cases assessment approaches are in line with the levels set out in the level descriptors for domestic Level 4/7 provision. Reviewers found that assessment tasks are generally effectively designed to ensure that programme aims and learning outcomes are addressed and enable students to demonstrate the achievement of the learning outcomes. Assessment criteria and grading descriptors are aligned to the expected learning outcomes at the right level.

186 Reviewers identified a very small number of issues within assessment criteria. Assessment criteria are linked to programme or module outcomes and identify the key learning that students must demonstrate in order to achieve marks within specific grade bands. Assessment criteria are used by markers to support consistency across their marking and by students to understand how their work is marked and what they need to do to achieve marks within band levels. In two instances reviewers noted that learning outcomes were too general to indicate the level that students had achieved. This could lead to inconsistency across markers and a lack of reliability in the levels that students had achieved. Again, we do not consider there to be evidence of any significant issues with regards to the standards being assessed in the assessment materials.

187 In conclusion, the analysis shows that in almost all cases the evidence demonstrates that the academic standards set on IYO programmes are equivalent to domestic Level 4/7

programmes, and that the assessment approaches used on programmes are appropriate to test the achievement of standards.

**Review question 3b: Are the standards achieved by students on IYO equivalent to those of domestic students and on similar terms?**

188 To explore the review question, reviewers considered the sample of students' summative assessed work to evaluate the standards achieved by students. For students that enrolled in 2022-23, assessed work from the last module studied was scrutinised. For students that enrolled in 2023-24, assessed work from the first module studied was scrutinised. The programme assessment regulations were also considered to understand how assessment is operated and to explore whether students on IYO programmes are offered similar attempts at success as available to students on equivalent domestic programmes.

189 Providers were asked to indicate whether their academic regulations for IYOs were different from those for other equivalent Level 4/7 undergraduate programmes. If so, they were asked to provide both sets of assessment regulations.

190 In order to explore whether standards are being achieved in practice on IYOs, 11 reviewers scrutinised the sample of student assessed work in the subject areas which reflected their own individual specialist disciplines. This amounted to 626 pieces of assessed student work in total across 11 different subject areas.

191 Reviewers' scrutiny of the sample of student assessed work confirmed that in most cases standards are being achieved in practice. The assessed work shows that students are demonstrating the knowledge and skills expected at Level 4/7. Assessment is operated in line with providers' stated policies and processes for marking are in most cases applied appropriately utilising assessment and grading criteria which correspond to the requirements of the level.

192 There were a small number of isolated concerns identified:

- at one provider it was considered that marking was overly generous with regard to two IYO students on two specific courses where marks awarded did not appear to be aligned to the assessment criteria
- in another provider, a piece of work with significant numbers of grammatical errors and moderate subject knowledge was awarded marks in the 70+ band where a mark in the mid-50s or low 60s would more accurately have reflected the standard.

193 It is possible that the providers' own internal quality assurance processes or internal moderation processes have already addressed these individual matters (and it was not the purpose of this evaluation to review the standards monitoring processes used by providers). Noting these were isolated examples of individual pieces of student work, we do not consider there to be significant issues with the standards being applied to student work in the courses we have evaluated.

194 Reviewers were asked to indicate any issues or concerns identified in assessment regulations regarding whether students on IYOs are offered similar chances of success as other entrants to other Level 4 (FHEQ) or Level 7 (SCQF) programmes.

195 Of the 53 courses, in almost all cases reviewers found no concerns or issues regarding the opportunities for success provided by different academic regulations being applied to IYO students than for domestic students on equivalent programmes. However, it was noted that where the provider was working with a partner, there were sometimes

differences between the two institutions' academic regulations. This meant that IYO students had more attempts to pass assessments. In some instances, particularly where international students are required to achieve higher marks than domestic students to progress, this meant that they could re-sit assessments in order to gain higher marks. We consider that it may not always be helpful for students to experience this approach, as this would not then be replicated when they transfer on to a course covered by the substantive provider's regulations.

196 In the small number of cases where there were differences between the assessment regulations for IYOs and those for the equivalent Level 4/7 programmes that domestic students would follow, the following observations were made regarding individual institutions:

- A small number of providers required IYO students to achieve higher module marks than those of domestic students (55% or 60% depending on the subject compared with the pass mark of 40%) in order to progress to the next level. These providers allowed IYO students to re-submit assessment for modules they had failed or achieved low marks on so they could achieve improved marks. This was not allowed by the academic regulations on the equivalent domestic programme where students' resubmitted work was capped at 40%. This means that international students had more opportunities to reach higher levels of achievement.<sup>11</sup>
- One programme enabled students with higher International English Language Testing System (IELTS) scores to undertake a 'fast track' module in Academic English in their first semester. If they were unsuccessful in achieving a pass mark, the examination board could recommend that they join the semester 2 standard version of this module. In effect, this provides IYO students with an additional opportunity.
- One programme provided the opportunity to IYO students to restart their course in semester 2 if they failed to reach a pass mark in their semester 1 modules, taking into account their 'assignment grades, attendance and commitment'.

197 In conclusion, evaluation of the sample of students' assessed work confirms that, in most cases, the standards set on IYO programmes are being achieved in practice. The evaluation noted that in some cases IYO and equivalent domestic programmes at Level 4/7 were governed by different assessment regulations, resulting in varying approaches to the opportunities provided to students to re-sit failed components of assessment.

198 **RECOMMENDATION:** Providers should consider whether it is appropriate to harmonise the academic regulations across Level 4 courses within their portfolios, including where they are being delivered by a pathway provider. If a provider has reasons for why they consider this is not desirable, they should clearly state this in order that stakeholders can understand the strategic approach being taken and the justification for any differences. We note this is particularly important where pathway providers' provision may be largely indistinguishable from the provision offered by the university provider. Such an approach would be in line with Sector-Agreed Principles 1 and 8 of the UK Quality Code.

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<sup>11</sup> This does not necessarily mean that these opportunities would have increased a student's final degree outcome at the completion of Level 6/10 study as in many cases completion of Level 4/7 is necessary to progress to the next year of study, but is not factored into the classification of degree achieved.

### **Review question 3c: In terms of progression, how do IYO programmes compare to domestic first years of undergraduate degrees?**

199 Providers were asked to submit information regarding the proportion of students that successfully progress from IYOs and their domestic equivalent at Level 4/7 on to the next level of study. Providers were asked to state the number of full-time students enrolled on the IYOs in 2022-23 that progressed to the second year of the provider's degrees in 2023-24, including those that switched subjects, provided their study was at a higher level than in the previous year, and the number of domestic students on the degree that progressed from the first to second year of the degree, including those that switched subjects, provided that their study was at a higher level than in the previous year. Providers were instructed not to include students who did not complete in 2022-23 and who repeated that same year of study in 2023-24; nor were they to include students who successfully completed their IYO in 2022-23 but who transferred courses and repeated the same level of study during 2023-24.

200 Progression is a very important measure of student achievement, not only because students begin their programmes with the expectation of gaining degrees, but because it is an indicator of the success of institutions in designing courses where all students are supported to achieve the best possible outcomes. However, it is also very complex, and there may be legitimate reasons for students who may well, for a variety of specific reasons, be unable to finish their studies or, in the case of international students, choose to move to another institution having completed IYO.

201 For the purposes of this review, providers were asked to provide information only in relation to those students who progressed within their own or partner institution. As mentioned above, it is possible for students who successfully complete Level 4/7 courses to transfer to Level 5/8 at other providers, but this is not normally captured in individual institutions' data either for the purposes of this review or more widely by providers as a general practice across higher education. It was notable and commendable therefore that our reviewers identified one provider that had tracked its students so it could identify where they progressed to other institutions.

202 Information was provided for 44 IYO programmes across 20 institutions. Of those 44, only 25 provided equivalent programme information for domestic students. In some instances, student numbers were very small, making comparisons difficult. These matters limit the extent of the analysis and findings.

203 The data drawn from providers' submissions for the 25 programmes which included information about equivalent domestic programmes indicates that in most cases a higher percentage of students on domestic programmes were more likely to progress than those on IYO programmes. Progression rates for IYO programmes differ across different programmes and institutions in terms of the number of students that progress. In some cases there are more observable differences than others. While some providers identified programme-specific reasons, including a site change and student financial difficulties, it is not generally clear why such differences exist.

204 One provider explicitly referred to how it analysed progression and continuation rates on IYO programmes so that additional support for students could be identified and implemented for future students. This may be the case in other institutions and could be considered as effective practice.

205 One reason that may lead to a difference in progression outcomes could be related to the requirements in some providers' regulations for IYO students to achieve higher module marks or grade averages across the level, typically 55-60% compared with the pass mark of 40%, than students on equivalent domestic programmes. In some cases, these

requirements also appeared to be subject specific - for example, one provider explained that it required higher marks for progression to Level 5/8 particularly where entry to the equivalent Level 4/7 domestic programme required specific A Levels in certain STEM subjects.

206 However, data also demonstrated that, of the 25 programmes, seven had better progression rates on IYO programmes than their equivalent domestic programmes. These, together with programmes where the differential progression rate between IYO and domestic students is narrow, indicate that there is practice within the sector which could be used to identify successful strategies that could be shared more widely across institutions regarding the support for international students, while also maintaining equivalence for domestic programmes.

207 On seven other programmes, the difference between IYO and domestic equivalent progression was more than 10 percentage points in favour of the latter, and on two of those seven programmes there were concerning differences. For example, one institution indicated that its progression rate for one IYO course was 12.5% compared with 77% for equivalent domestic programmes. In this case, specific course matters concerning a change of site, poor attendance and issues with students experiencing financial difficulties were cited as the reason. On another course in a different institution, IYO progression was only 17% compared with 77% on equivalent domestic programmes. Again, the provider cited student financial difficulties as a reason for poor progression.

208 It is concerning to note that financial difficulties of students are cited by several institutions as impacting adversely on student progression. One provider commented that the progression statistics for 2023-24 have been heavily affected by external influences out of their control, stating that a lower-than-normal progression rate of 51% on one of its courses can be linked primarily to the financial situation in many of the students' countries of origin, in particular Nigeria and Pakistan. Due to the fluctuating economic and political situations of these countries, numerous students were negatively impacted and were unable to continue their studies owing to financial pressures.

209 It is possible that, although not mentioned by all providers, this is a factor across the wider sector, particularly in relation to groups of students from specific countries. These issues are likely to affect the population of international students as a whole, rather than affecting a particular provider or subject. One institution provided commentary to highlight how it was investing resource into helping potential overseas students to develop a realistic understanding of the financial implications of studying in the UK. This could be seen as evidence of good practice.

210 In conclusion, the data submitted by providers showed a complex picture of progression for IYO students and students on equivalent domestic programmes which varied between subjects and between providers. The evaluation identified a number of factors affecting progression for IYO students, including the fluctuating economic and political situations of their home countries.

211 **RECOMMENDATION:** In line with our recommendation for International Foundation Programmes, providers should regularly assess progression rates for international and domestic students, and should ensure they are considering internal comparisons between both subject and international and equivalent domestic programmes. QAA further recommends that consideration of the student experience is undertaken when differences are observed. In doing so, providers should consider that with International Foundation Programmes they are preparing students for undergraduate study, whereas on International Year One Programmes they are delivering undergraduate study. Students requiring preparation will naturally come with a range of different knowledge and skills and will have

been assessed by the provider to have needed that assistance in order to be able to access higher education. However, with students entering onto undergraduate study, providers should be reasonably confident regarding a student's ability to succeed, and therefore it is essential providers understand the detailed reasons why students may be achieving differently across different programmes, assuming there are broader similarities in entry profile. Such an approach would be in line with Sector-Agreed Principles 1 and 4 of the UK Quality Code.

## Annex 1: Evaluation questions

This annex details the questions as they were originally set out in the published scoping document.

### 1 Entry requirements for International Foundation Programmes (IFPs) and International Year One Programmes (IYOs)

- a Are entry requirements for IFPs and IYOs equivalent to the entry requirements for domestic (UK) students onto equivalent Level 3 and Level 4 programmes in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, and equivalent Level 6 and 7 programmes in Scotland?
  - i Providers will be asked to submit their entry requirements for IFPs and IYOs and domestic foundation programmes and undergraduate study programmes for equivalent subject areas for QAA to analyse. QAA will consider any observable differences, and also the relevant Core practices of the UK Quality Code (2018 version).
  - ii Providers will be given the opportunity to provide an optional written commentary to explain any differences that they are aware of in their existing entry requirements that QAA will consider in its analysis.
- b Are the entry requirements applied consistently for all entry points?
  - i QAA will request a sample of evidence of actual student entry grades for IFPs and IYOs and equivalent domestic programmes.

### 2 International Foundation Programmes

- a Is the academic standard of IFPs equivalent to domestic Level 3 requirements in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, and domestic Level 6 requirements in Scotland?
  - i QAA will undertake a review of samples of course documentation and learning and teaching materials, to determine whether or not they meet the standard of Level 3 education in line with Ofqual's published level descriptor in England and Northern Ireland, the Level 3 descriptor of the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales, and the Level 6 descriptor of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework.
  - ii QAA will undertake a review of assessment materials, to determine whether assessment is in line with the levels set out above as appropriate.
- b Are the standards achieved by students on IFPs equivalent to those of domestic students and on similar terms?
  - i QAA will undertake a review of assessment regulations, to identify whether students are offered similar attempts at success as available to A Level students or Scottish Higher students (for Scottish institutions).
  - ii QAA will undertake a review of samples of assessed student work to determine whether standards are being achieved in practice.
- c Do students on IFPs progress on to higher education on equivalent terms to students on domestic foundation programmes?

- i Providers will be asked to submit information regarding the proportion of students that successfully complete IFPs and domestic foundation programmes for QAA to analyse.
- 3 International Year One Programmes
  - a Is the standard of IYOs being appropriately set at Level 4 of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications or Level 7 of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework?
    - i. QAA will undertake a review of samples of course documentation and learning and teaching materials, to determine whether or not they meet the standard of Level 4 (FHEQ) or Level 7 (SCQF) education as appropriate.
    - ii. QAA will undertake a review of assessment materials, to determine whether assessment is in line with Level 4 education (FHEQ) or Level 7 (SCQF) education as appropriate.
  - b Are the standards achieved by students on these international programmes equivalent to those of the domestic students, and on similar terms?
    - i If IYO programmes are subject to different academic regulations QAA will undertake a review of assessment regulations, to identify whether students are offered similar attempts at success as entrants to other Level 4 (FHEQ) or Level 7 (SCQF) study. QAA will consider the relevant Core practices of the UK Quality Code (2018 version).
    - ii QAA will undertake a review of samples of assessed student work to determine whether standards are being achieved in practice.
  - c In terms of progression, how do IYO programmes compare to domestic first years of undergraduate degrees?
    - i Providers will be asked to submit information regarding the proportion of students that successfully complete IYOs and equivalent Level 4 (FHEQ) or Level 7 (SCQF) activity for QAA to analyse.



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