

Agenda Item 16

Enclosure 6

Paper ETC 6/02

Shadow Health Professions Council

Education and Training Committee

**CORRESPONDENCE ON PHASE II OF SUBJECT
BENCHMARKING AND QUALITY ASSURANCE
AGENCY'S BULLETIN No. 9 " REAPING THE
BENEFITS "**

From QAA via the Secretary

FOR DISCUSSION AND DECISION

Executive Summary

1. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) is asked to up-date the Committee and Forum on the progress of the " prototype reviews " (which use the " Phase I Subject Benchmarks"). Those members of the Committee / Forum who attended the Steering Group on 8 January 2002 are invited to comment as well.
2. The letter reports on difficulties with Phase II of the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) Subject Benchmarking exercise. The attached QAA Bulletin places the letter in context.
3. The Committee may like to express a view on the situation, particularly because of the implications of Phase II Subject Benchmarking for Standards of Proficiency.

Ms Sandy Goulding
Head of Quality Assurance and Educational Development
Learning and Personal Development Division, HRD
Department of Health
Quarry House
Leeds LS2 7UE

28 January 2002

Dear Sandy

Benchmarking Academic and Practitioner Standards for NHS Funded Programmes

I promised to provide you with some background information about the recent benchmarking exercise and the intention to move to Phase 2. I have copied this letter to Ruth Howkins and Mike Laugharne at the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) who were closely involved with the project, to Professor Dame Jill McLeod Clarke who chaired the Benchmarking Group for nursing, midwifery and health visiting, to Helen Fields who was responsible for the Department of Health contract, and also to Peter Williams at QAA. The points made in this letter and any errors of fact are my own and you might wish to take views from Jill, Helen, Ruth and Mike separately.

The main reason for raising this issue with you is that there is some expectancy that the exercise we commenced leading to the publication last year of benchmark statements for NHS funded provision will be extended to include other health disciplines funded, in England, by HEFCE. This is emphasised by the Benchmark Statements being identified as Phase 1 on the cover, reference in the forward about Phase 2 leading to an overarching health professions framework, and the health professions framework that is integral to each of the statements being described as "emerging".

The benchmarking exercise commenced in January 2000 with the call for nominations to establish two groups. These were as follows:

Group 1 (led by Professor Dame Jill McLeod Clarke)

Nursing
Midwifery
Health Visiting

Group 2 (led by myself)

Dietetics
Speech Therapy
Chiropody/Podiatry
Prosthetics and Orthotics
Occupational Therapy
Orthoptics
Physiotherapy
Radiography (Diagnostic and Therapeutic)

Within the groups there was initially some concern that the NHS was seeking to use the exercise to drive the evolution of a core curriculum. Independently, Jill and I absolutely confirmed that this was not our intention but that we as health professionals should be able to identify a framework that might apply to all the different professions.

The great strength of what emerged, that is the common health professions framework, is that it fell out of discipline specific work undertaken by each of the professions and was therefore not contentious. Such was the level of agreement and common thinking that Jill and I were able to combine our separate core groups. It was, and still is, timely with the range of policy directives promoting seamless and integrated care focused on the needs of patients and not frustrated by existing professional boundaries.

The great weakness of the exercise was that different funding streams arbitrarily excluded some health professions from inclusion in the process. This is mirrored by the emergence of separate external quality assurance processes which are again dependent on the funding arrangements. For example, CPSM disciplines such as biomedical sciences, paramedics and arts therapists were excluded as was medicine, dentistry and pharmacy. The emerging health professions framework has therefore the potential to be extended and informal soundings amongst some of these disciplines as well as social work have indicated enthusiasm for exploring this further. It is somewhat ironic that separate funding arrangements are driving different quality assurance arrangements for healthcare whilst at the same time the establishment of Workforce Development Confederations, the merging of the separate levies (SIFT, MADEL and NMET) and the creation of the new Councils have all been in the interests of interprofessional working.

Clearly benchmark statements are important for the model of review that is being piloted for NHS funded provision. However, quite separate from this they will stimulate debate amongst academics and practitioners delivering healthcare education and training and will be helpful in identifying where this can be enhanced through shared teaching and learning amongst different professions. Furthermore, despite the limitations with the supportive evidence base, there is nevertheless considerable enthusiasm and belief, supported by DoH funding initiatives, that interprofessional learning will be key to better team working on qualification and support integrated care. It will not help having the different disciplines involved in shared learning being subjected to separate quality assurance processes.

Although Helen undertook some exploratory work, including meeting with Professor Sir Graeme Catto last year, I myself am not aware of any initiatives to progress this work to Phase 2. Jill and I did share our thoughts on the emerging framework with benchmark groups for other health professions being separately funded. For example, the biomedical scientists considered it and incorporated some of the elements within their separate statement.

My own view is that it would not be an onerous task, nor costly, to attempt to bring on board the other health and possibly social care professions to extend the framework so that it might be all embracing. Regardless of how quality assurance for NHS or Funding Council programmes may evolve, the framework would serve the Higher Education and practitioner community well and would both support enhancement and the implementation of interprofessional education and training.

I hope the above thoughts are helpful but please do not hesitate to contact me if you would like further information or detail on the points I have made.

With my very best wishes

Yours sincerely

Professor R Michael Pittilo
Pro Vice-Chancellor
Academic Quality, Assurance & Enhancement
Tel: 01707 284038
Fax: 01707 284046
e-mail: R.M.Pittilo@herts.ac.uk

c.c. Ms H Fields, Department of Health
Ms R Howkins, QAA
Mr M Laugharne, QAA
Mr P Williams, Acting Chief Executive, QAA
Professor Dame J McLeod Clarke



The Quality Assurance Agency
for Higher Education

higher quality

No 9 November 2001

THE BULLETIN OF THE QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

Inside

- 3 The new review process and operational issues
- 3 Preliminary analysis of Quality Assurance in Higher Education - consultation responses
- 5 Subject level reviews across the UK
- 6 Institutional level review
- 7 Review of health profession programmes
- 7 The Agency's work overseas
- 8 Access to Higher Education
- 9 Update on the *Code of practice*
- 9 Update on benchmarking
- 9 Progress files
- 10 Supporting the framework for qualifications of higher education in Scotland
- 11 How it all fits together: quality assurance and the standards infrastructure
- 13 Subscribers' meeting 2002
- 13 www.qaa.ac.uk

Agency offices

Head office

Southgate House, Southgate Street
Gloucester GL1 1UB
Telephone +44 (0) 1452 557000
Fax +44 (0) 1452 557070
Email comms@qaa.ac.uk

Glasgow office

183 St Vincent Street
Glasgow G2 5QD
Telephone +44 (0) 141 572 3420
Fax +44 (0) 141 572 3421

Agency web site

higher quality is published at
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Reaping the benefits

The last 10 months have seen a major change in the direction of the Agency's work. The proposals for a new approach to the external review of academic quality and standards in England, as well as the emerging and innovative ideas being developed in Scotland and Wales, offer us all the opportunity for a new beginning.

Implemented, these proposals will capitalise on the considerable progress made by higher education institutions over the past decade in securing their academic quality and standards. This progress has been verified, across the whole of the UK, by the various audit and subject assessment processes that have been operating since 1991.

Despite some claims to the contrary, our higher education system is among the most coherent and consistent, in terms of academic quality and standards, of any in the world. This is largely the result of the work that institutions have done, in association with the Agency, to create and embed the academic structures envisaged in the Dearing report on higher education (1997). These structures are beginning to demonstrate their value: now the investment has been made, it is time to reap the benefits.

What are the benefits? First, there is much greater awareness, at all levels, of the importance of careful and systematic attention to quality and standards in higher education. This includes recognition of the public duty to inform those to whom it matters - particularly students, potential students, and employers - about the standards of qualifications, and the academic facilities and services provided to help students reach those standards. Universities and colleges are now in a good position to provide that information. Secondly, the audits and assessments over the past decade have confirmed that there are no major systemic problems with quality and standards across higher education in the UK. There is no need to subject the academic community to repeated detailed external reviews at the micro level. It is sufficient to know that verified information is being provided and that quality assurance systems are working effectively. Thirdly, the move towards reliance on institutions' own internal quality assurance mechanisms means that the threat, perceived by some, of external control of higher education should recede. The twin traditions of academic collegiality and autonomy, so important for the intellectual health of a mature democracy, can once again be nurtured.

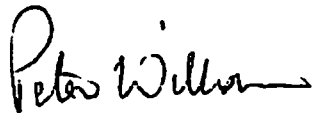
These benefits are considerable. But they do depend upon institutions' willingness to acknowledge their public responsibilities and duties, and to discharge them conscientiously and effectively. That is the compact implicit in the consultative document issued in July (HEFCE 01/45).

One of the Agency's principal tasks is to reinforce institutions' own capacity and effectiveness as guardians and stewards of academic quality and standards. Outside review bodies or inspectorates, visiting institutions or departments every five or six years, can at best have a limited impact on the quality and standards delivered day-to-day (albeit a dramatic and decisive impact at times). The effective way of assuring and improving quality on a continuing basis is to ensure that institutions recognise their own responsibilities and actively meet the resulting challenge. This principle is underpinning the development of the new quality assurance arrangements. The standards infrastructure (see page 11) makes the task easier.

So what is the role of external quality assurance when responsibility for quality and standards cannot but lie with those providing the programmes and awards? It is, first and foremost, to check that institutions are running their academic affairs in a way that can command public confidence. This is the accountability role, whose integrity cannot be jeopardised. External quality assurance also ensures that the information institutions provide for potential students and others about academic quality and standards is full, useful, reliable and up to date. This is the information verification role. And, further, it offers opinions and information to institutions about how they might consider improving their approaches to bring them up to the best of observed current practice. This is the enhancement role.

The development of the new process for England is inevitably at the forefront of our current work and thinking and is creating a lot of fevered media interest. But the Agency is continuing to do many things that don't attract quite so much attention. An example of this is our cooperation with the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish higher education funding bodies. We want to ensure that their review requirements are met in a way that reflects their distinct national characteristics, while at the same time allowing a maximum degree of congruency of outcome across the whole of the UK. We continue to advise relevant national ministers on applications from institutions seeking university title or powers to award degrees. And we are operating the Access Courses Recognition Scheme. This scheme is making an important contribution to the widening participation strategy, and it commands the support and respect of its participating organisations. Internationally, our programme of overseas audits, and participation in the Bologna and Prague processes, are enhancing the reputation of our higher education system here at home, defending its strengths and maximising its opportunities.

This issue of *higher quality* has articles about many of these activities. I hope the topics included will both inform and offer some new insights into the range of issues we are dealing with. I also hope that you will recognise the spirit of considerate interest, professionalism and helpfulness that we wish and intend to characterise our dealings with institutions and their staff, students and other interest groups. It goes without saying that we would be very pleased to hear from readers who agree or disagree with our views, and who want to contribute to the matters being discussed in this newsletter.



Peter Williams
Acting Chief Executive



The new review process and operational issues

In July, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), in association with Universities UK, the Standing Conference of Principals (SCoP) and the Quality Assurance Agency, published consultation proposals for a revised method for the quality assurance of teaching and learning in higher education in England. The consultation document (HEFCE 01/45) explains the rationale for the proposals, and also includes an outline of the review method that is envisaged. A first look at the responses to the consultation follows.

Since July we have received many requests, from higher education institutions and others, for more information about the process and procedures that would be used if the proposals were to be implemented as described. These requests have presented us with some difficulties. It would clearly not be right for us to pre-empt the results of the consultation by publishing procedural details that depended upon a particular outcome. And, until the Information Task Group has made its report, it is not possible to devise a scheme that takes full account of the information sets that institutions will be expected to provide. Finally, the consultation document states that 'the QAA will issue in due course, also for consultation and in the light of responses to this paper, a more detailed statement of the proposed approach to implementing the proposed framework' (paragraph 57).

Nevertheless, we do think it is important that the possible operational implications of the proposals should be understood. So we have decided to produce a 'preliminary operational description' in response to the requests we have received. It fleshes out the limited information provided in the consultation document, but takes into account the factors mentioned above. The description can be found on our web site at www.qaa.ac.uk.

Readers of the preliminary description need to be clear that it is no more than an illustration of what might be done if the proposals in the consultative document were to be implemented. It is not a statement of our policy or a 'QAA-preferred' model; it contains gaps that cannot be filled until other decisions have been taken. It also contains some features that would need further development before they could be implemented with full confidence.

The preliminary description does, however, represent a first shot at designing a workable method for institutional audit and selective subject reviews along the lines indicated in the consultative document. We hope this is helpful to readers.

The description will be modified in the light of further discussions between HEFCE, Universities UK, SCoP and the Agency. In the New Year, when the other related discussions on information are completed, a more detailed set of proposals will be published for formal consultation.

Quality Assurance in Higher Education - preliminary analysis of consultation responses

This article draws on an interim report on the consultation responses that was prepared on 31 October. The report was written to inform a series of meetings between the Agency and its main partner organisations which took place in the first two weeks of November. It was intended to provide an early and preliminary indication of mood and messages from the consultation, and was based on a representative selection of the responses.

We are grateful to all the organisations and individuals who have responded to the consultation.

Analysis of the responses has continued throughout November and a final report, based on all responses received, will be available very soon after this edition of *higher quality*.

Higher education institutions (and further education colleges in England)

In general, higher education institutions support the model set out in the consultation document. There is broad support for:

- an external quality assurance method that recognises that institutions themselves have the primary responsibility for quality and standards;
- a method that is as 'light' as possible, proportionate to the purposes to be achieved;
- the provision of useful public information to inform the choices of potential students and other stakeholders;
- an end to universal, comprehensive subject review programmes;

- a greater focus on enhancement, alongside accountability and information;
- evolution towards an audit-based method, that places greater reliance on institutions' own quality assurance processes, to secure these purposes.

There is strong encouragement to reinforce the message that the elements of the academic infrastructure - the *Code of practice*, *Subject benchmark statements*, qualifications frameworks etc - should be seen as advice and guidance, rather than prescription and expectation.

English further education colleges and their representative bodies are particularly concerned that they were not fully involved in the development of the proposals; that the model treats them differently from higher education institutions; and that there will be continuation of a comprehensive, subject review regime for further education colleges. There was strong encouragement for looking at how OFSTED and Adult Learning Inspectorate inspections could link with Agency audits/reviews.

Notwithstanding their broad support for the approach set out in the consultation document, higher education institutions identify a number of issues for further consideration. The two main ones relate to the place and nature of subject level processes in a system based on institutional audit, and to the expectations on provision of public information.

Subject level processes

There are concerns about: apparent tensions and confusions of purpose in the model; contradictions between objectives and operational descriptions in the document; 'drilling down' to subjects; whether following up at subject level was an appropriate response to weaknesses at institutional level; and the proposed 2002-04 subject review programme in higher education institutions.

There is general unease about the apparent continuation of subject review by another name, and about the range of subject level processes within what is presented as a method based on institutional audit.

Information

The expectations about publication of information are seen as crucial to any reduction in burden for institutions. Some respondents see an increase in burden in the proposals in the consultation document. Many institutions have reservations about the suggestion that summaries of the results of internal processes might be published: they see this as potentially compromising the rigour and candour of those processes if these are to form the basis of public information. The point is made that consistency of content and/or presentation would

have to accommodate diversity of mission and structure and the need to capture value added. There are also concerns that publication of quantitative data should not lend itself to conversion into league tables.

Most respondents would have liked greater clarity and detail in the information section, in order to offer a reasoned view. The need for consultation by the Information Task Group is stressed.

Enhancement

There is support for a method that would give greater prominence to enhancement, but disappointment with the way it is handled in the consultation document. There is a general view that the enhancement dimension of the proposed model needs more development.

Professional and statutory bodies (PSBs) and subject associations

Overall, there is broad support for the proposals including the move to a lighter touch. There is a general willingness to work with the Agency, and to cooperate, coordinate and share information where possible. At the same time, there are clear statements about the different purposes of accreditation and audit, and a general mood that the PSBs would need to continue running their own review processes to meet their professional and statutory obligations.

From subject associations or groups speaking on behalf of a subject there is, again, a general welcome for the approach and principles set out in the consultation document. There is some concern about possible information burden; the expiry date for current information; that 'drilling down' should not become subject review by another means; and that the role of subject associations should be recognised more explicitly with further development to better articulate the relationship.

Students

Students welcome the current review of quality assurance methods. They support the principles and objectives set out in the model, but have some concerns about the extent to which an institutional audit can assure quality at the subject level, and the potential reduction in public information at subject level compared with present arrangements. They argue for a greater role for individual students' unions in the audit process.

Martin Johnson

Subject level reviews across the UK

Completion of subject review, 1993 to 2001

The final round of subject reviews for the period 2000-01 is nearing completion. With the exception of a very small number of revisits, the schedule that started in 1993 in England and Northern Ireland will be finished by December 2001. During the period October to December 2001, around 180 reviews will be carried out in the 11 subjects currently under scrutiny. There are 33 reviews, included in the figure above, taking place in further education colleges. Many of the visits to further education colleges are to provision with less than 30 full-time equivalent students, and these are part of the sample of small provision requested by the Higher Education Funding Council for England.

A review of the cycle of assessment and review visits from 1993 to 2001 is being prepared and will be published early in 2002.

Progress with academic review

Scotland

In 2000-01 we undertook 25 academic reviews at the subject level in Scotland, in what was designed to be year one of a six-year cycle of reviews across the UK. This programme involved 12 of the higher education institutions in Scotland and included provision across 15 broad subject areas. The 2001-02 review programme involves 52 reviews across 17 higher education institutions and includes the remaining six subject areas from the first half of the cycle. We are very grateful for the hard work and professionalism of all involved in these reviews - institutional staff and reviewers. The experience and evidence of these two years is providing an important and secure basis from which future arrangements in Scotland can be considered.

The last of the 2000-01 reviews ended in July. The majority of the reports resulting from these visits will be published during December, with the remainder following in January 2002. The first year of the new review method has been monitored carefully with formal and informal feedback from academic departments, institutions, review facilitators, specialist reviewers and review coordinators. While much of the feedback has been very positive, critical feedback has led to significant operational developments for 2001-02. These developments have been summarised in the paper *A Practical Guide to Review*, which was refined through wide discussion and consultation involving all Scottish higher education institutions. This paper has been used in reviewer training and has been widely circulated to all involved in the 2001-02 programme. Changes to the 2001-02 reviews include improvements in communications, containing reviews within more strictly defined time

periods, and a tighter monitoring and production framework for review reports.

We are identifying the substantive outcomes in relation to learning and teaching from the first year of academic review. These will be discussed fully with colleagues from the sector and elsewhere, and reported in the next edition of *higher quality*.

Wales

The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) has agreed with Higher Education Wales that the current hiatus in externally generated reviews cannot be allowed to continue for another year. After discussions with us, HEFCW has indicated its wish to commission up to three subject level 'engagements' in each higher education institution, using an adaptation of the method described in the *Handbook for academic review* (the *Handbook*). HEFCW sent a circular to each Welsh institution, indicating that up to three subjects should be put forward for review. We have already received some indication of institutional intentions.

We have prepared a booklet, *Academic Review in Wales, 2002*, in response to a request from the HEFCW. The booklet outlines a method based on the proposals in the *Handbook*, but involving a threshold judgement of academic standards and graded judgements of student progression and learning resources. It is expected that a self-evaluation document will be prepared for each engagement. Most teams will have three subject specialist reviewers and a review coordinator. The teams will spend a maximum of two days in the institution, preceded by a preliminary visit by the review coordinator and a desk-based analysis of the self-evaluation. The reviews will be followed by a report, which will remain confidential to the institution, HEFCW and the Agency. The method should reduce significantly the burden of preparation for, and execution of, the reviews in comparison with reviews experienced to date. A copy of the booklet has been sent out with the circular, so that institutions may understand the method and comment if they wish to do so.

The Welsh engagements should provide us with useful experience in running 'limited' reviews and contribute to the current debate about subject level engagements for the future.

Further education colleges

A large number of further education colleges offer higher education programmes. They are, therefore, subject to review by the Agency. In 2000-01, we carried out a 'scope and preference' exercise for further education colleges (as well as higher education institutions). The exercise indicated a preference for less than 30 reviews in 2001-02 and more than 200

reviews in 2002-03. This distribution would place an unacceptable burden on the Agency and reviewers. Discussions have been taking place with the HEFCE about a more even distribution of review visits.

In July, the schedule of reviews for 2001-02 and the Service Level Agreement were finalised and signed with HEFCE. The repercussions of the delay (caused mainly by the debate about the review of quality and standards in higher education institutions) are particularly important for further education colleges. From January to July 2002, there will be around 75 subject level reviews at these colleges. During this period five colleges will receive their first reviews from us. All of the reviews will be full-scale reviews, as described in the *Handbook*. We do not carry out institutional reviews of further education colleges. Since 1999-2000 we have, for the first time, been carrying out reviews in more than 200 colleges that had been the responsibility of the former Further Education Funding Council. There are, in addition, some concerns about quality and standards in a minority of further education colleges; this is demonstrated by the results from the current cycle of subject reviews.

In order to achieve the desired number of academic reviews for the 2001-02 schedule, a number of subjects have been brought forward from 2002-03. This action, and the need for full-scale reviews, have combined to cause concern in further education colleges and their staff.

In an effort to overcome the problems associated with this, we have placed those who asked for a 2001-02 review at the front of the schedule, and have ensured that those brought forward from the 2002-03 schedule have been given as much notice as possible. The deadline for submission of self-evaluations for those being reviewed in the spring and summer terms has been postponed until 1 February 2002.

The detailed schedule for the January to July 2002 reviews has been completed. Letters were sent to colleges in October, informing them of the arrangements, and negotiations with further education colleges will continue.

We have also been running workshops and seminars for the staff of further education colleges to try to ensure that they are well informed about academic review. In addition, we have contributed to seminars for further education colleges organised regionally and nationally by HEFCE, as well as making a number of other presentations to a range of audiences. Despite these activities, considerable uncertainty about the differences between peer review and inspection, and a worrying lack of knowledge about the method, prevail among further education staff. One of our biggest problems has been to persuade colleges to nominate their staff to act as peer reviewers; a problem not helped by the contractual obligations that make the release of staff difficult or impossible.

Peter Milton
Norman Sharp

Institutional level review

Continuation audit

The process of continuation audit was first used in early 1997 when the universities of Sheffield and Exeter agreed to take part in the trials of the new process. Since that time a further 82 audits have been completed, with another 12 audits planned for the next few months. A great deal has been learned over this period, both about the process of audit and about the way institutions have developed successful strategies for ensuring the quality of learning opportunities and maintaining the standards of their awards.

As the continuation audit process has developed, and auditors and institutions have provided feedback on their experiences, we have refined what we do and how we do it. This experience is being used to inform the development of the new process of institutional audit.

We are preparing to publish a 'Learning from Continuation Audit' document that will draw out the key messages and themes which emerge from continuation audit reports. A great deal of interesting material has emerged from the reports, but the key messages are fairly clear, and while they may be considered largely self-evident, they are nevertheless worth saying. The reports support the view that an institution that has the capacity to manage its activities successfully will understand and support its 'mission'; will have strong lines of communication throughout the institution; and will have methods for ensuring that the right information goes to the right people at the right time.

Nicola Channon

Review of health profession programmes

The Department of Health has contracted with the Agency for the development and organisation of a process to review the quality and standards of higher education health profession programmes in England'. Both the Department and the Agency are working closely with the professional and statutory regulatory bodies, the workforce development confederations and higher education institutions. This collaboration should ensure that the new approach to review will streamline existing retrospective quality assurance processes and will deliver the necessary public protection and accountability requirements.

Following completion of initial development work, and the publication of benchmark statements for the health care professions, prototype reviews are underway. During the academic year 2001-02, six institutions (and their partner placement providers) have agreed to participate in prototype reviews of their health care provision:

Kingston University and St George's Hospital Medical School	physiotherapy	radiography
University College Northampton	nursing occupational therapy podiatry	midwifery physiotherapy
University of Plymouth	health visiting nursing	midwifery
Sheffield Hallam University	health visiting occupational therapy radiography	nursing physiotherapy
University of Teesside	occupational therapy radiography	physiotherapy
University College Worcester	midwifery	nursing

A steering group, comprised of stakeholder representatives, has been established and will meet throughout the prototype cycle. The group will act as an advisory forum and will disseminate information emerging from the prototypes to professional networks.

Once completed, the prototype reviews will be independently evaluated. Any necessary amendments to the review methodology will be made in light of experience gained in the prototypes. We hope a full cycle of review will start from October 2003.

Louise Holder

¹Dietetics, health visiting, midwifery, nursing, occupational therapy, orthoptics, physiotherapy, podiatry (chiroprody), prosthetics and orthotics, radiography, speech and language therapy.

The Agency's work overseas

Audits of overseas partnerships in 2001 were arranged to include links in China, Hong Kong, Greece and Israel. In all, 15 institutions agreed to have their partnership links included and all were visited in the UK. Unfortunately, the political situation in Israel forced a change to our plans: audit visits would have placed unnecessary, additional burdens on institutions already struggling to bring together students and tutors. It was decided, therefore, not to visit the UK institutions' partners in Israel, and to produce summary reports

based upon the UK visit only. Reports on partnerships in China, Hong Kong and Greece are being finalised and will be published over the next couple of months. The Israel summary reports, together with an overview report, will be published soon.

In addition to the partnerships considered in Hong Kong, a number of institutions also agreed to help us explore the operation of some distance learning arrangements. An overview report on matters surrounding the management of quality and

standards in distance learning will be produced; it will be available before the end of the year. We are very grateful to all the institutions and their partners that participated in the programme of audits of overseas collaborative links and the survey of distance learning arrangements.

In 2002, there will be audits of partnerships between UK institutions and their partners in Denmark, Finland, Germany, Switzerland, Malaysia and Singapore. To identify the institutions that have been asked to participate in these audits we used, as a basis for further enquiries, the information we received about collaborative links earlier this year. This information was very helpful and provided us with a fuller understanding of the current range and scope of UK activity overseas.

There are a few themes that have arisen as a result of the audits of overseas partnerships conducted this year, some of which are either new or provide a different emphasis from previous findings. For example, we encountered a number of instances in several countries where the use of a language other than English was an element in the delivery or assessment of a programme. It is clear that the challenges associated with translation of teaching material or assessments should be considered very carefully before such an arrangement is agreed.

There can also be difficulties in the delivery of programmes in English overseas, where English is not the first language of either the tutor or the student. A common difficulty relates to technical English in subjects where words are not in common English usage. In these cases the ability of tutors to use these words accurately, and for students to understand their full meaning, needs to be carefully addressed.

An important dimension in an overseas partnership is the status of the partner, whether a commercial or public institution. Whilst in no way implying that commercial partners are not as reliable as public institutions, the commercial aspirations of a partner can change the way a partnership is conducted. This can be to the detriment of the students in a way that is less likely with partners in the public sector. In at least one instance the partner institution had been taken over, with a consequent change in the way the partner operated. There is no simple way to ensure that such difficulties do not arise. Careful and explicit wording of the agreement, and an appreciation of the potential for problems, would assist in mitigating the impact on the students' experience of changes arising from commercial pressure.

Nicola Channon

Access to Higher Education

Licensing and review

We have been developing the *QAA Recognition Scheme for Access to Higher Education*. This has included the production of explicit licensing criteria for the authorised validating agencies (AVAs) which validate Access to Higher Education courses. From January 2002 these criteria will be implemented. They will become a key reference point for the processes of AVA licensing and review, the central part of our activity in relation to Access to Higher Education. We have reviewed 17 AVAs and issued new licences to two more (out of a total of 28 AVAs in England and Wales).

Statistics

Since January 2001 we have continued to develop, and make available, statistical information about recognised Access to Higher Education courses, the students who take these courses and their progression into higher education. In addition to the information we receive directly from the AVAs, we have considered a range of statistics from other sources. Some of the relevant data has come from

the Higher Education Statistics Agency, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, and the further and higher education funding councils.

In May 2001, following consultation and collaboration with colleagues from these agencies, we held a joint national symposium to present the conclusions of this work to AVA representatives. A leaflet was published, *Access to Higher Education Key Statistics 2001*, providing an overview of the data. This leaflet includes information about numbers of students, courses and the student profile. It also contains information about the subjects studied by Access to Higher Education students. Copies are available free of charge from Jean McLaren, Access Administrator on 01452 557118 (email j.mclaren@qaa.ac.uk). Our work in this area will continue, and in 2002 another statistics bulletin will be produced.

The detailed statistical information on which this digest is based and all published Access reports are available on our web site.

QAA-recognised Access to Higher Education courses

Access to Higher Education courses, which are recognised through our Scheme, are no longer referred to as 'kitemarked', but may use the formal designation 'QAA-recognised'. These courses are listed on the UCAS web site at www.ucas.ac.uk. Students who have successfully completed a QAA-recognised course are awarded a certificate bearing the Access logo.

Kath Dentith



Recognised by

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

Update on the *Code of practice*

In July and September 2001 two new sections of the *Code of practice* were published - *Section 9. Placement learning*, and *Section 10. Recruitment and admissions*. Both were finalised after consultation with the higher education sector and other stakeholders, in line with all sections of the *Code*.

We are now working with representatives from the sector to develop guidance on the accreditation of prior learning (APL). Informal feedback suggests that a guidance document, rather than a new section of the *Code*, is the best way to promote good practice in this area at present. We hope this document will be available early in 2002.

We have received requests from various organisations to produce further sections of the *Code* that would address specific issues. We do not intend to start working on any further sections for the time being. But we are planning to publish an introductory statement that highlights the main themes running through the *Code*. In addition, a review of the earliest sections of the *Code*, published in 1999, will be undertaken in 2002 to ensure their continued currency.

All sections of the *Code* are available on our web site or in hard copy.

Julie Swan

Update on benchmarking

In July 2001 we published draft subject benchmark statements for a range of subject areas. Comment on the drafts was invited during the consultation period, which closed on 16 November. The publication of the statements in their final form, which should take place early in 2002, will complete the exercise to facilitate the preparation of subject benchmark statements for bachelors degree with honours in 42 broad subject areas. We have appreciated the enthusiastic work of the subject communities concerned.

Within the next three months, we will be starting a project to gain insight into the ways the benchmark statements and other reference points are being used and understood within the higher education sector.

Our progress on the project will also be published on our web site, and in future editions of *higher quality*.

Mike Laugharne

Progress files

The progress file initiative is concerned with transcripts and personal development planning as an integral, and integrating, part of academic study.

In May 2000 Universities UK, Universities Scotland, SCoP and the Agency published a joint policy statement on progress files for higher education. In February 2001 this statement was revised'. The Progress Files Implementation Group (PFIG) was consequently established to monitor and support the introduction of progress files. Representation on the group includes representatives from Universities UK, Universities Scotland, SCoP and the Agency.

The PFIG works closely with the two main practitioner networks concerned with recording achievement: the Centre for Recording Achievement (CRA)² and Personal Development Planning in Higher Education (Scotland)³. The PFIG is supported by a large advisory group that has representatives from many different interest groups. The group is also pleased to be working with student and employer organisations, and various professional bodies.

The PFIG's strategy includes, a) providing resources for supporting the introduction of the progress file, b) the coordination of activities with the various practitioner networks and subject communities, and c) a research agenda to provide evidence of the different opportunities and approaches to progress files, and their costs and benefits.

The CRA web site contains a wide range of material and links, including a number of case studies relating to higher education. The Learning and Teaching Support Network web site⁴ includes a series of working papers and details of several conferences and workshops.

Universities UK and SCoP have conducted a survey of work undertaken or planned within institutions on the implementation of transcripts and personal development planning. In November 2001, the results of this survey will be published in a joint briefing note from Universities UK and SCoP.

Nick Harris

- 1 www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/progfileHE/guidelines/progfile2001.pdf
- 2 www.recordingachievement.org
- 3 www.eds.napier.ac.uk/PDP
- 4 www.ltsn.ac.uk/genericcentre/projects/pdp/working-papers

Supporting the framework for qualifications of higher education in Scotland

The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) is the national framework for all levels of learning and qualifications in Scotland. We are continuing our work with Universities Scotland, the Scottish Qualifications Authority and the Scottish Executive to develop and implement the Framework. A Joint Advisory Committee for the SCQF has been established, with representatives from key organisations and stakeholders across all sectors of education and training in Scotland.

We are delighted that Dr Andrew Cubie recently accepted an invitation from the Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning to chair the Committee. His appointment coincides with a significant period of SCQF developments. The 'first phase' resulted in the publication of *An introduction to the SCQF* (October 2001). It describes the main purposes, structure and features of the Framework, including the range, features and purposes of the main Scottish qualifications. Full details of the parts of the SCQF that relate to higher education institutions were published by us in February 2001 (*The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland*).

For the second phase, the Committee will focus on developing the potential of the SCQF as an integrated framework for lifelong learning in Scotland. The Framework should allow all providers of education, training, learner guidance and information services, to coordinate and integrate their provision and services.

We will continue to play a full role in supporting this development of the SCQF, which is fundamental to the Scottish Executive's arrangements for wider participation in lifelong learning. Our work with the higher education sector in this area is still coordinated through the Scottish Advisory Committee on Credit and Access (SACCA - a joint QAA/Universities Scotland committee). One of the current priorities of SACCA is developing further education and higher education credit links. This is being taken forward through a newly established working group.

Conference

On 17 December 2001, a national SCQF conference will be held at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama in Glasgow. It has been organised jointly with Universities Scotland, the Scottish Qualifications Authority, the Scottish Executive and partners on the Joint Advisory Committee. The main theme of the conference will be the role of the Framework as an integrated approach to lifelong learning in Scotland. The conference will include presentations from Wendy Alexander MSP, Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning; Alex Neil MSP, Convenor of the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee; Dr Andrew Cubie; and principal speakers from the main sectors of education in Scotland.

Details from our Glasgow office.

David Bottomley

How it all fits together: quality assurance and the standards infrastructure

Over the last four years we have been developing a new 'infrastructure' to strengthen, elaborate and make more comprehensible the purposes and outcomes of higher education in the UK. The main features of this infrastructure were defined in the Dearing report on higher education (1997). What is distinctive, perhaps unique, about the UK approach is that it recognises the importance of identifying agreed reference points in HE. These both enable universities and colleges to make clear the full variety of what they provide and help the public to grasp and to benefit from it. That is a particularly important task in the UK where we attempt to maintain broadly comparable academic standards across the whole of higher education, within an academic community that prizes highly the diversity both of its ends and of its means.

Clarity and accessibility

An approach that is based on standards requires clarity and accessibility. But previous investigation shows that it has been hard to know what academic standards actually are, or who is responsible for them. And, even when they have been identified, they have been difficult for non-academics to understand.

Dearing's solution to the conundrum of national standards and local diversity was to propose a series of common reference points, accepted across the sector, relating to the standards of programmes and qualifications. They are not detailed prescriptions, but assemblies of 'characteristics' which an observer can expect to see in any qualification, subject and programme.

The standards infrastructure

The elements of the infrastructure, described below, complement each other and provide a set of reference points. These generate, elucidate and communicate academic standards. They may be regarded as the most innovative and distinctive feature of the emerging UK quality assurance arrangements. The infrastructure has, surprisingly, attracted little analysis; few have grasped its novelty and ambitious aims. The comments received on particular components have usually been directed toward one element seen in isolation from the others, and not on their underlying principle. Worse, an entirely false perception has grown up that the main (perhaps only) purpose of the infrastructure and its elements is to provide the basis for external review by the Agency.

The elements of the infrastructure

- *The frameworks for higher education qualifications*, two variants, one for Scotland and another for England, Wales and Northern Ireland, these describe the characteristics of the awards and qualifications at a number of levels of higher education, from undergraduate certificate to doctorate;
- the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*, setting out guidelines on good practice relating to the management of academic quality and standards;
- *Subject benchmark statements*, initially for honours degrees for 42 broadly defined fields, describing the nature of the general intellectual characteristics which the subject aims to develop in a student, and which an honours degree holder in the subject might be expected to be able to demonstrate;
- programme specifications, an opportunity for institutions to provide information about the structure and function of their programmes of study, to specify learning outcomes, and to allow diversity to be 'mapped'.

The 'expository' approach: the academic community in dialogue with itself

The four activities have several common features, but their key similarity is an 'expository' approach to standards. This can be explained by contrasting it with its opposite, the 'prescriptive'. The four infrastructural elements are expository because each sets out to identify and elaborate good practice already in existence, or to build upon it. This encourages the academic community into dialogue with itself and the translation of the traditionally implicit into a more explicit form. Academic practices may, as a result, become more amenable to critical analysis, evaluation and improvement. The elements are intended to stimulate a new kind of discourse about academic judgement, not to supplant that judgement. A prescriptive approach, however, starts from an assumption of deficiency. This is not the approach we have taken, as we encourage the higher education sector to focus on existing good practice.

An example: subject benchmarking

Subject benchmarking provides a useful illustration of what we mean when referring to reference points (for standards). A set of subject benchmarks could be, and has been taken by some to be, a list of outcomes to be achieved. This is not our

intention; we interpret subject benchmarks as reference points. The distinction between such reference points and required outcomes can be explained by analogy. A reference point is like a map: it links the particular with the general and throws more light on it; it says where we are and where we can go.

Overall, the possession of a map widens choice. In contrast, a required outcome is like an itinerary: it tells us where we should go, with little contextual information, and might have nothing to say about other possible journeys or options. Although an itinerary has its purposes and uses, a map increases possible choice or general awareness.

The infrastructural activities create structures and activities that encourage, or induce, academics into mapping and interrogating their own tacit practices and underlying assumptions. Their aim is not to instruct academics in what they should do. The expository approach is appropriate for a mass higher education environment, as the strengths of expert professional process are not eroded. This approach can provide a firmer foundation for quality assurance and make it more comprehensible to non-specialists.

The academy and society

If the standards infrastructure offers a new opportunity for the academic community to look afresh at its activities in order to understand them better, it also offers the general public the prospect of more, and more understandable, information about what higher education is and does. More explicit and accessible explanations of what is available to students, and why, will increasingly form the basis of the new compact between the academy and society.

Students intending to invest their time and money in higher education need reassurance that their qualification will have currency value in the employment market. They will also need to know that they will be spending their time in an interesting and worthwhile way, developing themselves and their personal abilities in a context of intellectual challenge. The elements of the infrastructure have been designed to make sure that whatever individual courses, programmes, academics, departments, schools, faculties and institutions are offering are made clear and, in practice, are provided.

Peter Wright
Peter Williams

Subscribers' meeting 2002

Following the success of the first Subscribers' meeting in March 2001, the next meeting has been scheduled. It will take place on Monday 20 May at the Edinburgh Conference Centre at Heriot-Watt University. Invitations will be sent to heads of all subscribing institutions. The meeting will offer delegates an opportunity to discuss current higher education issues and question members of the Board of the Agency.

www.qaa.ac.uk

Further information about our work, and the documents discussed in this edition of *higher quality*, can be found on our web site.

Breaking the 30 million barrier

The site now receives 2.5 million hits a month - a total of 30 million a year.

In October 1999, when the site was consolidated at the current address, there were an average of 7,500 hits each day. Today the daily average number of hits is just over 82,000, a tenfold rise in two years.

The text-only version of the site will be launched by the end of the year. Subject review reports are only available on our existing site, but will be added to the text-only version by Easter 2002.

We welcome any comments or suggestions on how we can improve the web site.

Additional copies

Printed copies of *higher quality* are available free of charge.

Our publications are available from:

Linney Direct, Adamsway, Mansfield, Nottinghamshire NG18 4FN.

Telephone 01623 450788, Fax 01623 450629, Email qaa@linneydirect.com