

**Agenda Item 13**

**Enclosure 9**

**Paper ETC 95 / 02**

**Education and Training Committee**

**QAA REPORTS ON THE OUTCOMES OF MEETINGS  
ON PROGRAMME SPECIFICATIONS AND ON  
EXTERNAL EXAMINERS**

**from QAA**

**for information**



Promoting higher quality

**The Quality Assurance Agency  
for Higher Education**

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8 November 2002

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Dear Colleague

### Round table meetings 2002

Earlier in the year, you attended one of the "round table" meetings on external examining and/or programme specifications that were hosted jointly with UUK and SCOP. Many thanks for coming along and for participating and contributing to the vigorous and valuable discussions. A great deal was gained from the meetings; we hope that you found them similarly useful. Summaries of the points made in relation to each topic are enclosed. These have also been posted on our web site [www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/meetings02/pspec-ee.htm](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/meetings02/pspec-ee.htm)

An interim report on the points raised during the discussion meetings was requested and sent to the Task Group for Information on Quality and Standards in Higher Education (the Cooke group) in July 2002. Papers have also been provided for the Boards of QAA, UUK and SCOP and various HEFCE committees.

Also enclosed with this letter are information and a booking form for the next series of round table meetings, again jointly hosted by QAA, UUK and SCOP. The meetings are designed to further extend the very useful discussions about programme specifications – more detail may be found on the enclosed flyer. The meetings are aimed at practitioners who have been writing programme specifications, and at those involved in the development of institutional policies.

The December meetings are being organised with a slightly different format to those held earlier this year; there will be greater opportunities for delegates to propose issues and questions for the breakout groups. The meetings will not be advertised in the press (THES), so I would be grateful if you would pass the information and the booking form on to those colleagues who you feel might best be able to contribute to the meetings. Further meetings are being provisionally arranged for the early months of 2003, to be held in the North West and North East of England and the Midlands; these will be confirmed if demand appears to be sufficient.

E-mail enquiries about the meetings may be sent to [roundtable2@qaa.ac.uk](mailto:roundtable2@qaa.ac.uk).

Once again, thank you for your participation in the first series of meetings. I look forward to working with you further and to meeting your colleagues in the coming months.

Yours sincerely

Nick Harris  
Director, Development and Enhancement Group

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## **Round table meetings on Programme Specifications (PS); jointly organised by Universities UK (UUK), the Standing Conference of Principals (SCOP) and the Quality Assurance Agency for HE (QAA)**

### **Introduction**

The QAA, in collaboration with UUK and SCOP, agreed that the publication of the final report of the Task Group for Information on Quality and Standards in Higher Education was an opportune moment to organise a series of meetings on the subject of programme specifications. The meetings took the form of a brief, overarching presentation and then small break out groups, which fed back in plenary to all participants. The breakout sessions were extremely important, as the purpose of the meetings was to listen to the views and concerns of those working in HE institutions. Detailed notes were taken at all the breakout and plenary sessions.

In all, 233 people attended the series of meetings – the first, held at the beginning of May had 16 participants; the last, in London in July had 118. We are extremely grateful to all those who took the time to attend and to pass on their views.

The majority of participants agreed that the PS was a useful tool for academic development and that to change policy and significantly revise the guidelines at this stage would be difficult for many institutions. Although it was recognised that Dearing had intended the PS to provide student information, the development and preparation for the academic review method has led HEIs to write the PS with an academic audience in mind – participants believed that it was this approach that had led to the many examples of good practice regarding the PS.

### **Current development/use of PS**

- The PS is a valuable core document
- The PS is a useful tool that encourages coherence in programme design – particularly in the design of multi and inter-disciplinary programmes.
- Some HEIs have developed an institutional pro forma, others have allowed disciplines freedom to produce their own PS. Some institutions have begun to introduce the PS as part of the periodic review process; others have gone for a “big bang” approach.
- Some HEIs view the PS as a summary of the Definitive Programme Document.
- Some participants asked if the PS should be a dynamic or static document.
- The PS has engendered some examples of really good practice: they have led to progression studies and skills audits, been approached bottom up and top down in the same institution – these examples are from Leicester – a VERY successful implementation of the policy and one boat that they really don't want to rock!
- The PS has the benefit of allowing programmes to be seen holistically.

### **Who is the audience?**

Much of the debate engendered by the change in the method of external review and the requirements of the Cooke report was extremely similar to that held with HEIs during the development of the method of academic review. At that point, there was a strong feeling that, despite the Dearing recommendation that the PS should be written as student

information, they would be most useful if prepared as an academic tool and with a view to the audience being the external reviewer.

- The audience and, therefore, the purpose of the PS must be clarified asap.
- There was serious concern at moving back to the Dearing concept of the PS.
- Few, if any, HEIs currently use the PS to inform students.
- One document can't fulfil all aims.
- There was a fear of the contractual implications of using the PS as a document for student information – this would have implications on the kind of document produced.
- It will be demoralising for staff if they have to rewrite PS for a different audience – they've been helpful in their current format but would not be a helpful tool for staff if written for students.
- Suggestion of different versions of the document raised the problem of version control – accuracy and reliability will be jeopardised – there'll be a different version every time.
- At what stage is the PS meant to convey information to students? Admissions? On course? Their needs are different.
- What about the difference now between HEIs and HE in FE? They're using different review methods so will they need to be producing different types of PS?
- If they're to be for students, then students should be involved in writing them – the language in which they're written at the moment is inappropriate. Not just student involvement but schools, 6<sup>th</sup> form colleges, FE colleges etc.
- One suggestion: keep the PS as it is and produce something else for student information that isn't called a PS.

### **Publication**

- Some participants asked what was actually meant by publishing in the context of the PS. Publishing on an intranet/website would be different to publishing in the prospectus. Difference between publication and publicity.
- The PS won't be useful if it's published – it will be a completely different document.
- The issue of version control is raised again if the document is published. How can minor modifications be dealt with?
- If the PS is published, there is a danger that it will be seen as publicity. Some aversion to this – should not be publicity.

### **The PS as a multi-layered document**

This was the most common solution to the issue of publishing:

- The PS could/should be multi-layered so that the particular audience can go down to whatever level of detail required. A web-based approach would facilitate this.
- The PS is a useful peg on which all other relevant information can hang – all information, including the PS must be read in context.

### **Threshold v. typical?**

- The notion of achievement doesn't sit well within the PS – it's a document that describes what's on offer in the programme at that institution.

- Threshold/typical should not be specified – it's too contentious.
- There is still confusion over programme outcomes and module outcomes.

### **Links with progress files**

- The progress files are still in their infancy – it's too early to make links.
- The skills element of the PS is its strongest link with the progress file.

### **The PS and the new review process**

- Strong fear that auditors would misuse the document – especially if their purpose changes. At present the PS is essential for making a judgement on quality and standards but if it becomes student information it will no longer be able to be used that way.
- Will training for reviewers/auditors take on board any change in the purpose of the PS?

### **Revision of the guidelines**

- If we revise the guidelines we should do it from the bottom up (?)
- The examples in the guidelines need to be refreshed. They should also recognise the diversity of practice in the sector.
- Further guidance on the use of the benchmark statements in the PS would be useful.
- There needs to be a clearer articulation of what is expected from the PS.
- Perhaps the guidelines should be reviewed at the end of the transitional period?

### **The view of the PSRBs**

- Participants at the PSRB meeting welcomed the PS unreservedly. Found it very useful to receive standard information about programmes.
- Participants felt that they would be very useful to a wider audience.

### **Other points**

- Should be made clearer that the PS is the place where departments can highlight what is special about THEIR programme in a particular discipline.
- However, if the document must be published, institutions would be loathe to publish the blueprint for one of their more innovative programmes.
- It's taken this long to get an understanding of what a learning outcome is.
- The PS has become over-important.

### **Conclusion**

A summary of the views and opinions expressed at the meetings will be reported to the Boards of QAA, UUK and SCOP in the autumn.

The Agency found the meetings themselves and the evaluation of the dialogue extremely useful. It is now committed to continuing discussion on when and how to revise the Guidelines for Programme Specifications. Many issues were raised that suggested that, in the light of the Cooke Report and a new method of review, the

guidelines do need to be revised. However, Agency staff are also very aware of the views of many participants who felt that the guidelines should remain as they are so that academic staff can continue to work with a document with which they are familiar in producing their programme specifications. The Agency does not intend to make any major changes to the guidelines at the moment but will be seeking opportunities for further discussion with the sector.

Participants were asked to fill in an evaluation sheet on the meeting and the majority of participants found that it had been both interesting and useful. The Agency too found the meetings and the evaluation of the dialogue extremely useful. In the light of feedback and of how much Agency staff learned, we hope to organise future meetings, run along similar lines on various issues.

FRC  
14.08.02

## **Round table meetings on External Examiners (EE); jointly organised by Universities UK (UUK), the Standing Conference of Principals (SCOP) and the Quality Assurance Agency for HE (QAA)**

### **Introduction**

The QAA, in collaboration with UUK and SCOP agreed that the publication of the final report of the Task Group for Information on Quality and Standards in Higher Education was an opportune moment to organise a series of meetings on the subject of the external examining system. The meetings took the form of a brief, overarching presentation and then small break out groups, which fed back in plenary to all participants. The breakout sessions were extremely important, as the purpose of the meetings was to listen to the views and concerns of those working in HE institutions. Detailed notes were taken at all the breakout and plenary sessions.

In all, 263 people attended the series of meetings – the first, held at the beginning of May had 14 participants; the last, in London in July had 90. We are extremely grateful to all those who took the time to attend and to pass on their views.

Overall, the majority of academics had confidence in the external examining system – they placed value on it and felt that we should be building on its strengths in order to address weaknesses.

The following were the main areas of discussion:

#### **The bottom line – what IS the role of the EE?**

- There are valid reasons for looking at the EE system; but whatever happens, its enhancement function should be preserved.
- Should we be looking at separating the roles of confirming standards and enhancement? The enhancement role is important with regard to the EE as it is annual. Can we divorce this annual advice from standards?
- The bottom line of the EE being the guarantor of standards is slipping. EEs need to be more empowered – they need to know that institutions are taking on board their comments.
- The role of the EE is inconsistently used – the new review process will have an impact on this.
- More guidance required on the role of the EE at an Exam Board – can they change marks? Only with agreement of board or independently? Should it only happen before the board meets?

#### **The pro-forma (annex C of the Cooke report)**

This was the issue that engendered the most negative discussion with very few, if any, participants being in favour of the template as it currently stands. Indeed, at the final and largest of the series of meetings, all nine breakout groups fed back their concerns at the plenary session.

The issues raised were of both a practical and a theoretical nature.

- How will it work? Who will have editorial control? Who will be responsible for putting it on the web? How long will each summary stay on the web for? Will it be a summary that is agreed by the institution and the external examiner?
- There is a risk of legal action/unsolicited attention if the EE is named.

- It will be used as a marketing tool.
- It will inhibit frankness.
- How will it work in terms of modular/inter and multi-disciplinary provision? EE reports are often more useful at the module level but this does not fit with the summary of reports at programme level.
- It implies an annual validation against the reference points – surely this is more a matter for periodic internal review? The Cooke recommendations are confusing the role of EE and external reviewer.
- The institutional response to a summary is as important as the summary – the summary should be presented more as an agreed dialogue between the institution and the EE rather than the institution publishing a response afterwards.
- Who is the summary for? What is the value of the public information provided?
- Is the summary fit for purpose? It is 50% certification and 50% summary (or additional information) at the moment.
- How do you educate the public to understand the language used in an EE report summary and to ensure that the summary is read in context?
- If the summaries are to go ahead, an evaluation by their users should be planned.

#### Alternatives:

- A summary by the Chief External Examiner only, at the end of his/her period of tenure might be more useful.
- An institutional summary of issues/themes arising each year and any action planned might be more useful.
- Whatever is published should reflect the discourse between the EE and the institution.

#### Training for EEs

There was a reasonable level of support for some kind of training for the following reasons:

- Training at the national level would bring more recognition to the role and would give it more value.
- Training might encourage a clarification of what the role of EE actually is – what is the bottom line and what can institutions add to that bottom line?
- There is a need to give guidance to EEs and institutions as to what the institution can expect of an EE and how far they make those expectations clear.
- Training would allow for a sharing of good practice.
- Suggested that training should be at national level in order to train EEs in the context in which they're working. Induction should be at institutional level. In this way, the EE will understand the national expectations of the role of EE and the institutional practices with which s/he will be working.
- Suggested possible role for LTSN – there was seen to be merit in both generic and subject-level training.
- One group favoured a more CPD-based approach and suggested a suite of workshops aimed at EEs.
- An annual conference for EEs was also discussed, either within an institution or inter-institutional. If within one institution, could offer three different venues, as a large HEI is likely to have EEs from all over the UK. The morning could



discuss institutional matters and the afternoon could be spent with the subject. Need to ensure that institutional messages with regard to, say, the code, are the same across subjects – this format would help to do that.

### **Use of the academic infrastructure**

- How far do EEs have to refer to the reference points in their reports?
- What about EEs from the professions who are very valuable but aren't aware of the infrastructure?
- The use of the infrastructure in the role of the EE should be allowed to evolve. This will happen naturally over a period of time. Institutions don't have a great deal of time with their externals – they don't want to waste it persuading them to use the right jargon.

### **Other points**

The following points were raised on several occasions:

- Institutions need to consider what they can do to minimise the increasing burden on EEs.
- The section of the code on EE was generally well-received although it was thought by some to be too vague. One group, however, suggested that precept 1, especially 1.i, should be revisited. It was felt that if this was right, then the rest would follow but at the minute, it wasn't entirely helpful. Is this THE most important part of the EE's role?
- The idea of a national register of EEs was discussed at several meetings. It had a mixed response but was less opposed if the discussion was around the provision of a register as information, rather than the register-owner (LTSN?) making the appointments as well as providing the list. One alternative was proposed: that each HEI provides a cadre of EEs – thus the professional development of the EE becomes the responsibility of each HEI.
- Another role for the LTSN was suggested – some participants found the LTSN assessment guides helpful and wondered if there was a role for that body in producing macro-reports which highlighted themes within each discipline? It could then also compare these themes/issues across disciplines.
- The impact of Cooke proposals on modular schemes should be thought through further.
- PSRB attitude to the proposals was quite different – they would be happy to see the entire EE report published.

### **Conclusion**

An interim report was sent to the Chair of the Task Group for Information on Quality and Standards in Higher Education in July 2002. and a summary of the views and opinions expressed at the meetings will be reported to the Boards of QAA, UUK and SCOP in the autumn.

The Agency found the meetings themselves and the evaluation of the dialogue extremely useful. It is now committed to continuing discussion on the best way to revise the section of the Code of Practice on External Examining

Participants were asked to fill in an evaluation sheet on the meeting and the majority of participants found that it had been both interesting and useful. The Agency too found the meetings and the evaluation of the dialogue extremely useful. In the light of

feedback and of how much Agency staff learned, we hope to organise future meetings, run along similar lines on various issues.

FRC  
14.08.02

## Assuring and reporting on quality and standards in Higher Education

The Agency, Universities UK and SCOP are jointly organising discussion meetings concerned with quality and standards in higher education and the way they are to be reported publicly.

Within the contexts of the new institutional audits, and the Cooke recommendations on public information, the meetings will focus on an extended earlier discussion\* on programme specifications.

The meetings are free, with lunch provided.

To ensure ample opportunity for round table discussions, each meeting will be limited to 60 participants, so please apply early.

<p><b>Tuesday 17 December</b></p> <p>The meeting will consider the work and diversity of approaches taken by those practitioners who have, or are involved in, developing programme specifications and to discuss and explore:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● the range of approaches taken between and within institutions;</li> <li>● the relationship of programme specifications to other reference points of standards infrastructure (subject benchmark statements and frameworks for HE qualifications).</li> </ul>	<p><b>Wednesday 18 December</b></p> <p>The meeting will consider programme specifications in relation to the development and implementation of institutional policies, in particular:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● internal validation, monitoring and review;</li> <li>● provision of information;</li> <li>● teaching and learning strategies;</li> <li>● issues concerned with developing partnerships and their roles in widening participation.</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Both days will include:-</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● opportunities for delegates to propose questions and issues they would like discussed (see booking form);</li> <li>● programme specifications and developmental engagements, review and audit.</li> </ul>	

Subject to sufficient interest it is anticipated that similar meetings will be arranged on a regional basis early in 2003.

### Programme

- 10.30 Registration and coffee
- 11.00 Welcome
- 11.05 Setting the scene
- 11.25 General discussion in plenary
- 11.45 Breakout groups with note takers
- 12.50 Lunch
- 13.30 Setting the scene
- 13.50 Breakout groups with note takers
- 14.50 Plenary
- 15.15 Tea/coffee and opportunity for informal general discussion, and disperse

For further details and registration form:

\* [www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/meetings02/pspec\\_ee.htm](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/meetings02/pspec_ee.htm)  
or email [roundtable2@qaa.ac.uk](mailto:roundtable2@qaa.ac.uk)



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## Assuring and reporting on quality and standards in Higher Education

### Conference booking form

Delegate name with title: .....

Name badge as: .....  
(Please print)

Position held: .....

Institution: .....

Contact address: .....  
.....  
.....  
.....

Tel No: ..... Fax No: .....

Email .....

Do you have any special dietary requirements .....

Please indicate below which event(s) you wish to attend

 <b>Tuesday 17 December</b>		<b>Wednesday 18 December</b>	
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Please let us know about any specific topic within the area of programmes specifications that you would like to discuss:

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Please return this completed form at your earliest convenience to:

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