

Seminars to discuss the future of quality assurance – January 2009
Updates on related workstrands

This consultation event considers the principles of the quality assurance system and potential changes to the institutional audit method. There are other complementary projects underway looking at particular aspects of the quality assurance system, which will feed in to the revisions to the system overall. These are summarised below.

Review of Teaching Quality Information (TQI) and the National Student Survey (NSS)
(TQI/NSS Steering Group)

The TQI/NSS steering group, secretaries by HEFCE, is currently carrying out a review of policy in this area. The outcomes of this review must be acceptable to all joint funders (HEFCE, the Scottish Funding Council, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, SFH and the Training and Development Agency for Schools) and to the joint owners of the current Quality Assurance Framework, Universities UK (UUK) and GuildHE, as well as key stakeholders, notably the NUS and Association of Colleges.

We anticipate that the review will lead to a joint consultation with UUK and GuildHE in Autumn 2010. We envisage that this will set out:

- proposals for a revised information set
- proposals for the publication of that information and who should be responsible for making information available (including the future of Unistats.com, and proposals for changes to the NSS)
- where future work will be required
- how this relates to ongoing discussions around the handling of public information in QAA institutional audit.

In order to develop consultation proposals the steering group has commissioned Oakleigh Consulting and Staffordshire University to undertake primary research into the information needs of a range of prospective users of information about HE. They will be examining what information is wanted and needed, how it should be presented, who should be responsible and how that should inform advice and guidance to students.

Alongside this research we will also be commissioning work to look at how we might best enhance and develop the National Student Survey. The process of appointing researchers for the NSS work is currently ongoing and we expect both pieces of research to be completed by the end of May 2010.

The TQI/NSS steering group consists of representatives from the sector, the funding councils and representative bodies from throughout the UK, as well as other stakeholders such as the NUS and HESA. It is chaired by Professor Janet Beer, Vice-Chancellor of Oxford Brookes University.

Chris Taylor, HEFCE
c.taylor@hefce.ac.uk

Review of External Examining Arrangements (Universities UK/GuildHE)

Universities UK and GuildHE are carrying out a review of external examining arrangements in the UK, in order to consider and recommend what improvements need to be made to ensure that external examiner arrangements effectively support the comparability of academic standards and are robust enough to meet future challenges.

The issues that the review will consider include:

- The core and changing role of external examiners and the way in which this is communicated to a wider audience
- Development of Terms of Reference for the role, to ensure consistency and comparability
- The specific role of external examiners in ensuring appropriate and comparable standards
- Following up recommendations of external examiners
- Involvement of external examiners during the lifespan of a course
- The level of support given by institutions to external examining, both financial and professional
- The appointment, training, induction and duration of office of external examiners
- Current and future challenges and changing practice (such as modularisation) and their implications for external examining
- Recognition of the external examiner role in promotion procedures
- Comparable international practice
- External examiners and FECs- their sourcing, payment and partnership arrangements
- How best practice can be shared and adopted including the value of a "college of peers" model
- The availability of an independent recourse for external examiners for raising concerns when routes within institutions' own processes are exhausted
- The section of the QAA Code of Practice on external examining.

Membership and Operation of the Review Group and Expert Group

The chair of the Review Group is Professor Dame Janet Finch, Vice-Chancellor of Keele University. The group will include representatives of GuildHE, QAA, HEA, ARC, AoC and NUS. Given the relatively short timescale it is not proposed that a detailed national consultation is conducted in advance of the report being produced. However, to ensure that the review is evidence based and informed of current practice an expert group drawn from a representative range of institutions will be formed to provide feedback and information on some of the key issues the review will be addressing.

Next Steps

The Review Group will meet four times and report in December 2010. The Expert Group will be primarily a virtual group but will meet twice to inform and develop both the work areas of the review and the final recommendations. The first meetings of both groups are planned for January/February 2010.

Greg Wade, UUK
Greg.Wade@UniversitiesUK.AC.UK

Evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure (QAA)

QAA is currently undertaking an evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure. The concept and components of the Academic Infrastructure have now been in existence within the UK for over 10 years. Periodically, each of the individual components has been separately reviewed, revised and updated. Additional reference points and supplementary guidance have been produced by QAA and others to complement the Academic Infrastructure. At the same time, internal and external audit and review methods have evolved and the nature of UK higher education has changed significantly. Given the elapse of time since the Academic Infrastructure was introduced, and these developments, it is now appropriate to consider what effect the Academic Infrastructure has had on higher education in the UK and whether the concept of an Academic Infrastructure and of its components remain useful and 'fit for purpose', or whether they should be revised and updated.

The evaluation aims to determine the extent to which the Academic Infrastructure has contributed to a shared understanding about academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities in UK higher education, and to provide evidence from which to make suggestions about its future development. The evaluation will consider the concept of the Academic Infrastructure and the impact and outcomes of its adoption and use from a UK-wide perspective, but it is acknowledged that different political contexts, education systems and specific audit and review methods operate in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland.

The evaluation primarily represents an approach which will consolidate, collate and analyse existing information. The first phase of activity is focused around the development of a consultative discussion paper which will explore the current level of awareness of the Academic Infrastructure among those working in higher education, the extent of its adoption and use and whether it is perceived as an effective tool in maintaining academic standards. The discussion paper will be published in early 2010 and the higher education sector and stakeholders will be invited to respond to questions arising from the findings. A final report, analysing the responses to the discussion paper and, if the evidence supports the needs, making proposals for the future of the Academic Infrastructure will be published in late summer 2010.

Further information about the Academic Infrastructure evaluation project can be found on QAA's webpages at: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/evaluation09/default.asp>
An outline project description can also be downloaded from this site.

If you have any thoughts or opinions about the Academic Infrastructure, or if there are any recommendations you would like to make, we would welcome your contributions. These can be sent to a dedicated email address: academicinfrastructure@qaa.ac.uk

Background information about the Academic Infrastructure can also be found on QAA's webpages at: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/default.asp>

*Janet Bohrer & Harriet Barnes
Development and Enhancement Group, QAA*