



**The Russell Group of Universities**

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**AGENDA ITEM 13: THE FUTURE OF THE QUALITY ASSURANCE REGIME**

**Issue**

1. In recent months the IUSS Select Committee, public and the media have voiced concerns about quality and standards in UK universities. In response, the HE sector is taking steps to explain more clearly how the current quality assurance (QA) system works and is undertaking a number of reviews to deliver improvements. The government's HE Framework (due to be published on 19th October) will emphasise the importance of responding to student needs.
2. This briefing, prepared by Professor Chris Brink (VC Newcastle), summarises current issues in QA, highlighting forthcoming consultations and reports where the Russell Group will need to take a view. Professor Brink is a member of the Board of the Quality Assurance Agency for HE (QAA).

**Context**

3. Concerns about QA are linked to a number of other current issues, notably the review of student fees (the Conservative party has indicated that the case of an increase in the fee cap must be accompanied by commitments to increase educational quality); access issues; and the postgraduate review (which will look at the attractiveness of UK universities to international students amongst a range of other issues).

**Summary and actions**

4. The main issues to note are:
  - **QAA:**
    - The QAA published a report in May on the "Thematic inquiries into concerns about academic quality and standards in England"
    - The QAA Board has approved but not published an action plan about sustaining quality and standards in HE
  - The former **Innovation, Universities & Skills Commons Select Committee:**
    - Published its report on students and universities in August
    - It recommended the formation of a new "Quality and Standards Agency"
    - The government response to the report is due in mid-October
  - **HEFCE:**
    - Committee on Teaching, Quality and Student Experience (TQSE) sub-committee on quality published its report on 1 October

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- It made recommendations are made on a wide variety of issues including admissions, degree classification, plagiarism, contact time and learning hours, making information available to the public in a common format
  - **UUK/GuildHE/HEFCE:**
    - Have published an overview of the UK QA framework in November 2008
    - Have set up a Quality Forum under the auspices of its Student Experience Policy Committee (SEPC), which has agreed in principle to create a standing group on QA involving these organisations
    - Are coordinating a **consultation on the future QA system in England and Northern Ireland** which will be issued in December. The main elements of this consultation have been discussed (although not yet agreed) by the UUK Board. Details at Annex A
    - Are leading a **review of the external examiner system**. Details at Annex B
6. **The Russell Group is undertaking information gathering and analysis** about the UK QA system, the external examiner system, and the use of the use of student achievements records in Russell Group universities to inform responses to these various consultations and projects.

***The Board is invited to discuss the issues raised by Professor Brink and identify priorities for Russell Group universities***

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## Briefing for the Russell Group meeting of 22 October 2009

### Current debates and developments on Quality Assurance

Chris Brink

10 October 2009

In the summer of 2008 concerns were raised in the national media about the quality of UK higher education provision. Since then a number of stakeholders have been considering the matter, in a complicated web of single and joint discussions.

- **The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)** published a report on *Thematic enquiries into concerns about academic quality and standards in England*, in May 2009. The QAA Board also approved (in July) an outline action plan, *Sustaining quality and standards in higher education*. This plan has been circulated to key organisations, but has not been published. It proposes to address the following topics, starting with a round table meeting:
  - External examining
  - Public information
  - Contact hours
  - Assessment and degree classification
  - Language requirements for international students.
- The House of Commons **Innovations, Universities, Science and Skills Committee** (IUSS Committee) published a 162-page report on 2 August 2009. It took evidence from a wide range of bodies and individuals (including the Chairmen of the Russell Group and UUK). It started work with DIUS and completed its report with BIS. It is a wide-ranging report, raising questions and commenting on issues of equality, finances, teaching and learning, and (Chapter 5), standards and quality. The report lists 109 recommendations, of which items 75-98 come from the Chapter on standards and quality. On this topic the report is broadly critical of all stakeholders. The core item, for the purposes of this briefing, is Recommendation 81:

*We have concluded that, on balance, the QAA, rather than be abolished, should be reformed and re-established as a Quality and Standards Agency ... with the responsibility for maintaining consistent, national standards in higher education institutions in England and for monitoring and reporting on standards. ...*

Two other relevant recommendations are a return to teaching quality assessment and time-limited powers for degree accreditation.

- **HEFCE** has a standing Committee on Teaching, Quality and the Student Experience (TQSE). In response to the concerns raised, HEFCE established a sub-committee chaired by Prof Colin Riordan (VC, Essex) to consider whether the concerns were justified, how public confidence in quality and standards in the HE sector might be maintained, and whether there was a risk that HEFCE's statutory duty regarding quality and standards (in England) might be compromised. The TQSE sub-committee published its report on 1 October 2009. Its overall conclusion is that there is no systemic failure in quality and standards in English higher education. It considered, and made recommendations regarding, the following areas of concern:

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- Admissions procedures
- Degree classifications
- Plagiarism
- External examiners
- Assessment and feedback
- Contact time and learning hours
- Institutional audit
- Public information.

The most interesting conclusion of the TQSE Subcommittee is that the current QAA audit method, if continued, will not provide HEFCE with sufficient evidence to fulfil its statutory duty.

- **Universities UK** has a standing committee called the Student Experience Policy Committee (SEPC), which is the UUK voice on quality and standards. When concerns were first raised, it set up a Quality Forum to discuss the issues jointly with GuildHE, the TQSE Subcommittee and the QAA. At the September 2009 meeting of UUK it considered an SEPC paper recommending:
  - A set of principles and objectives
  - A UK-wide strengthening of the external examiner arrangements
  - A more flexible institutional audit system
  - A system which is more transparent in its reporting
  - No increased overall burden
  - Robust and comparable public information
  - The involvement of students
  - A continued emphasis on quality enhancement.

In terms of the future management of quality assurance, UUK has reached agreement in principle with HEFCE, GuildHE and QAA that there should be “a standing quality assurance system maintenance and development group”. This would be jointly owned and secretaried by the three bodies, with QAA as “expert advisers”.

## Comments

There are some long memories behind the various reports, but fortunately also a number of new players. UUK has both a new Chairman and a new CEO, the responsible Government Department has changed (and may change again), HEFCE has a new CEO, and UUK has both a new Chairman and a new CEO. The debate has been mostly about quality and standards in England, but is clearly relevant to the whole sector. Nobody has expressed great enthusiasm for the IUSS report, and it may well fade into oblivion, but the fundamental issues raised by it will not. There is broad endorsement of the principle of institutional autonomy, implicitly attacked by the IUSS report. The QAA has no strong appetite for taking up the chalice offered by IUSS, nor does HEFCE seem to want it to. There is a broad consensus that the various stakeholders should work together to clarify matters and decrease risks to the sector. However, the steps being mooted mostly have to do with process mechanics rather than fundamental issues.

There are three fundamental issues: simplicity, comparability and responsibility.

The issue of **simplicity** is that the sector makes a conceptual distinction between “quality” and “standards”, and the public does not. Quality, in the technical sense of the QAA (now endorsed in some form by both the TQSE and IUSS reports), is about making sure that appropriate and effective teaching, support, assessment and learning opportunities are provided, and how well these are managed. Standards describe the level of achievement a student needs in order to gain entry to a university or to graduate from it. In consequence, quality assurance has come to

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be seen mostly as monitoring process, while standards are about outcomes. The QAA, under its recently-departed CEO, has always been explicit that while it monitors quality it does not judge standards. To the public, and perhaps many politicians, this is a contradiction in terms. If you think of “quality” as nothing other than “high standards”, a quality assurance agency which professes not to be judging standards seems to be ducking its responsibility. At the same time, universities jealously guard their autonomy, and are not unhappy with there being no government agency checking up on their standards.

The issue of **comparability** is twofold: comparability between institutions, and comparability over time. Each of these is represented by a canonical question. “Is a degree in Physics at the University of Somewhere of equal standard to a degree in Physics at the University of Elsewhere?” To this question the sector has not found a sensible answer. We seem not to have made clear the point that all degrees have to meet a threshold standard. The more we proclaim sector diversity, the more difficulty we have with comparability – or at least with a common view on comparability. The second question is: “Have standards dropped over time?”. This is a rich field for personal reminiscences, anecdotal evidence, latent prejudices, political posturing and media hype. Again, the sector has not found a clear and common response.

The issue of **responsibility** is simple: who judges standards? The answer given by the QAA is confusing, the answer given by the IUSS is not wanted, and the university sector is keeping its head below the parapet. (The TQSE Subcommittee, for example, concludes that “there is no systemic failure in quality in English HE”, but makes no similar claim for standards.) The only easy answer available to the public, then, is the one eagerly offered by newspaper league tables.

**Conclusion:** The questions raised in the various debates are not unanswerable. The answer lies in addressing the simplistic assumptions on which the questions are based, greater conceptual clarity, more efficient mechanisms, comprehensible public information, and better communication. The UUK paper (SEPC-2009-018) is sensible, and the attempt to put together a single group to address the issues (e.g. what changes should be made to the audit system) is worth supporting.

## **ANNEX A: UUK PROPOSALS FOR CONSULTATION ON THE FUTURE OF QA IN ENGLAND AND NORTHERN IRELAND**

UUK and its partners are committed to a quality assurance system which is accountable, rigorous, transparent, flexible, responsive and public facing. It needs to tackle concerns about quality and standards and make real changes to improve the student experience and the reputation of HE. The consultation draft suggests:

- A set of principles and objectives including: commanding public and stakeholder confidence; run by an operationally independent body; based on recognition of institutional autonomy and responsibility for delivering quality and standards.
- A UK-wide strengthening of external examiner arrangements, through a review led by UUK and GuildHE, working in partnership with QAA.
- A more flexible institutional audit system, which is not restricted by a cyclical approach and which also has the ability to follow key themes.
- A system which is more transparent in its reporting, leading to reports which are more publicly accessible (but potentially also blunter).
- A system which minimises burden, in order to ensure that maximum funding is delivered to front-line teaching and resources. While QAA subscriptions have gone up in 2009-10, we are cautious about increases in subsequent years.
- Putting more emphasis on the provision of robust and comparable public information, based on research about the needs of prospective students and a review of the current teaching quality information dataset.
- The involvement of students, giving our support to involving students as members of audit teams and continuing to look creatively at student engagement.
- A continued emphasis on quality enhancement, including through HEA-led work on assessment and feedback, in particular based on the use of NSS results.

The proposals have to be signed off by each of the partners, and may need to be revised in light of the HE framework which will be published in October. The consultation will be published in December 2009 and will run for three months. UUK will be holding consultation events in Leeds (21<sup>st</sup> January) and London (27<sup>th</sup> January).

## **ANNEX B: UUK PROPOSALS FOR THE REVIEW OF THE EXTERNAL EXAMINER SYSTEM**

The purpose of the review is 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 review will consider:

- The core and changing role of external examiners and the way in which this 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 in 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 (e.g. 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

The review will report to UUK and GuildHE in about 12 months time, highlighting immediate short-term improvements and longer-term challenges and how these might be addressed.