Consultation on changes to the Academic Infrastructure December 2010

Foreword

This document sets out the proposals of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) for restructuring the Academic Infrastructure to address the findings of an evaluation completed in summer 2010.[1]

Overall, the results of the evaluation showed that the Academic Infrastructure has served the higher education sector well, with much evidence of the positive impact it has had on assuring the standards and quality of higher education provision in the UK. However, there are also areas where further improvement would be welcome, which are summarised by the following response to the evaluation process from a higher education provider:

> 'The Academic Infrastructure needs strengthening to gain greater credibility, but our counsel here is to move towards simplification rather than elaboration: too much insistence on detail or nuance will not help. Overall better communication is needed, and that will be enabled by greater clarity of purpose, strengthening key elements to be mandatory, and the avoidance of academic jargon.'

In response to the findings of the evaluation, QAA proposes to restructure the components of the Academic Infrastructure into the **UK Code of Practice for standards, quality and enhancement in higher education**. The Code of Practice will have two parts, one dealing with academic standards and one with academic quality and enhancement. Each part will contain several chapters, each of which will be available separately to download from QAA's website. This new Code of Practice will form the definitive reference point for all those involved in delivering higher education which leads to an award from or is validated by a UK higher education provider. It will cover all students, whatever their mode or location of study and both undergraduate and postgraduate.

Students, their parents, their advisers, sponsors and employers, as well as the wider public, all need to be able to have confidence in the standards of higher education awards and the quality of the learning experience provided. Students invest a great deal of time and effort in their education; in parts of the UK they also pay fees, which will probably only be increasing, quite substantially, in the future. In order to make that investment, all students need to be confident that the standard of the award they will achieve and the quality of the learning they will experience in order to achieve that award will be protected. The proposed new **Code of Practice for standards, quality and enhancement** outlined in this document is intended to provide that confidence by specifying a definitive framework to which all higher education providers must adhere.

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[1] The final report of the evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure is available at www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/evaluation10findings

The Code of Practice will be based on the existing reference points that higher education providers already use and, as such, is not a fundamental change to how the standards of awards are set and maintained and the quality of provision assured and enhanced. However, it will be an important change to the way in which the regulation of higher education can be explained and understood. It will also provide a framework that is flexible and can adapt to the changing environment of higher education. Some developments we are able to predict as they emerge from work currently underway, but the Code of Practice will also be able to change as new priorities emerge. We have suggested two areas for immediate consideration in the 'Future work' section of this document (page 11).

The evaluation showed that the Academic Infrastructure was valued and successful as a technical tool for higher education practitioners; the Code of Practice will still fulfill this function but will also do so in a context where its effective communication to students and the wider public, whose interests QAA was established to safeguard, will be essential. This consultation is about how QAA proposes to restructure and change the existing reference points and work with the UK higher education sector to develop and implement the Code of Practice. In many cases higher education providers already use the reference points that will be included in the new Code of Practice, but the evaluation showed that there were some gaps; this consultation also sets out how these gaps could be covered. We therefore welcome responses to this consultation by representatives (including student representatives) from the higher education sector and comments from anyone with an interest in higher education.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who contributed to the evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure and we look forward to your continued engagement and responses to this consultation.

Anthony McClaran
Chief Executive
QAA

Introduction

The **Academic Infrastructure** is a set of UK-wide, nationally agreed reference points that give all higher education providers a shared framework for setting, describing and assuring the quality of the learning experience and standards of higher education awards and programmes.[2] Its primary purpose is to help those involved in providing higher education to set and maintain the standards of their awards and assure and enhance the quality of their provision. The evaluation stage completed in 2010 found that it was valued by higher education providers as a tool for this purpose.

It is the work of practitioners in higher education, guided by the reference points of the Academic Infrastructure, that directly affects the experience of students. Students also benefit from the existence of a strong quality assurance system underpinning the UK higher education sector. It is important that higher education providers can demonstrate clearly that their standards and quality meet externally set benchmarks. Although higher education institutions are autonomous, with responsibility for quality and standards, there is a wider framework in which they must work and which provides a safeguard for students, higher education providers and the wider public.

The components of the Academic Infrastructure are part of the range of external benchmarks used by higher education providers. This consultation is about how QAA proposes to restructure these established reference points, enabling those who use them to indicate whether changes proposed will provide a framework that will continue to help in setting and maintaining standards and assuring and enhancing provision for learning. This consultation addresses the findings of the evaluation.

The evaluation found that **what** the current Academic Infrastructure says is, in essence, appropriate. It was suggested that it could be extended to cover other topics or to expand on some it already covers, but on the whole the current content is fit for purpose. However, higher education providers felt that more clarity was needed about the difference between academic standards and academic quality, and between what are 'essential requirements' for higher education providers and what is provided as 'guidance'. This is an issue of **structure**.

There has never been an expectation that every member of staff involved in delivering higher education will be familiar with every part of the Academic Infrastructure. Rather, the guidance contained within the Academic Infrastructure is embedded within individual providers' policies and processes, and specific individual elements remain relevant to those involved in specialist areas. Moreover, there is a distinction between higher education providers with degree awarding powers (who have responsibility for setting and maintaining the standards of awards), and providers without degree awarding powers (who contribute to maintaining the standards of the awards of their awarding body). Consequently, some elements of the Academic Infrastructure are less directly relevant to those providers without degree awarding powers. These two situations will continue to apply to the proposed new **UK Code of Practice for standards, quality and enhancement in higher education** outlined in this document. The Code of Practice will continue to be UK-wide, which was identified in the evaluation as another strength of the current Academic Infrastructure.

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[2] More information about the Academic Infrastructure is available at www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure.

There needs to be a better explanation of how higher education is regulated and what reference points higher education providers use. This consultation considers how we might be able to provide information to audiences beyond higher education specialists, to help them understand what the reference points are and how they are used. The consultation invites you to suggest how this greater awareness might be successfully achieved.

The final report of the Academic Infrastructure evaluation (August 2010) identified a number of specific proposals to be addressed. We have produced a supporting report to accompany this consultation document which details separately how each proposal made in the evaluation report has been considered. The supporting report sets out the evidence that has been used to arrive at the changes proposed in this consultation. It can be found at www.qaa.ac.uk/news/consultation/AI.asp.

In preparing this consultation document we have also drawn on discussions held during workshops with students, their representatives, employers and representatives from professional, statutory and regulatory bodies during November and December 2010. We are grateful for their feedback.

Consultation process

The Academic Infrastructure is owned by the UK higher education sector as a shared framework for setting, describing and assuring the quality of the learning experience and standards of higher education awards and programmes. QAA publishes and maintains the Academic Infrastructure on behalf of the sector. The evaluation demonstrated that this sense of ownership was valued by the higher education sector and had been fostered by the collaborative way the Academic Infrastructure had been developed.[3] QAA wishes to maintain this.

This consultation gives the UK higher education sector opportunity to consider the proposed changes to the Academic Infrastructure, provide feedback on them and signal their agreement to implement the revised structure. It also provides an opportunity for a wider audience to consider whether the changes proposed will indeed help to provide confidence in the academic standards of higher education awards and the quality of learning provision.
We would therefore like to hear from anyone with an interest in higher education about the proposals we have made.

Responses to the consultation should be received by 1 March 2011. They may be submitted electronically via QAA's website or by email to academicinfrastructure@qaa.ac.uk.
Four round table discussion events are being held to provide anyone with an interest in this work with an opportunity to discuss the proposals and offer feedback to QAA. Details of the events are available at www.qaa.ac.uk/events.

A report summarising the responses received will be published in summer 2011. QAA will then begin a programme of development and implementation. As has previously been the custom and practice, higher education providers will have one year from the publication of each element to consider the impact of the changes on their own provision.

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[3] *Evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure: final report (August 2010)*, paragraph 2.1.3.

Proposed changes

Definitions

We have discussed the terms 'academic standards' and 'academic quality' with students and their representatives and with employers and representatives of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies. These discussions supported the view that there is little understanding beyond higher education professionals involved in quality management of the way in which the terms 'standards' and 'quality' are used in the context of the quality assurance of higher education. Making a distinction between the terms was thought to be artificial. However, the evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure found that because of the relationship between the elements of the Academic Infrastructure as reference points and the external processes of review operated by QAA, practitioners within the higher education sector would welcome clarity about how the terms are used in these contexts.

It is therefore proposed that for the purposes of the **UK Code of Practice for standards, quality and enhancement**, the following definitions will apply:

- **Threshold academic standards** are the level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an academic award. For similar awards, the threshold level of achievement should be the same across the UK.
- **Academic quality** is a way of describing how well the learning opportunities available to students are managed to help them to achieve their award. It is about making sure that appropriate and effective teaching, support, assessment and learning opportunities are provided for them.

Academic standards refer to the levels of achievement that students demonstrate in order to be awarded a higher education qualification. The threshold standard is the minimum acceptable level of achievement that must be demonstrated for a student to be eligible for the award. The reference points associated with this are, particularly, the qualifications frameworks and subject benchmark statements, which set out the threshold levels. Standards of performance above the threshold (for example, degree classification for honours degrees) are determined by individual awarding bodies.

The term 'learning opportunities' denotes the provision made by a higher education institution to enable a student to achieve the requisite standard for an award. 'Learning opportunities' is used rather than 'learning experience' because while we consider that a higher education provider should be capable of guaranteeing the quality of the opportunities it provides, it cannot guarantee how any particular student will experience those opportunities.

Learning opportunities include the teaching that students receive in their courses or programmes of study; the contribution students make to their own learning; and the academic and personal support that enables them to progress through their courses. Learning resources (like libraries and information systems), specialist resources (such as laboratories or studios), admissions policies and staff development all contribute to the quality of learning opportunities.

Academic quality is a shorthand term used to refer to the higher education provider's management of learning opportunities. By ensuring that its policies, structures and processes for the management of learning opportunities are implemented effectively, a higher education provider also ensures the effectiveness of its outcomes.

We are not proposing a single definition of **enhancement** for the purposes of the Code of Practice. Different QAA review methods have adopted different definitions depending on the specific context in which they operate.[4] We consider that quality enhancement naturally forms part of effective quality assurance, and approaches to enhancement and good practice will therefore be covered within Part B of the new Code of Practice, as it is developed.

Consultation question 1

For the purposes of the UK Code of Practice for standards, quality and enhancement, the following definitions will apply:

- **Threshold academic standards** are the level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an academic award. For similar awards, the threshold level of achievement should be the same across the UK.
- **Academic quality** is a way of describing how well the learning opportunities available to students are managed to help them to achieve their award. It is about making sure that appropriate and effective teaching, support, assessment and learning opportunities are provided for them.

Are these the appropriate definitions?

Structure

The **UK Code of Practice for standards, quality and enhancement in higher education** will be structured in two parts:

- Part A relating to the setting and maintenance of threshold academic standards
- Part B relating to the assurance and enhancement of academic quality.

Within this structure, quality enhancement is seen to be inextricably linked to quality assurance. Each part will contain a number of chapters, which will be available to download separately from QAA's website. This will enable the chapters to be used by specialists in individual areas of activity within higher education, much as the different sections of the existing *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* are now. It will not be expected that all staff within higher education will necessarily be familiar with the entire Code of Practice.

It is intended that this restructuring of the components of the Academic Infrastructure will make clear the distinction between academic standards and academic quality for those working within the higher education sector, but also make it easier to explain to a wider audience about the existence of a framework underpinning UK higher education.

Each chapter will set out obligatory minimum expectations in relation to the topic. It will also signpost other relevant sources of guidance and good practice, published both by QAA and by other bodies.

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[4] For more information on the definitions of enhancement and QAA's review methods, see www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews.

The following principles will underlie the entire Code of Practice:

- students have the opportunity to contribute to the shaping of their learning experience
- all students are treated fairly, equitably and as individuals
- students are properly and actively informed at appropriate times of matters relevant to their programme of study
- all policies and processes relating to study and programmes are clear and transparent
- strategic oversight of academic standards and academic quality is at the highest level of governance of the provider
- all policies and processes are regularly and effectively monitored, reviewed and improved
- sufficient and appropriate external involvement exists for the maintenance of quality and standards
- staff are supported, enabling them in turn to support students' learning experience.

Some elements of the Code of Practice, particularly those that relate to setting academic standards, will apply only to higher education institutions with degree awarding powers, but on the whole the Code of Practice will apply to all those who provide higher education that leads to an award from or is validated by a UK higher education provider. The Code of Practice will make clear where responsibilities lie only with those who have degree awarding powers.

In recognition that each student experience is different and not necessarily linear, Part B of the Code of Practice will be organised with reference to common aspects of the 'student journey'. This suggested structure is based on feedback collected through the evaluation and from discussions with the Academic Infrastructure Evaluation Sounding Board, which is made up of representatives from across the UK higher education sector. We have also discussed it with students and their representatives, who emphasised that there are a number of themes that are constant throughout the student life cycle. In particular, the students highlighted the need for information about different aspects of their learning experience to be available and communicated in an accessible way at different times. This is reflected by identifying information provision as an overarching theme to be considered in all chapters of the Code of Practice. You may wish to comment about the best way in which these topics may be divided to create a manageable structure.[5]

The Code of Practice is relevant to the experience of all higher education students, whatever their mode of study. Where particular considerations relate to specific groups of students, over and above those covered in the general chapters, these will be covered in separate chapters.

The following table sets out the proposed structure for the Code of Practice. It indicates which elements of the current Academic Infrastructure would provide the basis for the individual chapters and highlights some potential difficulties in achieving this restructuring. For each chapter there will also be a number of overarching considerations that must be considered as it is developed, and these are listed at the end of the table.

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[5] More detailed feedback from our discussions with students and their representatives will be available from QAA's website.

Proposed structure for UK Code of Practice for standards, quality and enhancement

	Chapter	Existing content	Notes/further information
		Part 1: setting and maintaining threshold academic standards	
A1	At national level: qualification descriptors	*The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*; *The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland*; also reference to the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework and the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales	We do not propose to revise the two higher education qualifications frameworks - these reference points are well established. This chapter will link to the frameworks, which must be adhered to, but it will also address the overarching themes to be revisited in all chapters as appropriate.
A2	At subject and qualification level: benchmark statements (either subject or qualification)	Subject benchmark statements; *Foundation Degree qualification benchmark*.	As above, we do not propose to revise each subject benchmark statement beyond the normal cycle of review. This chapter will link to these as reference points, explaining how they are to be used while also addressing the overarching themes. Links may need to be made to other publications such as the master's characteristics and forthcoming doctoral characteristics documents. It may be possible to include additional explanation about the use of subject benchmark statements for multi and interdisciplinary programmes.
A3	At specific programme level: Approval and review, and programme level information	Section 7 of the existing *Code of practice*; the relevant parts of the *Guidelines for programme specifications*.	This chapter will make clear the use of the appropriate parts of the current guidelines for programme specifications as relating to approval and validation of programmes. Please see the 'Future work' section (page 11) about requirements for student information. The information requirements set out in this chapter would also provide a link to the information to be provided in the proposed Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR).
A4	Assessment and Externality	Sections 4, 6 and 7 of the existing *Code of practice*. It will also include the minimum requirements for external examiners to be developed by QAA.	Depending on the outcome of the sector-led review of external examining it may be that a template for external examiners' reports is developed and this could also form part of this chapter. For more information see the project work web page for the review of external examining.[6]

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[6] www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/PolicyAndResearch/PolicyAreas/QualityAssurance/HowTheSystemWorks/Pages/ExternalExaminers.aspx.

		Part 2: assuring and enhancing academic quality	
B1	Programme design	Section 7 of the existing *Code of practice*.	The suggestion is to divide Section 7 of the existing *Code of practice* between this chapter and the programme monitoring chapter so this might be quite a short chapter. Should it therefore be combined with another chapter?
B2	Admissions and accreditation of prior learning	Section 10 of the existing *Code of practice*; Accreditation of prior (experiential) learning (APEL) guidelines (England).	
B3	Guidance for learning and teaching as relating to issues of quality and enhancement (including e-learning, learning and teaching strategies, staff development and supporting innovative practice)	This will be a new topic, identified as necessary during the evaluation, but will also draw on Section 2, Part B of the existing *Code of practice*.	This is where it would be possible to include guidance on what information on teaching, learning and assessment should be available for students (for providers in England and Northern Ireland, this would sit behind the Key Information Set, which is discussed under 'Future work', page 11). Links could be included in this chapter to other reference points that provide additional guidance such as *Personal Development Planning: Guidance for institutional policy and practice*[7] and the work of the Higher Education Academy.
B4	Student support, guidance and learning resources	This will be a new topic but will draw on Section 8 and part of Section 9 of the existing *Code of practice*.	
B5	Student representation	This will be a new topic.	Discussions with students and their representatives have suggested that this could set out minimum expectations of higher education providers regarding student representation.
B6	Assessment, external examining and the award of qualifications	This will be based on Sections 4 and 6 of the existing *Code of practice* not included in Part A above and will be based on those aspects relating to quality and enhancement.	It is possible this chapter could also reference the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR)[8] and the European Diploma Supplement[9], as means of recording achievement.

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[7] Available at www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/progressFiles/guidelines/PDP.
[8] Further information about the HEAR is available at www.heacademy.ac.uk.
[9] See www.europeunit.ac.uk/eu_policy___education/diploma_supplement.cfm.

B7	Programme monitoring	Section 7 of the existing *Code of practice*; elements of current *Guidelines for programme specifications* as appropriate.	This chapter may be quite short (see comments on B1 above) but it might be extended to include other checks and balances operated internally by higher education providers.
B8	Complaints and appeals on academic matters	Section 5 of the existing *Code of practice*.	
	Chapters to cover further considerations that apply to particular groups of students in addition to the general topics outlined above, as follows.		
B9	Students studying in collaborative arrangements	This will be based on Section 2 (mainly part A) of the existing *Code of practice* and the recently published amplification.	
B10	Students studying on postgraduate research programmes	This will be based on Section 1 of the existing *Code of practice* but will take account of recent developments such as inclusion of the Researcher Development Statement as appropriate.	
B11	Disabled students	This will be based on the recently revised Section 3 of the existing *Code of practice*.	There will be an overarching theme on equality and diversity - see page 11; therefore all chapters may draw on Section 3 of the existing *Code of practice*.
B12	International students	Guidelines are currently in development by QAA.	These guidelines could form an additional chapter, or could remain an additional reference point referred to in all other chapters as appropriate.

For each chapter, the following overarching topics will be specifically addressed:

- how information about the topic is communicated to students and other relevant audiences
- how the topic relates to the needs of non-traditional learners (for example work-based learners, part-time students), drawing on Section 9 of the existing *Code of practice* where necessary
- that equality and diversity issues have been embedded throughout
- how the responsibilities of awarding bodies and other higher education providers differ in relation to the topic
- that the content of the chapter considers where the situation might differ in the four countries of the UK and makes this clear
- that the content of the chapter aligns with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*
- how good practice and enhancement relate to the topic, including reference to relevant publications such as Enhancement Themes and *Outcomes...* papers and work by the Higher Education Academy.[10]

Consultation question 2

Do you agree that the components of the Academic Infrastructure should be restructured into the UK Code of Practice for standards, quality and enhancement? Will the new Code of Practice make clear the distinction between standards and quality?

Future work

The design of the Code of Practice will allow for additional developmental work to be undertaken as required and referenced to the appropriate chapters as they are developed and revised. Two immediate areas for work, which may be undertaken in parallel with the ongoing development of the Code of Practice, are highlighted below:

1   The **status of credit frameworks** and place of level descriptors within the Code of Practice. Scotland and Wales already have integrated credit and qualifications frameworks; England has a credit framework, and credit (though not necessarily the framework) is used by almost all higher education institutions. The evaluation demonstrated that there would be value in further exploration of this topic.

2   **Information** about higher education that is provided to the public, especially to prospective students making choices about programmes of study. Work is underway, at present for England and Northern Ireland, about the provision of 'public information', particularly that for prospective higher education students, their parents and advisors and sponsors (including employers). A set of comparable information in the form of a 'Key Information Set' (KIS) has been proposed.[11] It is anticipated that this will be underpinned by more detailed information at programme level, about teaching, learning and assessment methods. At present, this information may be available in programme specifications but not necessarily in an accessible format.

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[10] For further information, see www.qaa.ac.uk/enhancement.
[11] See www.hefce.ac.uk/news/hefce/2010/choices.htm.

The proposed structure for the Code of Practice envisages a role for programme specifications as tools for quality assurance, supplying the definitive description of the programme as validated (drawing on the evidence of the evaluation which suggested this was the way in which most higher education providers had found programme specifications to be valuable).

The need to provide information for students (both prospective and current) and for other audiences will be addressed as an overarching consideration throughout the Code of Practice. However, it may be desirable to undertake developmental work, perhaps initially in England and Northern Ireland, about what more detailed information is needed to complement the KIS and how this is presented in order to be accessible. It is possible that the current guidelines for programme specifications do not support institutions in publishing suitable additional information about individual programmes beyond what is provided in the KIS. Once the dataset to be provided in the KIS is agreed, it will be possible to develop guidelines about what further information in a comparable form can usefully be made available to prospective students.

In due course, once the current public information consultations have concluded, and if their outcomes are adopted in Wales and Scotland, a third part of the Code of Practice on 'Information' (Part C) could be developed, drawing together all these strands (for example to include student charters, UCAS entry profiles and institutional employability statements). However the provision of information for the purposes of raising awareness and understanding about higher education and to inform student choice - while very important - may not be considered to be directly relevant to the setting and maintaining of academic standards and assurance and enhancement of academic quality, and consequently should not be included in the Code of Practice but provide the content of a different reference point.

Consultation question 3

The two areas highlighted for future work are the status of credit frameworks and provision of information at programme level. Do you agree that these should be priorities for future work ? Do you agree that in due course the Code of Practice should include a Part C on Information?

Communication

The evaluation identifed the need to improve public awareness of the existence and purpose of the Academic Infrastructure. Once the consultation on changes to the Academic Infrastructure has been completed, QAA will undertake a programme of work to ensure its existence, purpose and function is communicated to all those with an interest in higher education. This may include the development of a 'road map', which explains how the various processes that together help to provide assurance of the standards and quality of UK higher education fit together. These include the internal processes of monitoring and review carried out by higher education providers, the external review methods operated by QAA, QAA's Concerns about standards and quality in higher education scheme, and the external examining system.

We would be interested in the views of any non-specialist audiences as to whether the proposals set out in this consultation document will help make it clear what the Code of Practice is for and how it is used by higher education providers. We would be glad to hear of any ideas

you may have about how we could communicate what the Code of Practice is for and how it is used by higher education providers.

Consultation question 4

Will the UK Code of Practice make clear how UK higher education providers set and maintain threshold academic standards and assure and enhance academic quality? Is the name 'UK Code of Practice for standards, quality and enhancement in higher education' appropriate?

Resource implications

QAA appreciates that UK higher education providers are currently operating in a period of financial restraint and uncertainty about future funding arrangements. The proposals set out above for the Code of Practice are based on restructuring the current Academic Infrastructure to better meet the demands placed on the quality assurance of higher education by the sector itself, students and the wider public as suggested in the evaluation. It is not envisaged that the content and consequent requirements on higher education providers will change significantly, other than would be expected in the course of normal review and revision.

Summary of consultation questions

Consultation question 1: For the purposes of the UK Code of Practice for standards, quality and enhancement, the following definitions will apply:

- **Threshold academic standards** are the level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an academic award. For similar awards, the threshold level of achievement should be the same across the UK.
- **Academic quality** is a way of describing how well the learning opportunities available to students are managed to help them to achieve their award. It is about making sure that appropriate and effective teaching, support, assessment and learning opportunities are provided for them.

Are these the appropriate definitions?

Consultation question 2: Do you agree that the components of the Academic Infrastructure should be restructured into the UK Code of Practice for standards, quality and enhancement? Will the new Code of Practice make clear the distinction between standards and quality?

Consultation question 3: The two areas highlighted for future work are the status of credit frameworks and provision of information at programme level. Do you agree that these should be priorities for future work ? Do you agree that in due course the Code of Practice should include a Part C on Information?

Consultation question 4: Will the UK Code of Practice make clear how UK higher education providers set and maintain threshold academic standards and assure and enhance academic quality? Is the name 'UK Code of Practice for standards, quality and enhancement in higher education' appropriate?

Annex - draft protocol for the development of the UK Code of Practice for standards, quality and enhancement in higher education

Each part and/or chapter of the new UK Code of Practice for standards, quality and enhancement in higher education will be developed by QAA with the help of an advisory group representative of the sector, and through consultation with the wider higher education sector. This continues the method used in the development of the existing reference points of the Academic Infrastructure. Each advisory group will be issued with a protocol which should help to standardise how each part or chapter is developed and what generic issues must be considered by all groups. This annex sets out a draft of this protocol. A final version will be published on QAA's website along with the programme of work that will need to be undertaken to create the new Code of Practice.

Draft protocol

The **UK Code of Practice for standards, quality and enhancement in higher education** is the definitive point of reference for all providers of higher education in the UK. QAA maintains stewardship of the Code of Practice on behalf of the higher education sector. The following protocols set out how it will be developed and maintained.

The Code of Practice does **not** incorporate statutory requirements relating to relevant legislation. It assumes that higher education providers have an overriding obligation in all cases to ensure they meet the requirements of legislation. However, where a section of the Code of Practice is related to legislative or similar obligations, efforts must be made to ensure compatibility.

The development and/or revision of each chapter of the Code of Practice will be coordinated by a QAA officer supported by an **advisory group.** This advisory group will include both **experts** on the specific topic and nominees representative of the UK higher education sector. The advisory group will always include at least one **student representative** and/or an officer from the National Union of Students.

The work of QAA and the advisory group in developing or revising a chapter of the Code of Practice will be supported by a public consultation with the higher education sector and others with an interest in higher education.[12] It is anticipated that the process of developing and/or revising a chapter of the Code of Practice will take approximately one academic year to complete.

As each chapter of the Code of Practice is initally developed, drawing on the existing components of the Academic Infrastructure, each advisory group will identify which elements of the topic relate to the setting and maintance of academic standards and which relate to the assurance and enhancement of academic quality, in order that they can be included in Part A or Part B as appropriate. The coordination of this work and between advisory groups will be overseen by QAA.

Each chapter will be developed to a common format, which makes clear the distinction between obligatory minimum expectations in the form of essential precepts, and examples provided for guidance. All chapters will be structured as a series of precepts and accompanying

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[12] QAA's consultation policy is available at www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/policy/consultations/policy.asp

explanations. The precepts express key matters that the higher education sector through the advisory group have identified as important for setting and maintaining threshold academic standards and/or assuring and enhancing academic quality. Individual higher education providers should be able to demonstrate that they are tackling the matters addressed by the precepts effectively through their management and organisational processes, taking account of institutional needs, traditions, culture and decision-making. The accompanying explanations must show why the precepts are important and in some cases give examples of the possible ways in which the precept can be met.

As each chapter is developed and/or revised, the advisory group must assure themselves that the following underlying principles are included in ways appropriate to the specific topic of the chapter.

- Students have the opportunity to contribute to the shaping of their learning experience.
- All students are treated fairly, equitably and as individuals.
- Students are properly and actively informed at appropriate times of matters relevant to their programme of study.
- All policies and processes relating to study and programmes are clear and transparent.
- Strategic oversight of academic standards and academic quality is at the highest level of governance of the provider.
- All policies and processes are regularly and effectively monitored, reviewed and improved.
- Sufficient and appropriate external involvement exists for the maintenance of quality and standards.
- Staff are supported, enabling them in turn to support students' learning experience.

In addition, the advisory group will need to ensure that the following overarching topics have been considered and addressed as appropriate:

- how information about the topic is communicated to students and other relevant audiences
- how the topic relates to the needs of non-traditional learners, for example work-based learners, part-time students, and students studying through flexible and distributed modes
- that equality and diversity issues have been embedded throughout
- that discussion has been included of good practice and enhancement in relation to the topic, including reference to sources of information
- that the content of the chapter considers where the situation might differ in the four countries of the UK and makes this clear
- alignment with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*
- other reference points which might usefully be included as appendices.