



**Evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure:
a QAA information paper**

February 2010

Introduction

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is currently undertaking a project to evaluate the Academic Infrastructure and has recently produced a discussion paper to facilitate debate.¹ The paper contains a number of questions about the role of the Academic Infrastructure, its relationship with other ways higher education providers set and maintain the quality and standards of their provision, and about the usefulness of each individual component of the Academic Infrastructure. It also raises questions about how the Academic Infrastructure could change to meet the challenges facing quality assurance processes in the future.

This work needs to be understood against the background of a number of parallel and interrelated activities and debates currently being undertaken by different organisations and groups across the UK higher education sector. This work is being carried out in order to maintain and improve the quality assurance system for higher education. Some of the current activities were prompted by the House of Commons Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Select Committee inquiry in 2009, while others were already planned and underway at that time, including the evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure.

To date, no systemic problems with the academic standards of UK higher education awards or the quality of the UK higher education student experience have been identified. However, the sector recognises that there is no room for complacency and the initiatives described below are considering areas where improvements can be made to ensure that the international reputation for excellence of higher education in the UK is maintained. Much of the activity to date has focused on the higher education sector in England. While responsibility for higher education is devolved to the regional administrations, the questions being discussed are of importance across the UK. The Academic Infrastructure itself represents a set of UK-wide nationally agreed reference points.

QAA is working closely with its partners and stakeholders to ensure that the evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure is informed by current debates and the outcomes of the project are appropriately linked to related work. This paper provides a summary of the key initiatives and indicates where the themes of these activities are relevant to the evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure and have been addressed in the discussion paper.

QAA working in partnership: activities related to the evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure

1 During the early part of 2008, in response to specific incidents identified in a small number universities in England, concerns were voiced in the media and elsewhere about whether the public could have confidence in standards of UK higher education awards and the quality of the higher education student experience. In acknowledgement of these concerns, the House of Commons Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Select Committee launched an inquiry into **Students and Universities** in October 2008. The final report of the inquiry was published in August 2009.² The Government published a detailed response to the report in October 2009, which included setting up a review of postgraduate provision (see below).³ Other higher

¹ Available at www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/evaluation10.

² www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmduis/170/170i.pdf.

³ www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmsctech/991/991.pdf.

education organisations also published responses to the select committee reports, including QAA.⁴

2 At the same time, with the support of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) we launched our own **Thematic enquiries into concerns about academic quality and standards in higher education in England**, with the final report published in May 2009.⁵ Following approval by our Board, we are now in the process of implementing an action plan for work to follow up on the findings of this report.

3 Separately, a sub-committee of the Teaching, Quality, and the Student Experience committee of HEFCE was set up to examine similar concerns. The work of the sub-committee, under the title **HEFCE's statutory responsibility for quality assurance**, drew in part on the findings of our Thematic enquiries project. This group reported in October 2009.⁶

4 The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills published its higher education framework document, **Higher Ambitions**, in November 2009.⁷ This document referred to the activities cited in the previous paragraphs, while covering a broader range of topics including the funding of higher education. Formally, the framework applies only to higher education in England, but is of interest elsewhere in the UK.

5 The Welsh Assembly Government's Education Minister commissioned a **review of higher education in Wales** chaired by Professor Merfyn Jones, Vice-Chancellor of Bangor University. The report on the first phase of the review, which considered student finance in Wales, was published in the autumn of 2008 and recommended changes to the student support regime in Wales.⁸ The second-phase report, which looked at the mission, purpose and role of higher education in Wales, was published in June 2009.⁹

In November 2009, the Welsh Assembly Government published **For Our Future - The 21st Century Higher Education Plan for Wales**. The plan acknowledges the role that higher education plays in the social, cultural and economic development of Wales.¹⁰

The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) has been asked to provide details of actions, measures and timelines for delivering the plan set out in *For Our Future* by spring 2010. HEFCW is also working with the sector to introduce **mechanisms for supporting the enhancement of learning opportunities** for students.¹¹ This work follows on from the development of a **revised Institutional review method** for higher education institutions in Wales, which will be implemented from 2009-10.¹²

6 The **Quality Assurance Framework Stakeholder Group**, whose members include the representative bodies for higher education (Universities UK ((UUK)) and GuildHE) and the

⁴ www.qaa.ac.uk/news/media/IUSSresponse.pdf.

⁵ www.qaa.ac.uk/standardsandquality/thematicenquiries/FinalReportApril09.pdf.

⁶ www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09_40/09_40.pdf.

⁷ www.bis.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/publications/Higher-Ambitions.pdf.

⁸ <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/dcells/publications/4.0%20Policies%20and%20Strategies/5.0%20Further%20and%20Higher%20Education/Further%20and%20Higher%20Education/Review%20of%20Higher%20Education%20in%20Wales%20Phase%201%20Student%20Finance%20Arrangements/081201reviewhigher.pdf>.

⁹ <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/dcells/publications/090622hephase2en.pdf>.

¹⁰ http://wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/policy_strategy_and_planning/feandhe/forourfuture/?lang=en

¹¹ www.hefcw.ac.uk/documents/publications/circulars/W10%2002HE%20Mechanisms%20for%20Supporting%20the%20Enhancement%20of%20Learning%20Opportunities.pdf.

¹² www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/reviewWales/Handbook2009.pdf.

funding bodies (HEFCE and the Department for Employment and Learning ((DEL)), Northern Ireland), with QAA as expert advisors, has been considering the principles and objectives that might underpin future quality assurance arrangements once the current cycle of Institutional audits in England and Northern Ireland is completed in 2010-11. An initial consultation on these principles and objectives was launched in December 2009.¹³ In the future, quality assurance arrangements in England and Northern Ireland will be monitored by the **Quality Assurance System in Higher Education Group**. The group will be chaired by Professor Philip Jones, Vice-Chancellor of Sheffield Hallam University, and will hold its first meeting early in 2010.

7 Once the initial consultation has been completed, QAA will develop an **operational description for a new audit method** for higher education institutions in England and Northern Ireland, to be effective from the academic year 2011-2012. This will be subject to a further consultation later in 2010. The expectations of the role the Academic Infrastructure plays in institutional quality assurance processes and the use made of it by a revised audit method will need to be carefully planned and coordinated. Consideration is also being given to the future of Integrated quality enhancement review (IQER) of higher education provision in further education colleges.

8 The former Higher Education Regulation Review Group (HERRG) has now been replaced by a UK-wide **Better Regulation Group**, chaired by Sir Graeme Catto.¹⁴ The work of this group is at a very early stage but its remit is to monitor the regulatory burden within higher education.

9 UUK and GuildHE have jointly launched a UK wide **review of external examining**, which will report to the governing bodies of the two organisations by the end of 2010.¹⁵ We are working with UUK and GuildHE to ensure good co-ordination between this and other ongoing, related activities.

10 HEFCE announced in September 2009 that it would be undertaking a **review of public information**, working via the Teaching Quality Information/National Student Survey (TQI/NSS) steering group.¹⁶ This review is at an early stage, and it is not expected that consultation on any recommendations for change will start before autumn 2010.

11 In response to the Select Committee's report on *Students and Universities*, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills instituted a **review of postgraduate education**,¹⁷ which has recently closed its first round of evidence-gathering. In *Higher Ambitions*, the Government asked Sir Martin Harris, director of the Office for Fair Access, to advise them, by spring 2010, on further action that could be taken to **widen access** to highly selective universities for those traditionally under-represented in higher education.

12 These reviews are intended to inform the **Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance**, chaired by Lord Browne of Madingley, which is currently gathering evidence.¹⁸

¹³ www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09_47.

¹⁴ www.dius.gov.uk/higher_education/shape_and_structure/better_regulation/herrg_background.

¹⁵ www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Newsroom/Media-Releases/Pages/UniversitiesUKtoleadreviewofexternalexaminers.aspx.

¹⁶ www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/nss.

¹⁷ www.bis.gov.uk/postgraduate-review.

¹⁸ <http://hereview.independent.gov.uk/hereview/2009/11/first-update-from-the-chair>.

13 Further priorities for higher education in England were set out in the **grant letter** on higher education funding for 2010-11 to HEFCE from Lord Mandelson, the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills.¹⁹

14 In Scotland, sector-wide **Enhancement Themes** aim to enhance the student learning experience through identifying specific areas for development, by sharing good practice and generating models for innovation in learning and teaching.²⁰ The **second cycle of Enhancement-led institutional review (ELIR)** is currently underway, and is subject to an ongoing evaluation.²¹

15 Across the UK, higher education institutions are trialling the production of the **Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR)**, as a key vehicle for measuring and recording student and achievement.²² This is in response to *Beyond the honours degree classification*, the final report of the 'Burgess Group' chaired by Professor Robert Burgess, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Leicester.²³

Relationship to the evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure

The activities outlined above have, not surprisingly, generated a large number of comments and recommendations. A number of themes recur between the reports, and some of these have direct relevance to the evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure. These are summarised in the following table:

Theme	Activity	Relevance to the evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure
a The role of QAA - QAA provides tools that help higher education providers to have in place suitable arrangements for setting and maintaining academic standards and quality.	1, 3, 5, 6, 8, 10	The Academic Infrastructure is a central element of the quality assurance arrangements used by institutions and QAA in our external audit and review activity.

¹⁹ www.hefce.ac.uk/news/hefce/2009/grant1011/letter.htm.

²⁰ www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk.

²¹ www.sfc.ac.uk/web/FILES/Our_Priorities_Effective_Institutions/First_annual_report_of_the_evaluation_of_the_SFC_quality_enhancement_strategy_in_the_university_sector_Extended_Summary.pdf.

²² www.heacademy.ac.uk/events/detail/2009/04_Nov_HEAR_National_Update_Conference.

²³ www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Publications/Pages/Publication-272.aspx.

<p>b Quality and standards - there is general agreement that there has been no systemic failure in the standards of UK higher education awards or the quality of the higher education student experience. However, there is a need to foster greater understanding by the general public of the concepts of 'quality' and 'standards' as used in higher education, particularly with regard to how they are set and maintained.</p>	<p>1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 12, 14</p>	<p>There is a need to consider how the Academic Infrastructure can be made more accessible to non-expert audiences, and whether additional publications are required to engage the public.</p>
<p>c Public information - a need is identified for the provision of better information about higher education. This includes information for prospective and current students about programmes and institutions, and information for the general public about quality and standards and the ways in which these are maintained.</p>	<p>1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 12</p>	<p>In addition to the points noted above, it may be necessary to reconsider the role of programme specifications or to introduce further guidance on the publicly available information provided by higher education providers.</p>
<p>d External examining - there is a need for a review of the operation of the external examiner system, and for a clearer 'job description' for external examiners.</p>	<p>2, 3, 4, 6, 9</p>	<p>Currently covered primarily in <i>Code of practice, Section 4: External examining</i>.</p>
<p>e Admissions - the role of admissions processes in addressing the widening participation agenda should be investigated.</p>	<p>4, 10, 11, 13, 14</p>	<p>Currently covered in <i>Code of practice, Section 10: Admissions to higher education</i>.</p>
<p>f Assessment - further work is needed to examine the consistency of assessment and degree classification practices within and between institutions and subject communities. Feedback to students is an area of particular interest.</p>	<p>1, 2, 14, 15</p>	<p>Currently covered in <i>Code of practice, Section 6: Assessment of students</i>; subject benchmark statements.</p>
<p>g International students - consideration needs to be given to the information available to international students about UK higher education, and to the support provided to such students by higher education providers.</p>	<p>2, 4, 10</p>	<p>All parts of the Academic Infrastructure may need to take more account of the needs of international students.</p>

This list of activities is not intended to be comprehensive, but to indicate the volume of activity currently taking place and which needs to be taken into account as the evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure progresses.

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