

## Great expectations



This is my last editorial for *higher quality*. I write it at a moment when there are a number of uncertainties facing quality assurance in higher education in England as it looks to the future. The forthcoming Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Select Committee report, the promised Department for Business, Innovation and Skills Framework, the imminent HEFCE Sub Committee report on quality and standards and, indeed, our own recent *Thematic enquiries into concerns about academic quality and standards in higher education in England* report, will all have a role in the discussions that are beginning to take place about the future direction and structure of the quality assurance framework in England.

That there needs to be a fundamental look at our review process in England is not in dispute. This has already happened in Scotland and Wales and their dispensations for the next few years are agreed. The current English audit process was decided upon by the Quality Assurance Framework Review Group (QAFRG) in 2004, when the world was a rather different place. Today's audits are delivering what was asked for then. The requested approach was based on a wish to move the emphasis of enquiry from 'assurance' (that is, accountability) to 'enhancement'. But recent developments are clearly suggesting that the fast-moving world of higher education and its changing student body, not to mention concerns about other spheres of regulation, require a different focus, for the next few years at least.

Our *Thematic enquiries* report has highlighted some of the key areas that are likely to find their way into the topics for examination in audits. External examining, matters relating to the needs of international students, assessment methods, student workload expectations, comparability of degree classifications, and the reliability of information about quality and standards are all areas in which there is keen public interest and rising expectations.

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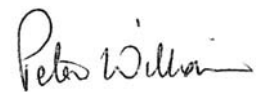
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Some of these topics will require a collective effort on the part of higher education institutions, because they will affect some aspects of institutional autonomy, such as external examining and degree classifications, and will probably need a common approach. QAA will be ready to offer its expertise to the intensive work that will be required.

Whatever the outcome of all these deliberations, they should be seen by universities as an important opportunity to provide evidence that an autonomous higher education system can be relied upon to manage itself properly. This will demand open, candid and honest discussion of current weaknesses and strengths. It will also demand a willingness to recognise that any reluctance to understand the realities of public perceptions of higher education (whether well-founded or not) carries considerable risks for self-regulation.

If these responsibilities, shared among the various constituencies of higher education, including institutions, students, funders and QAA, are shouldered effectively and responsibly, then there should be no need to fear the future.

I shall observe progress with considerable interest. Good luck and goodbye.



**Peter Williams**

## Students as members of audit teams

QAA has begun recruiting and training students to be members of audit teams from 2010.

As a result of the consultation on changes to the Institutional audit process, QAA sought applications from students, students' union representatives and graduates with current or recent experience of studying in a UK higher education institution.

QAA's advertisement for student members of audit teams attracted an unprecedented volume of high calibre applications, which made initial shortlisting a difficult task. Those shortlisted went forward to a further selection and briefing event in Birmingham on 28 May 2009. The agenda for the day provided an opportunity for student delegates to learn about some of the academic governance



**Derfel Owen,**  
QAA Development  
Officer, presenting  
at the audit  
training event

structures within the higher education sector in England and Northern Ireland as well as its diverse nature. Training in the role and some of the key skills required to undertake an audit were offered at the event. As a result of the feedback, recommendations regarding the selection and appointment of student members of audit teams were made in early June. Further training will be held in autumn 2009.

The vitality, enthusiasm and skills of the applicants strengthens the message that student auditors will bring a valuable perspective and experience to the audit process and will enhance its effectiveness. QAA would like to thank all of those who applied and their supporting higher education institutions for their interest and enthusiasm.



**Student delegates at May auditor training event**

## Students at centre of Manchester event

A QAA Quality Matters event took place on 26 May 2009 at the Centre for Excellence in Enquiry Based Learning, University of Manchester. The opening address was provided by Aaron Porter, Vice-President (Higher Education) of the National Union of Students. It was followed by an introduction to Institutional audit, provided by Alison Blackburn - Head of Academic Quality and Standards at the University of Central Lancashire and an experienced audit secretary.

The event provided student delegates with the opportunity to hear from students' union sabbatical officers with experience of preparing the student written submission for Institutional

audit. Delegates also learnt about effective student engagement following an Institutional audit.

## Student engagement workshop

QAA organised a student engagement workshop on 24 June 2009 in Birmingham to provide an opportunity for staff from higher education institutions to learn about new and innovative approaches that staff at other institutions are taking with regard to engaging and involving students in managing the quality of their education.

See the QAA website for full reports on both events and video clips.

**Derfel Owen**  
**Maureen McLaughlin**  
[www.qaa.ac.uk/students](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/students)

## HEPI student experience conference

The Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) conference 'The student experience - what's the deal?' took place on 6 May 2009 in London. The event was organised in response to the current focus on students' experiences and what they expect from higher education.

QAA's Chief Executive, Peter Williams, gave a talk entitled 'Great expectations - do students gain a great deal from their higher education institution?', in which he highlighted what students should expect to receive as part of their academic experience. Peter maintained that students should be entitled to clear information about their programme of study,

they should experience an integrated strategy of teaching and learning that enables them to get the most out of their studies, and they should be assessed in ways that enable them to objectively demonstrate their learning. Lastly, Peter asserted that each programme of study should include a clear demonstration of how it meets national expectations for the award.

Presentations and other information are available on the HEPI website at:  
[www.hepi.ac.uk/pubs.asp?DOC=5](http://www.hepi.ac.uk/pubs.asp?DOC=5)

**Laura Bellingham**  
[www.qaa.ac.uk/events](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/events)

## Peter Williams awarded CBE

QAA's Chief Executive, Peter Williams, has been awarded the CBE in the 2009 Queen's birthday honours list for services to higher education over the past 40 years.

He said: 'I am absolutely delighted to receive this award, which is a reflection on the excellent work QAA is doing for quality assurance in UK higher education.'

Sir Rodney Brooke, Chair of the QAA Board, said: 'I would like to pass on my sincere congratulations to Peter. The award of the CBE recognises the immense contribution Peter and his staff at QAA have made in maintaining the excellent, worldwide reputation of higher education in the UK.'

**Richard Tibenham**  
[www.qaa.ac.uk/news](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/news)

## Parliamentary inquiry into students and universities

The House of Commons' select committee on Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills has, over the last six months, been conducting a wide-ranging inquiry into students and universities. QAA's chief executive, Peter Williams, gave evidence to the inquiry as part of a panel of experts.

Since then, the committee has held more evidence sessions, the last of which was on 11 May 2009, involving questions to John Denham MP, then Secretary of State for Education, and Sir Alan Langlands, Chief Executive of the Higher Education Funding Council for England.

Mr Denham told the committee that 'the work of QAA in general shows that we do not have a systemic problem with quality and standards in the system'. When pressed on QAA's

response to specific allegations of threats to standards, he said that it was important to 'intervene much more smartly'. He added that it would be wrong for QAA to behave like the schools inspectorate.

In other evidence sessions held for the inquiry, the committee has questioned many students, vice-chancellors and academics, as well as the heads of sector bodies such as QAA. It has also been running an e-forum to which students have been invited to post views on their experiences of university.

All evidence sessions have now been held, and the committee is expected to publish its report and recommendations over the summer.

**Zoë Forbes**

[www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/IUSSSC](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/IUSSSC)

## Thematic enquiries into concerns about academic quality and standards

As reported in the previous edition of *higher quality*, QAA has been undertaking, over several months, a major piece of work involving a series of enquiries into five areas which emerged, last summer, as possible matters of serious concern about academic standards and quality in higher education in England.

These areas are:

- student workload and contact hours
- English language requirements for international students
- recruitment practices for international students
- the use of external examiners
- assessment practices.

The final report is now available on the QAA website at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/standardsandquality/thematicenquiries](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/standardsandquality/thematicenquiries)

The project has involved a detailed analysis of media coverage, comments and blogs, as well as in-depth interviews and focus group

discussions with people from across the higher education sector. We have also looked at published and unpublished reports, papers, lectures and speeches, including memoranda submitted to the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Select Committee inquiry into 'students and universities'.

The aim of the project has been to identify whether there is evidence to support assertions made in summer 2008. In order to do this, QAA has employed different methods from those used in its regular audits of higher education institutions.

Our enquiries suggest that while the UK has a fundamentally sound higher education system, there is evidence to support further exploration in the following areas:

- the range of contact hours appropriate to the student learning experience
- guidance offered to international students about UK higher education, and the support arrangements that international students should expect from higher

education institutions, including English language support and personal and academic support

- processes used to identify, train and support external examiners, including reopening the debate about whether there should be a nationally agreed set of minimum expectations for the role of all external examiners
- a review of assessment and degree classification practices across and between institutions

- effective ways of informing the general public about academic standards and quality in higher education, and the purpose and principles of external quality assurance processes.

QAA will therefore be recommending to its Board that further work is undertaken by QAA and its partners to determine how these areas can be addressed.

**Jayne Mitchell**  
**Laura Bellingham**  
**David Cairns**

[www.qaa.ac.uk/standardsandquality/thematicenquiries](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/standardsandquality/thematicenquiries)

## IQER 2008-09 programme nears completion

The Integrated quality and enhancement review (IQER) 2008-09 programme of 66 Developmental engagements and 24 Summative reviews is nearing completion.

Overall, institutional nominees have continued to make a very positive contribution to Developmental engagements. The flexibility of the method was illustrated recently when two Developmental engagements took place in the same week at a college. The same team carried out the engagements, using a separate self evaluation for each review and reporting the outcomes in two separate reports. Although these arrangements presented some logistical challenges, they proved successful.

The Summative review stage has now started, mainly for those colleges which had Developmental engagements in the summer of

2008. Five colleges with less than 100 full-time equivalent students funded by HEFCE have exercised their right to have a Summative review only. Four of these started with a desk-based scrutiny of documentation, rather than a visit. These variations of the method have been developed so that the process is in proportion to the size of the colleges' higher education enrolments.

Facilitators for Summative review have been useful in helping reviewers resolve queries. Their valuable contribution has emphasised the importance of each college selecting the member of staff with the most relevant knowledge and experience for the facilitator role.

**Gillian Hayes**  
**Ian Welch**

[www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/iqer](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/iqer)

## Developing QAA's Single Equality Scheme

QAA is developing a Single Equality Scheme in response to the recently introduced Equality Bill. As part of the new Bill, public bodies are required to 'consider the diverse needs and requirements of their workforce when developing employment policies and planning services'. Although QAA doesn't fall within the list of public bodies identified by the new Equality Bill, we are keen to comply with the requirements and want to proactively promote equality of opportunity and good relations

between different diversity groups, encourage participation of all diversity groups in QAA's work, and eliminate unlawful discrimination.

The scheme will apply to QAA both as an employer and as a service provider through its work with the sectors, and will be developed for implementation by September 2010.

**Colette Cherry**

[www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus)

## Access to HE conference and publications

### Access to HE conference

A hundred delegates attended this year's conference, held in Birmingham on 18 June, which focused on the theme 'Access to HE Diploma: a qualification for the future'.

QAA's Chief Executive Peter Williams addressed the conference and took the opportunity to reflect on the 20-year history of the national Access to HE framework. Recalling the work undertaken by QAA and its predecessors, he remarked on 'the history of demonstrable achievement and resilience of the scheme' and its value in enabling 20,000 adults a year to be prepared for higher education. Harvey Woolf, Chair of the Access Qualification Development Group, also reflected on the development of the Access to HE qualification.

The conference provided an opportunity to hear from those involved in the grading pilots, and to discuss questions about the implementation of grading.



Delegates at the Access to HE conference

### Latest Access to HE publications

The 2009 edition of *Key statistics* is now available on the Access to HE website at: [www.accesstohe.ac.uk/partners/statistics/](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/partners/statistics/) email [access@qaa.ac.uk](mailto:access@qaa.ac.uk) to request printed copies. The more detailed *Joint agency statistical report*, which includes information from funding bodies and UCAS about the profile and progression of Access to HE students, is also available on the Access to HE website.

### Access to HE data trends survey

The final report on QAA's survey about Access to HE data trends has been published on the Access to HE website ([www.accesstohe.ac.uk/news](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/news)). The aim of the survey was to explore with Access to HE providers the reasons for a

reported fall in the number of Access to HE students and provision, recorded over recent years. Of the 200-plus respondents, 37 per cent had experienced a fall in student numbers. The contributory factors they considered significant fell into four broad categories:

- nature of provision - 26 per cent (especially a reduction in part-time and evening provision)
- recruitment and selection - 17 per cent (especially more selective recruitment, in response to retention benchmarks)
- financial/personal factors - 42 per cent (especially perceived deterrent effects of increased fees in further education and higher education, the costs of study and the potential loss of essential benefits)
- alternative study options - 12 per cent (including Year 0 or equivalent courses provided in higher education and Foundation Degrees)
- other - 3 per cent.

However, 23 per cent of the respondents reported an increase in student numbers. Growth was attributed to a range of factors, including successful marketing and response to demand, with the development of courses in new subject areas or through new forms of delivery. The 40 per cent of providers who indicated that numbers had fluctuated or remained broadly the same over the period also noted that demand had held up - although sometimes the age profile of students had changed, or numbers had been capped, restricting potential for growth.

At the request of the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (now the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills), the Learning and Skills Council has commissioned a follow-up study to explore these issues further, and to consider whether the position has now changed.

**Kath Dentith**

[www.accesstohe.ac.uk](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk)

**20** years of  
**Access**  
to Higher Education

## Our work in Wales

### Institutional review in Wales from 2009-10

QAA has recently consulted on the draft handbook for the revised method for Institutional review in Wales. The main changes proposed in the handbook are:

- an increased focus on the enhancement of student learning opportunities
- the introduction of student reviewers
- consideration of European Standards and Guidelines and other guidance relating to European or other international practices
- the introduction of a rolling programme of reviews
- a move to a risk-based approach, with the time between reviews reduced where a judgement of limited or no confidence has been previously given
- an enhanced role for the institutional facilitator
- an increased focus on research degree programmes
- the option of an annual student statement by the student representative body
- the introduction of separate and hybrid collaborative review to the institutional review process.

Full details of the draft handbook are available at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/reviewWales](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/reviewWales)

Following the consultation, QAA will finalise the handbook and make it available on the QAA website in early autumn 2009. We will shortly be writing to all institutions in Wales to agree a date for their next Institutional review. When suggesting a date for the review, we will take into account the date and outcome of an institution's previous review.

### Latest Advisory Committee for Wales meeting

QAA's Advisory Committee for Wales met on 20 May 2009 at Swansea University. The Committee discussed a wide range of issues, including:



The Advisory Committee for Wales, from left to right: Lin Howells; Gabriel Jezierski; Lisa Newberry; Tony Hazell; Chair of Committee, Noel Lloyd; Jacquie Hare; Cliona O'Neill; Pat Cooper; Julian Ellis; Katie Doulton; Stephen Jackson; David Finch; Ben Gray

- progress by QAA against the service level agreement with the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales and with Higher Education Wales
- developments in medical education in Wales
- student engagement
- outcomes from Institutional review 2003-2009
- higher education in further education.

During April and May 2009, QAA liaison officers visited all the higher education institutions in Wales as part of a joint project with the Higher Education Academy looking at the way in which changes in quality assurance and quality enhancement are taking place across the sector in Wales. The project report will be launched at a conference in autumn 2009. The conference aims to:

- support institutions in their consideration of the purpose and role of enhancement
- explore how quality enhancement is conceptualised across the higher education sector
- provide opportunities for sharing different approaches to quality enhancement and current practice
- inform how best to support institutions in Wales in terms of quality enhancement.

See the next issue of *higher quality* for more details on the conference. Further information will also be available on the QAA website.

**Julian Ellis**  
[www.qaa.ac.uk/wales](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/wales)

# Quick guide to...QAA's work in Northern Ireland

## Background

On 1 August 2007, Northern Ireland's 16 further education colleges merged into six area-based colleges. The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) in Northern Ireland asked QAA to conduct a review of higher education programmes in the newly-formed further education colleges during 2008-09.

A consultation on the proposed method for reviewing further education colleges in Northern Ireland - Developmental review - was carried out during October and November 2008. This provided an opportunity for colleges and their respective awarding bodies to comment on QAA's proposals and to contribute to the design of the method.



Two of the six area-based colleges: North West Regional College, Strabane (above) and Belfast Metropolitan College, Millfield (below right)

## What is Developmental review?

Developmental review is an evidence-based process conducted by peer review and is designed to assist colleges in enhancing their quality procedures. The developmental aspects of the review process include the opportunity for the college, in preparing for its review, to test, develop and refine internal quality assurance and enhancement processes. Members of the college's own staff are also included as full members of the team carrying out the review. College staff are chosen according to their management responsibilities, so that they can take a significant role in sharing good practice and implementing any recommendations made as a result of the review.

In the interests of identifying and disseminating good practice within colleges in Northern Ireland, QAA also invited one reviewer from each college to participate as a reviewer in the Developmental review of a Northern Ireland college other than their home college.

## How does the review method work?

Developmental review is concerned with the extent to which the college, working with its awarding body partner(s), exercises its responsibilities in maintaining academic standards, and in assuring and enhancing the quality of students' learning opportunities in higher education programmes. Developmental review does not consider directly the responsibilities of awarding bodies. The responsibilities of the higher education institution, as an awarding body, are assessed separately through QAA's Institutional audit process.

A report on the Developmental review is produced by QAA, and made available to the college and its awarding bodies, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) and DEL. Areas identified by the review team for development are identified within the reports. As the purpose of these reviews is developmental, the reports are not published.

Developmental reviews in further education colleges in Northern Ireland were conducted during May 2009 and the reports will be distributed in July 2009.

**Derek Greenaway**  
www.qaa.ac.uk/northernireland



## QAA Annual Subscribers' Meeting

QAA's Annual Subscribers' Meeting took place at the Belfast Waterfront conference centre on 3 June 2009. Over 130 delegates attended from QAA's subscribing institutions and from higher education representative bodies from across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. This year's meeting followed the theme of 'Managing the quality of higher education in a changing environment' and focused on current and future challenges that may impact on the quality of UK higher education.



Northern Ireland Minister for Employment and Learning Sir Reg Empey, pictured centre with QAA Chair Sir Rodney Brooke, left, and Chief Executive Peter Williams, right

The programme included a mix of guest speakers and discussion sessions and QAA showcased some of its work. Sir Rodney Brooke, Chair of the QAA Board, opened the event by welcoming delegates and introduced Sir Reg Empey, Minister for Employment and Learning (Northern Ireland), who delivered the plenary address, focusing on the challenges for

the future of higher education. This was followed by keynote sessions delivered by Dr Don Olcott jr, Chief Executive, Observatory for Borderless Education, entitled 'Camelot, calamity, or catch 22: global higher education myths and realities' and by Professor Philip Jones, Vice-Chancellor, Sheffield Hallam University, entitled 'Quality assurance, enhancement and information requirements in a changing environment'.



Aaron Porter, Vice-President (Higher Education) at the NUS, leading his discussion group

After the keynote sessions, delegates attended smaller discussion groups that focused on 'The changing face of UK higher education'. Aaron Porter, Vice-President (Higher Education) of the National Union of Students, led a session on students' increasing expectations and their information needs. Dr Stephen Jackson, QAA's Director of Reviews Group, considered the future possibilities for the development of quality assurance. Carolyn Campbell, QAA's Head of International Affairs, focused on developing a Transnational Education Strategy, and Professor Colin Stirling, Vice-President



Delegates at the Access to HE showcase: Dr Claire Mera-Nelson, Director Creative Futures, Trinity Laban (left); Mr Keith Bartlett, Deputy Principal, Norwich University College of the Arts (middle); Professor Mark Hunt, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, University for the Creative Arts (right)

(Teaching and Learning), University of Manchester, led discussions focused on changing approaches to teaching.

The afternoon explored QAA's approach to changes in higher education. QAA's Chief Executive Peter Williams opened the session by outlining what QAA is doing to respond to the challenges of the changing nature of UK higher education. This was followed by updates from QAA directors, focusing on arrangements for revising the Quality Assurance Framework in England, reviewing the Academic Infrastructure, on the Quality Enhancement

Framework in Scotland and the role of international reviewers, and an update on Institutional review in Wales.

The event concluded with a question and answer session with a QAA panel chaired by Sir Rodney Brooke.

All notes and presentations are available at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/events/subscribers/2009](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/events/subscribers/2009)

**Jackie Carter**  
[www.qaa.ac.uk/events](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/events)

## Latest Scottish Enhancement Theme gains momentum

The latest Scottish Enhancement Theme - Graduates for the 21st Century: Integrating the Enhancement Themes - began in early 2009 and is already generating considerable activity across the Scottish higher education sector.



Professor Philip Winn (Vice-Principal for Learning and Teaching, University of St Andrews) chairs the steering committee, which has one member representative from every higher education institution in Scotland, as well as student members and observers from the Scottish Funding Council, Universities Scotland, the Higher Education Academy, student participation in quality scotland (sparqs) and the National Union of Students, Scotland.

This group is setting out the areas of activity for the new Enhancement Theme, which provides higher education institutions and the sector as a whole with an opportunity to make use of the outcomes of the previous Enhancement Themes.

The three main areas of work for this Enhancement Theme are:

- updating and integrating resources relating to past Enhancement Themes
- institution-based work making use of previous Enhancement Themes, according to their teaching and learning priorities,

supported by facilitated discussion within and between institutions where there are shared areas of interest

- an overarching, general sectoral discussion of the graduate for the twenty-first century.

Institutional teams, featuring both staff and student representatives, are being set up to take forward discussions, in line with individual institutional priorities. This will be supported by commissioned work to facilitate discussion within and between institutions where there are shared areas of interest.

The overall context for this work is one of an institutional and sector-wide consideration of the needs and attributes of the future graduate, recognising the diversity that exists among learners and the changing complexities of the world in which they work. The sector-wide debate will be stimulated by a series of events, presented by national and international experts.

As well as working with higher education sector organisations, the Enhancement Theme also aims to engage with and be aware of emerging developments within a wider group, including employers, research councils, professional bodies and the school sector.

National and international experts in relevant areas will support all three strands of work, contributing to institutional and sectoral developments and discussions.

**Christine Macpherson**  
[www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk](http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk)

Focus on...

## Norman Sharp, outgoing Director of QAA Scotland

### As he prepares to retire in September, Norman Sharp OBE reflects on his 12 years at QAA Scotland

It is always a danger to invite anyone to offer parting reflections. There are obvious dangers of freedom from institutional constraints just round the corner, to say nothing of temptations of never-ending verbosity. You can be reassured. I have been given a very tight word limit and I have nothing but the most stimulating of experiences on which to offer very few reflections.

One of the many privileges I have had over the past few years has been to serve on the Board of the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies. It was particularly interesting to participate recently in its bi-annual conference, hosted this year in Abu Dhabi. There were presentations and delegations from universities, quality agencies, government departments, and professional and statutory bodies from around the world.

Many countries had been in the 'quality business' for some time; many were taking first steps. Some came from developed countries with well established and relatively well resourced higher education systems; many came from less developed economies with intense resource pressures and high expectations of their higher education systems. What struck me very forcibly throughout these few days was the snapshot that was provided at that one global gathering, both of the history of quality management in higher education and of its fundamental importance.

Observing developments in countries with reasonably long-established quality systems was like observing a speeded-up film of a bird's-eye view of traffic in a busy city centre. Traffic apparently randomly criss-crossing, passing in opposite directions, occasionally seeming to go round in circles, with the odd blind alley being entered, and, of course, the occasional collision.

In many cases countries were reporting rather abrupt changes in the direction of their quality systems: from intensive subject accreditation to

institutional audit for some; from institutional audit to intensive subject accreditation for others; from points-based inspection systems to capacity-building systems for some; from capacity-building systems to points-based inspection systems for others. In remarkably few cases were these abrupt changes in direction the result of any kind of systematic consideration of evidence.



What is interesting in all this is that when you look below the surface of these seemingly random 'traffic flows', you see they are all trying to get to broadly the same place! The history of higher education quality management globally does seem to be one of u-turns, reversals and roundabouts, with the occasional straight stretch which has allowed good progress to be made.

The reasons for all this are not hard to find and are well documented and discussed elsewhere. However, the point this leads me to - as my first reflection - is the importance of stability in the system. This is certainly not to be confused with rigidity, which can result in perhaps the most useless and wasteful repetitive turning of the quality handle. Equally, it does not imply that the same strategy is appropriate for each stage of development - there is clearly a life cycle to these developments.

What it does imply is that there needs to be a consensus around the objectives to be achieved and the fundamental principles on which the quality system is to be built. The system then should be continually shaped and developed in the light of the evidence of its operation and the changing context in which it operates.

Without any sense of complacency, I reflect in gratitude on the way in which the higher education sector in Scotland has worked to support continuing dialogue and has created a

consensus around the fundamental aspects of purpose and principle that underpin the higher education quality system.

Related to all this is my second and indeed final reflection: the over-riding importance of the fundamental driver of enhancement of the student experience, something which is at the root of our quality systems. Returning to our Abu Dhabi conference, it was an interesting experience to listen to the Director of the quality agency in Ethiopia talk about the initial developments in quality assurance in higher education in his country. I was struck throughout my discussions with him by our sense of shared purpose: the quality system should be designed to support the institutions in capacity development.

I discussed the same issues with South African colleagues involved in the creation of the quality framework in the early post-apartheid days, when we identified the same common bond. In their context, capacity building was identified as the key purpose as much in relation to their most advanced, world ranking, universities as it was in their historically disadvantaged institutions.

Wherever one is starting from, particularly in the challenging context all our universities face today, enhancement is always an important institutional goal. The evidence that has been gathered in Scotland over the past decade (both by ourselves and by independent analysts) certainly supports the effectiveness of an enhancement-led strategy. The starting assumptions have been borne out. It is certainly not a light touch: it is a different, more penetrating and purposeful touch. Enhancement is not at the expense of assurance or accountability: it builds them in.

In drawing these few reflections together, I am very aware of, and grateful for, the extensive global partnerships we have been able to develop in order to learn from others and also in order to assist with developments elsewhere. Much has been gained from our interactions with countries such as Australia, Canada, Ethiopia, Ireland, Iceland, New Zealand, the Nordic countries and South Africa. We continue to be invited to advise on and participate in these developments around the world, and QAA, the universities and student bodies in

Scotland also offer a warm welcome to international working groups who come to learn from the Scottish experience in managing enhancement-led approaches.

In reflecting on these matters, I am conscious of the privilege it has been to work in the higher education sector in Scotland. It is often said that we are lucky in Scotland to work in a system where you can get a representative of every higher education institution, student body and funding council into a reasonably large room at one time. This is undoubtedly true.



Norman Sharp (right) with David Bottomley, Assistant Director, QAA Scotland

However, it is only a part of the answer. More important, I think, is that everyone should want to get into one room! That has certainly been my experience. There is a sense of common purpose, of common values and shared interests that has enabled principles and practice on quality matters in Scotland to be created. These principles and practices continue to evolve with a very clear focus on enhancing the experience of all students served by Scottish higher education institutions, and on maintaining the standards of the awards they achieve.

Occasionally the noise in our one room is considerable: we all have our own independent roles to preserve. But we work at it and continue to emerge with our principles intact - and as a result we have created an approach to the management of quality and standards in which all partners have a serious stake.

Before finally signing off, in these times of public accountability, I think I should close by highlighting that my participation in the conference in Abu Dhabi was undertaken at no expense to either QAA or the UK taxpayer!

**Norman Sharp**  
www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland

## Dr Bill Harvey appointed Director of QAA Scotland

Dr Bill Harvey will take over as Director of QAA Scotland when Norman Sharp OBE retires in September 2009.

Dr Harvey is currently Deputy Director for Learning and Teaching at the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), a post he has held since 1998 and in which he is responsible for policy relating to quality assurance and enhancement in Scottish higher and further education. Before joining the SFC, Dr Harvey was a Senior Lecturer in physics at Edinburgh Napier University from 1980 till 1995. He has also worked with the Open University, as a tutor and external examiner.

Dr Harvey will follow Norman Sharp OBE who has been head of QAA's Scotland office, more recently as Director of QAA Scotland, for 12 years.

Dr Harvey said: 'I have worked closely with Norman Sharp and his colleagues at QAA



Scotland for many years. I am looking forward to the challenges ahead, including the continuing need for the sector to demonstrate accountability and responsiveness, and to building on the strong foundations already in place.'

Professor Nick Kuenssberg OBE, Chair of QAA Scotland, welcomed the appointment: 'I am delighted that Bill will be joining us as Director of QAA Scotland,' he said.

'I would also like to thank Norman for his tremendous

work over the years - he will be a very hard act to follow. Bill will bring a wealth of both academic and policy-making experience to the post and will, I am sure, continue to develop the strong and effective partnerships with all stakeholders which are the hallmark of QAA's work in Scotland.'

**Zoë Forbes**  
[www.qaa.ac.uk/news](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/news)

## Malaysia audits 2010

The focus of the 2010 overseas audit is UK higher education in Malaysia, where there are over 20,000 higher education students pursuing UK awards. It is likely that QAA will invite around 10 institutions to take part in audits of partnership links in Malaysia, and another 10 institutions to provide information for case studies, whose aim is to disseminate good practice.

A small party from QAA visited Malaysia in late May to discuss the audit with colleagues at the Malaysian Qualifications Agency and the British Council. Detailed arrangements for the audit, including the UK institutions involved, will be announced shortly.



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QAA will publish a report on each of the UK institutions covered by the audit. These reports will comment on the arrangements in place for the management of quality and standards, and will include features of good practice and recommendations for

improvement. In addition to the individual audit reports, QAA will produce an overview of UK provision in Malaysia, bringing together audit reports and case studies, as well as information from a desk-based study of other partnerships. We are planning to publish the reports and case studies in June 2010.

**Will Naylor**  
[www.qaa.ac.uk/international](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/international)

## QAA's developments internationally

QAA is receiving an increasing number of high-level visitors from countries around the world who are keen to understand more about the UK approach to quality assurance in higher education. Since the beginning of March 2009, we have received 13 delegations of visitors from countries including the Seychelles, Mauritius, Bahrain, Kazakhstan, Turkey and Singapore.

Our visitors show great interest in the development and use of external reference points for academic standards, including qualifications frameworks, but it is very much a two-way exchange of information. In many instances, delegations have raised issues about UK higher education delivered across national borders into their territories, and the consequences for the recognition of qualifications. They are often looking for more information - and in some cases more reassurance - as to how transnational education provision is quality assured.

### Bologna update

Closer to home, colleagues from QAA participated in the biennial meeting of Ministers responsible for higher education in the European Higher Education Area - the Bologna Process - held on 28-29 April 2009 in Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium. QAA Chief Executive Peter Williams was a member of the UK delegation and Fiona Crozier, QAA Assistant Director for Development and Enhancement, was a member of the delegation from the European Association for Quality Assurance, as a member of its Board.

QAA's contribution to the UK's achievements and progress in implementing Bologna instruments included our compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance, confirmed by external review in 2008 and by the *Verification of the compatibility of The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ) with the Framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA)* - available at [www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ).

QAA officers also continue to make invited presentations at major international events within the growing community of quality assurance networks: Director of QAA Scotland Norman Sharp at the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies for Higher Education (INQAAHE) biennial conference, held in Abu Dhabi in April 2009; and Head of International Affairs Carolyn Campbell at the Asia Pacific Quality Network annual conference, held in Hanoi in March 2009.

### Spanish certification enquiries

We are still receiving enquiries and requests for assistance from graduates of UK universities who are having difficulty in obtaining recognition of their UK degrees from national authorities in Spain, either for admission to further studies or for employment. The numbers are substantial and continue to rise. The graduates - who have all studied full-time in the UK - are from more than 35 universities across the UK and the degrees are from a wide range of subject areas.

QAA has become involved as the Spanish authorities have insisted that graduates get certificates from QAA attesting to the level of their award against the FHEQ, something which we cannot and do not do. We have referred graduates back to their universities for assistance, but it has become clear from responses that some sharing of information and experiences of handling recognition issues within universities would be of value.

Meanwhile, we are working with colleagues in Spain to set up meetings with Spanish authorities, and we hope to achieve a satisfactory resolution to the problem.

Please contact us at [international@qaa.ac.uk](mailto:international@qaa.ac.uk) if you wish to contribute any information, either about problems with recognition of qualifications in Spain or if you have any success stories which could contribute to the briefing of officials for the planned visit to the Ministry of Education in Spain.

**Carolyn Campbell**  
[www.qaa.ac.uk/international](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/international)

## Update on subject benchmarking

The winter meeting of the Benchmarking Steering Group took place on 5 March 2009 at the Aston Business Centre, Birmingham. The agenda included a discussion of future arrangements for maintaining the currency of existing subject benchmark statements, and it was agreed that QAA should remain responsive to requests for revising statements on a continuing basis. QAA will, in addition, contact subject communities to provide them with the opportunity of reviewing their statements not more than seven years after they were originally revised. New statements will continue to be reviewed not more than five years after original publication.

The Group also discussed plans for ensuring that QAA's guidance to subject communities on developing new subject benchmark statements featured in the Recognition scheme remains up to date. The guidance was originally published in 2004 and will now be reviewed for currency, in line with the maturation of subject benchmarking over the last five years.

### Review of subject benchmark statements

Consultation on the draft revised statement for *Agriculture, forestry, agricultural sciences, food sciences and consumer sciences* is now closed

and the final statement will be published in the autumn. Work is continuing on revising the statement for *Architecture*.

### New subject benchmark statements

A new statement for *Youth and community work* and an annex to the statement for *Mathematics, statistics and operational research* to cover integrated master's (MMath) were published on 2 March 2009. QAA has agreed to support the development of a new benchmark statement for master's degrees in *Computing* (see *higher quality* issue 27). An expression of interest in developing a new benchmark statement for *Counselling and psychotherapy* has been received from The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy.

### Master's level benchmarking

Work is continuing on finalising a draft for consultation of the master's degree characteristics document (see *higher quality* issue 27).

**Laura Bellingham**

**Fiona Crozier**

**Harriet Barnes**

[www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark)

## An introduction to QAA published

QAA has published *An introduction to QAA* (May 2009). This 12-page guide outlines who we are and what we do, discusses our role in UK higher education, and provides an overview of all our major activities.

The publication is intended for anyone who wants to know more about QAA's work and signposts readers to further information on the QAA website. It also includes a list of 'frequently asked questions' and provides details of other useful higher education contacts.

This publication is currently being circulated to

our major stakeholders, partner organisations, students and their representative bodies. It can be downloaded free of charge from our website and printed copies can be ordered from our distributors, Linney Direct ([qaa@linney.co.uk](mailto:qaa@linney.co.uk); 01623 450788). A Welsh translation of the publication is also available.

**Steven Walker**

[www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus)



## Upcoming events and publications

10 July 2009	Fifth annual liaison conference: employer-responsive provision	Woburn House, London
23 October 2009	Quality assurance and enhancement in Wales - a changing picture?	The Metropole Hotel, Llandrindod Wells

Date	Publication
April 2009	Information bulletin - <i>Higher education strategies pilot 2007-08</i> <i>Access to HE data trends survey - final report</i>
May 2009	Consultation on a draft new handbook for Institutional review in Wales <i>An introduction to QAA (May 2009)</i> <i>Thematic enquiries into concerns about academic quality and standards in higher education in England final report - April 2009</i> <i>Access to HE Bulletin for AVAs</i> <i>Access to HE Key statistics 2009</i> <i>Access to HE Joint agencies statistical report</i> <i>Research-Teaching Linkages report: Overview: the aims, achievements and challenges from the Enhancement Theme</i>
June 2009	<i>Institutional audit: A brief guidance note on becoming a student member of an Institutional audit team</i> <i>Outcomes from institutional audit series 2: Specialist institutions</i> <i>Universities Scotland Teaching Quality Forum Project: Good practice in internal subject review</i> <i>Enhancement Themes newsletter</i>
Forthcoming	<i>Three Outcomes from institutional audit series 2 papers: Subject benchmark statements; FHEQ; Programme specifications; and Code of practice</i> <i>A toolkit for enhancing personal development planning strategy, policy and guidance</i> <i>Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee International Benchmarking Working Group. Supporting student success: A forward-looking agenda, final report - April 2009</i> <i>First Year Experience report: Student expectations, experiences and reflections on the first year</i> <i>Research-Teaching Linkages report: Information and mathematical sciences</i>

All QAA publications and event details are available at [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk)

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