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## World class standards

The period since publication of the last edition of *Higher quality* has been one of intense activity for the Agency. Consultations have taken place with the sector and with stakeholder organisations on sections of the *Code of practice* and on the qualifications frameworks, and preparations have continued for the introduction of the new method of academic review. It has been a time of extensive dialogue with the sector, through meetings arranged by individual institutions and subject associations, through conferences promoted by the Agency and, increasingly, through our web site. There are now several million hits per year on our web site, confirming the importance of this medium for both communication and consultation.

### Qualifications frameworks

The frameworks, one for England, Wales and Northern Ireland and one for Scotland, were approved by the Board of the Agency in January, and copies are being distributed with this edition of *Higher quality*.

Publication of these frameworks is a major step forward for higher education in the United Kingdom. In 1997, the Dearing report called for 'Greater explicitness and clarity about standards and the levels of achievement required for different awards' made by universities and colleges. The qualifications frameworks deliver the clear and explicit standards that were called for.

After careful and detailed debate within the sector, we have a consensus on the standards that should be associated with the main higher education awards. It is particularly important that such a consensus should be established for the Honours and Masters degrees, as at these levels there is a need to maintain a clear comparability with qualifications elsewhere in Europe.

Academic standards are not static, they change over time as the frontiers of knowledge and understanding are pushed forward. The qualifications frameworks recognise that, by calibrating standards against that frontier.

The descriptors for the main higher education qualifications do three things. First, they set out expectations of a student's mastery of their field of study, and of the conceptual understanding needed to describe and discuss current problems in that field.

Second, the descriptors state the abilities that the graduate will have developed, for example, critically to evaluate arguments, assumptions, abstract concepts and data, to formulate judgements and to identify a range of solutions to a problem.

Lastly, the descriptors relate these abilities to employment, making it clear that these are qualities needed not only for academic success, but also as a foundation for employment that will require the exercise of initiative and personal responsibility, and the ability to take decisions in complex and unpredictable situations.

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Dearing noted that the Masters title was used in many different ways, including for qualifications made in respect of both advanced, specialist programmes, and for conversion programmes covering largely undergraduate material. The framework makes it clear that the Masters title should be used only in respect of qualifications that are genuinely postgraduate in their level. This is of particular importance in the new European context of the Bologna Declaration. The Masters title is being used consistently across Europe to denote postgraduate achievement. The UK cannot afford to be left behind.

The standards represented by the descriptors of the qualifications frameworks are challenging, world class standards. They will ensure that the United Kingdom maintains its competitive edge in the global market place for higher education.

#### Academic review

The new academic review method is now operating in Scotland. Early experience of the use of the new method emphasises the importance of the self-evaluation document, which is at the heart of the review process. The lighter touch of the review process, that is inherent in the new method, is most likely to be realised where there are good quality self-evaluation documents. A reflective, evidence-based and genuinely evaluative document, supported by good programme specifications, and cross-referenced to other important internal documents, will provide reviewers with most of the information they need. Documents that are merely descriptive, and which do not evaluate strengths and weaknesses honestly and openly, will raise more questions than they answer. Reviewers will then need to spend more time gathering evidence on which to base their judgements. A good self-evaluation document is a major factor in ensuring that the new method delivers a less intrusive and burdensome approach to review.

#### Subscribers' meeting

In March, the Agency will hold its first subscribers' meeting. All heads of subscribing institutions have been invited to this one-day conference, which will provide an opportunity to question members of the Board of the Agency, and its senior management team, on the work of the Agency. The conference will provide an opportunity to discuss our *Annual report*, to pursue current issues in depth through workshops, and to look ahead to future challenges. I look forward to seeing all institutions represented at what I hope will become an annual event.



John Randall  
*Chief Executive*

# The frameworks for higher education qualifications

The Agency has continued to work with the higher education sector, students, employers and regulatory and professional bodies to develop:

- a framework for higher education qualifications for England, Wales and Northern Ireland (EWNI); and
- a credit and qualifications framework for Scotland that will allow higher education to be incorporated into a comprehensive Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework.

The two parallel frameworks align at the level of the Honours degree, and are the same with regard to Masters and Doctoral qualifications.

## Developing the frameworks

Over the past two years, informal and formal consultation has taken place with all HE institutions and with many other individuals and organisations that have an interest in the frameworks. From the outset there was broad consensus on the need for the frameworks. There was support for many of the specific proposals, including those that address the confusion that has arisen over the use of the M title for extended undergraduate programmes. However, some aspects of the proposals were the subject of controversy. In particular, there was a clear division between employers and institutions about the number of levels for undergraduate qualifications in the EWNI framework.

In Scotland, the embedding of higher education qualifications with the comprehensive Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework was widely welcomed.

In November 2000, we published summaries of the feedback received to the two position papers published in July 2000 and the structures of the frameworks that our Board had decided to adopt in the light of this feedback. Copies of these papers were distributed widely and are available on our web site. At the same time we published draft guidance for use by institutions as they work towards implementation of the frameworks.

Feedback on the draft guidance suggests that a balance has been struck between the permissiveness of the frameworks, which has been criticised by some as too great yet has been welcomed by others, and the introduction of a consistent approach for the recognition of particular outcomes.

Final guidance is included in the documents on the frameworks published with this bulletin.

Supplementary guidance on the location and nomenclature of some specific qualifications for

medicine, dentistry, veterinary medicine and teaching will be published later this year.

Students enrolling for programmes of study from the start of the academic year 2003-04 should be joining programmes that are in line with the appropriate framework.

For some institutions, significant changes will need to be made to the qualification titles adopted for particular programmes or the programmes themselves will need to be restructured. The Agency will work with those subject communities where most of these changes will occur. We will facilitate a benchmarking exercise for subjects where there is significant taught provision at the Masters level and where restructuring can be expected for some programmes if the Masters title is to be retained when the frameworks are in place. Benchmarking of the MBA has been identified as one of the areas where this type of exercise would assist institutions. We will also facilitate ongoing discussions to assist institutions with understanding how the frameworks should be implemented.

The frameworks in an international context  
An Agency conference in November 2000 set the need for and development of the frameworks in the context of the Bologna Declaration on a European space for higher education. The UK was one of 29 signatories to the Declaration. Speakers at the conference made it clear that there is a need for greater transparency and consistency of the outcomes that are recognised by particular qualifications, both within the UK and on an international basis. Changes being made to national higher education arrangements within Europe, in particular, suggest that the UK will need to demonstrate that it can compete in a global market on the basis of the standards which higher education in the UK maintains. The qualifications frameworks will help institutions to demonstrate that confidence can be placed in the standards of their qualifications.

## Working in partnership

The Agency is very grateful to the large number of individuals and organisations who have contributed to the development of the qualifications frameworks. It was not possible to satisfy all preferred options, as many different positions were adopted. However, we will continue to work in partnership with those who will be affected by implementation of the frameworks and will seek to build on the support for the frameworks demonstrated by so many bodies. Now that the framework structures have been finalised, we must turn our attention to communicating their benefits to a wider audience, including employers, and prospective students and their advisers.

## Further progress in benchmarking academic standards

By describing the nature and standards of higher education programmes, benchmark statements provide the academic communities with a means of defining what can be expected of a graduate in a particular subject area.

In the first phase of the benchmarking project, the Agency facilitated the development of 22 subject benchmark statements and published them in April 2000.

The second phase began in autumn 2000, with the formation of benchmark groups in the following subject areas:

Agriculture, Forestry, Agricultural and Food Sciences
Anthropology
Area Studies
Art and Design
Biosciences
Building and Surveying
Communication, Media, Film and Cultural Studies
Dance, Drama and Performance Arts
Dentistry
History of Art, Architecture and Design
Languages and Related Studies
Linguistics
Materials
Mathematics, Statistics and Operational Research
Medicine
Music
Physics and Astronomy
Psychology
Town and Country Planning
Veterinary Medicine
Welsh
Subjects Allied to Medicine (SAMs)
Biomedical Science
Complementary Therapies
Health Studies
Optometry
Pharmacy

This work will progress over the coming months, leading to a consultation on the draft statements during October/November 2001.

We are also undertaking preliminary planning on benchmarking postgraduate awards and will be seeking to establish groups for the MBA and the MEng in the first instance.

Benchmarking of nursing and the professions allied to medicine

The Agency is facilitating preparation of benchmark statements for the health care professions. Some 102

people, drawn from higher education institutions, practitioners, employers, and the regulatory bodies are directly involved with this project. A steering group is overseeing the project. The group is jointly chaired by Professor Dame Jill Macleod Clark, University of Southampton and Professor Mike Pittilo, Kingston University and St George's Hospital Medical School. This UK-wide benchmarking project is supported by the relevant Government departments and by the bodies that fund higher education provision in the subjects covered.

The draft benchmark statements are cast within an overarching health professions framework. The statements illustrate the shared bases upon which the education and training of health care professionals rest, and the profession-specific context within which undergraduate programmes are organised. The format of the statements reflects these two dimensions.

The following health professions are covered by the statements:

Dietetics
Health Visiting
Midwifery
Nursing
Occupational Therapy
Orthoptics
Physiotherapy
Podiatry
Prosthetics and Orthotics
Radiography
Speech and Language Therapy

Each statement contains an initial section, *Health professions framework*, which is set out under three main headings:

- the broad expectations of the practitioner as a professional;
- the application of principles and concepts in securing, maintaining or improving health/well-being;
- the knowledge, understanding and skills associated with the disciplines that underpin the education and training of professionals.

This is followed by the main section which describes the nature and extent of programmes leading to awards, and the profession-specific expectations and requirements.

Consultation on the statements will take place from 22 January to 2 April 2001. They are available on the Agency's web site. Publication of the final statements is scheduled for June 2001.

## Recent developments in HE progress files

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What is a progress file?

The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (the Dearing and Garrick reports) recommended that progress files should be introduced into higher education. The Committee proposed that these files 'should consist of two elements: a transcript recording student achievement which should follow a common format devised by institutions collectively through their representative bodies; a means by which students can monitor, build and reflect upon their personal development.'

A joint initiative

The Agency is working jointly with Universities UK (formerly CVCP), Universities Scotland (formerly COSHEP), the Standing Conference of Principals (SCOP) and the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN), on a policy initiative concerned with developing and implementing progress files in higher education.

A policy statement and draft guidelines for HE progress files were published in May 2000 and can be found on our web site at [www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/progfileHE/guidelines/contents.htm](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/progfileHE/guidelines/contents.htm). A revised version of the guidelines, reflecting issues raised in response to the draft paper and including a new annex on aspects related to careers guidance, is being prepared and will be available shortly on our web site.

The joint policy statement encourages higher education institutions to introduce a transcript with a consistent information content by the academic year 2001-02. However, universal use of this transcript would not be expected until 2002-03.

A five year lead-in time with a start date of 2005-06 is more realistic for implementing policy on personal development planning (PDP), the tool that will encourage students to reflect upon their development, across the whole system and for all higher education awards.

Links to programme specifications, benchmark statements and the qualifications frameworks  
The progress file supplements and personalises the programme specification for the course being followed by a student. Each institution's policy on PDP can provide a means for acquiring and developing qualities and skills at subject level, including those related to employment or employability.

The transcript, a key document, summarises the learning and achievement associated with an individual's qualification.

Discussing the issues

The Agency is working to support the introduction of progress files in close association with many partners. These include the DfEE, employers and professional bodies, the National Union of Students, the National Postgraduate Committee, and a range of institutions and departments involved in research and development or with experience of 'recording achievement'.

A series of discussion forums are planned for this year; the first, for senior managers, will be held at Universities UK on 13 March 2001. Information will be circulated through established networks and will be posted on our web site.

## Update on the *Code of practice*

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The *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (the *Code*) provides precepts and guidance for best practice across a range of institutional activities. During institutional reviews the Agency considers to what extent each institution is meeting the expectations of the precepts of the available sections of the *Code*.

Eight sections of the *Code* have been published to date, and work continues on the remaining planned sections. The most recently-produced section, on career education, information and guidance, was

published in mid-January. Copies of each published section of the *Code* are distributed to institutions.

A national conference held in London on 13 June last year launched the *Code* on academic appeals and student complaints on academic matters. The event attracted interest both from the specialist and general consumer press, and provided the first public platform for debating the problems of providing independent, external review of decisions on complaints and for discussing implementation of the code. Keynote speaker, Baroness Blackstone,

emphasised the importance of dealing with complaints fairly, quickly and effectively, and welcomed proposals for an ombudsman for student complaints.

#### Forthcoming sections of the *Code*

In December 2000, a draft version of the *Code* on student placements was made available on our web site, with a deadline of 16 February 2001 for receipt of comments. The final version should be published in late April or early May of this year.

A group drawn from the higher education sector has been assisting with drafting the section of the *Code* that will address admission to higher education. We hope to make a draft version available in March 2001, with a view to publication of the final version during the summer.

A draft of the section on accreditation of prior learning and experience should be available for comment by May 2001.

Published sections of the *Code* and drafts available for consultation can be found on the Agency's web site.

*Code of practice*: published sections as at end January 2001

Section	Title
1	Postgraduate research programmes
2	Collaborative provision
3	Students with disabilities
4	External examining
5	Academic appeals and student complaints on academic matters
6	Assessment of students
7	Programme approval, monitoring and review
8	Career education, information and guidance

## Subject level scope and preference surveys

Following two years of consultation and development, the new, integrated process of academic review was introduced in Scotland. Twenty five reviews are scheduled in 12 Scottish institutions over the academic year 2000-01; these will cover 13 of the 21 subject units due for review between 2000 and 2003. All review teams are in place and review coordinators are liaising with the institutions to be visited. Some 63 reviews are planned for Scotland in 2001-02, with a further 85 reviews taking place during 2002-03. For the rest of the UK, academic review will commence in 2001-02.

#### Collecting data

At subject level, academic review comprises a number of stages. An initial step is a scope and preference survey. This involves collecting data from institutions about the extent and complexity of the HE programmes they offer in each subject area. The survey provides institutions with an opportunity to inform us about their preferred timing of reviews. Although we cannot guarantee that institutional preferences will be accommodated, as we have to ensure that a balanced distribution of reviews is maintained, we are committed to making every effort to agree an appropriate review schedule with each institution. The survey involves some 417 higher education providers in what is a major logistical exercise.

The data we gather enables us to plan the overall schedule of reviews across the UK for each of the

three academic years and to calculate how many reviewers we need to recruit and train. It also provides a basis for decisions about the size of review teams and the subject specialisms required for each review.

In Scotland, scope and preference data was collected, leading to the schedule outlined above. A similar exercise was also carried out in Wales, but it has not yet been possible to draw up a detailed schedule as a result of a decision by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) to allow institutions to defer to 2001-02. Discussions about how the 21 subjects are to be reviewed are continuing with the HEFCW and the Welsh institutions.

The subjects due for review in England and Northern Ireland comprise those 11 of the 21 subject areas that remain after completion of the current round of subject reviews. These 11 subjects have been the focus of the most recent scope and preference survey carried out by the Agency. From a preliminary analysis of the returns, it is clear that we face a very substantial increase in our subject review activity. With some small adjustments to the schedule of visits proposed by institutions, we will be running between 350 and 400 reviews across the UK in 2001-02 and significantly more than this in 2002-03. Reviewer recruitment and training will start in March 2001 and continue through 2001 into 2002.

### Nomination of reviewers

The Agency would like to emphasise that we are continuing to encourage nominations of reviewers. Although we have received well over 1,400 nominations to date, we must ensure that there are no shortfalls in particular subject specialisms. One of the strengths of academic review is that it is a peer review process, and if academic staff in higher education institutions wish to be reviewed and judged by those who can genuinely be described as their peers, it is essential that they consider either putting themselves forward or nominating appropriate colleagues. Academic review is no longer in the planning stages, it has already begun.

It is in everyone's interests to ensure that those who have the best understanding of learning and teaching issues are involved.

For further information on scope and preference surveys and related matters, please contact:

Gillian Hayes, Head of Operations on 01452 557017 or email [g.hayes@qaa.ac.uk](mailto:g.hayes@qaa.ac.uk)

For information on academic reviewer nominations, please contact:

Helen Markham, Team Leader, Recruitment, Training and Deployment on 01452 557036 or email [h.markham@qaa.ac.uk](mailto:h.markham@qaa.ac.uk)

## Review of programmes in nursing and the professions allied to medicine

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### Review in England

Recent changes in funding arrangements, whereby the Department of Health now funds programmes in nursing and the professions allied to medicine, mean that reviews of this provision will no longer be carried out under contract between the Agency and the Higher Education Funding Council for England.

Discussions regarding a contract between the Agency and the Department of Health have been taking place. Under the proposed contract the Agency will carry out reviews of Department-funded provision. This will enable the Department to meet its aim of streamlining the range of external reviews that its providers currently receive, and ensuring that the programmes are subject to external review arrangements equivalent to those used for other higher education provision.

### Review process

It is proposed that the review process will take the form set out in our *Handbook for academic review* (the *Handbook*). Any special arrangements for reviewing provision, for example, to recognise the importance of clinical placements and opportunities for collaboration and sharing of evidence with the professional and regulatory bodies, will be set out in a supplementary text to the *Handbook* which the Agency will develop in consultation with key stakeholders.

### Review timetable

The proposed timetable for review starts in October 2001, using a staged approach. It will incorporate three key stages: prototype reviews; evaluation of the prototypes; and review of all Department of Health-funded provision over a three-year cycle.

The first full cycle of review will be completed by the end of the academic year 2005-06.

2000-01	Completion of initial development work
October 2001 to July 2002	Prototype review process
October 2002 to June 2003	Evaluation of review process
October 2003 to July 2006	Full cycle of review for nursing and professions allied to medicine

### Prototype reviews

Six prototype reviews will take place during the period October 2001 to July 2002. They will incorporate nursing, professions allied to medicine (PAMs) and combined nursing and PAMs reviews.

The prototype reviews will provide an opportunity to test the utility of the supplementary text to the *Handbook* and the opportunities for collaboration with the professional and regulatory bodies.

#### Evaluation

Evaluation of the prototypes during October 2002 to July 2003 will inform any further amendment of the review process in the light of participants' experience.

#### Full cycle of review

A full cycle of reviews will commence from October 2003.

#### Reviews in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales

The Agency will continue to discuss with the bodies that fund provision of nursing and PAMs elsewhere in the UK how best to review the provision that they fund.

#### Further information

Representatives from the higher education sector, the regulatory bodies, the Department of Health, and practitioners, are working with the Agency to develop review arrangements for this provision. Documentation and progress reports from this ongoing work will be made available on our web site.

## The Agency's work overseas

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UK institutions have a history of providing higher education to students in overseas countries, through collaborative arrangements with partner institutions. The recent strength of the pound, however, has made it more difficult for UK institutions to compete in terms of cost with other countries offering degree-level awards taught and assessed in English. Within an expanding global market, the UK's reputation overseas as a leading provider of higher education relies increasingly on the assured quality of UK higher education awards. The Agency has a major role in ensuring that UK higher education continues to be recognised internationally as a high quality product.

The Agency seeks to support the international reputation of UK higher education by ensuring that government and education agencies overseas are clear about how the quality of the awards offered by UK higher education institutions through collaborative links are maintained at UK standards. To do this, we carry out quality audits of collaborative links between UK higher education institutions and some of their partner organisations in other countries. The resulting overseas audit reports focus on the capability of the collaborative arrangements to support the quality of provision and security of standards that would be expected of the UK institution's own equivalent provision. The reports are published in printed format and on our web site.

#### Assuring quality and standards

This aspect of the Agency's work was begun by the Higher Education Quality Council in 1996. Since then there have been visits to 18 countries, some of which have been visited twice. Some 70 reports have been published. In the early audits of overseas collaborative links, questions were asked by the

countries concerned as to why the UK should have deemed it necessary to 'check up' on its institutions' overseas collaborative activity. Some countries assumed that the audits were a panic reaction to problems that needed sorting out. More recently however, the most frequently-asked question is 'why are other countries not conducting a similar exercise in respect of the overseas activities of their own institutions'?

#### The challenges facing UK institutions

Many challenges face UK institutions wishing to work with collaborative partners to offer their awards overseas. From our experience of quality audits of overseas partnership links, we have identified recurring themes that have the potential to cause problems for the providing institutions. Avoiding these problems is a key to successful collaborations. When a partnership link, however small, does begin to generate problems in respect of the quality of provision or the security of academic standards, the potential cost to the providing UK institution, in reputation as well as in financial terms, can be far-reaching. It is clear that if time and effort is invested in setting up the arrangements in detail before the start of a collaborative programme, the likelihood of the partnership's long-term success is greatly improved. Short cuts bring problems. In particular, quality audits of overseas links have shown that careful attention to the induction of each partner institution's staff into the expectations of a UK degree-level award is a critical success factor. So too are attention to the clarity of the UK provider's requirements for the administrative arrangements in the partnership, and the partner's understanding of the provider's expectations for quality in teaching, assessment and student support.

Challenges to the establishment and successful maintenance of overseas collaborative programmes can also emerge from sources beyond the control of the UK institutions themselves. For example, some countries have recently introduced legislation that can make working with partner institutions more difficult, especially in the private sector, and particularly when it is not always clear how the legislation will be applied in practice. The Agency takes every opportunity during overseas visits to clarify the proper interpretation of such legislative requirements with government and education agencies. In this way, we aim to be in a better position to advise UK institutions on the procedures that should be followed to gain and maintain approval for their collaborative activities. We are committed to working closely with UK institutions to ensure that the UK higher education 'brand' of reliable high quality provision and assured standards is carefully nurtured by all involved.

Innovations affecting 'borderless' education  
Web-based and other innovative ways of offering award-bearing learning opportunities at a distance will have a major part to play in 'borderless' education, and in the ability of UK institutions to provide quality

higher education around the globe. One of the Agency's objectives is to support sustainable innovation in learning and teaching. It is important that the students experiencing distance learning and electronic learning (d-learning and e-learning) have the same quality of experience, if not the same experience, as those studying through more traditional modes of learning. It is our intention to work with the sector to ensure that innovative approaches to learning at a distance are soundly based and are capable of maintaining the standards expected of UK higher education awards.

Work for the current year

During 2001, we will audit selected partnership links with China and Hong Kong, Greece and Israel. Auditors and Agency officers will visit the UK providers of these links and their overseas partners. The visit to Hong Kong will include some arrangements that are classed by the UK providers as 'distance learning'. The purpose of this additional dimension to the audit is to explore aspects of delivery and assessment. From this, we hope to produce an overview report on aspects of quality assurance in delivery and assessment in this rapidly expanding mode of overseas provision.

## Access to HE

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We have made considerable progress with our programme of reviewing the authorised validating agencies (AVAs) that validate Access to Higher Education courses in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. AVAs are licensed by the Agency to act in this capacity and the courses they validate appear in the DfEE's *List of Access Courses Preparing Students for Entry to Courses of Higher Education*, approved by the Secretary of State. Details of all recognised courses are available also on the UCAS web site at [www.ucas.ac.uk/access](http://www.ucas.ac.uk/access)

Since the *QAA Recognition Scheme for Access to Higher Education* was introduced in March 1999, we have carried out 14 reviews and have awarded one new licence to a merged organisation. This means that half of the currently licensed AVAs have been reviewed under the new scheme. At the time of going to press, reports have been published for 12 of these reviews. Copies of the reports can be purchased from Linney Direct (see page 12) and are available on our web site.

Each review results in a recommendation to the Access Recognition and Licensing Committee (ARLC) about renewal of the AVA's licence. The *QAA Recognition Scheme* makes provision for six possible recommendations to the ARLC:

- unconditional renewal of licence;
- conditional renewal of licence;

- provisional renewal of licence (with a further review visit by a specified date);
- suspension of licence;
- withdrawal of licence;
- temporary renewal of licence.

Outcomes of the 12 AVA reviews for which reports have been published are:

- one unconditional renewal;
- six conditional renewals;
- four provisional renewals,
- one withdrawal of licence.

While the review and licensing of AVAs is a major part of the Agency's responsibility for Access to HE, we also monitor their activity by scrutinising their annual reports and statistics. We are committed to developing statistical data on Access courses, Access student profiles and student progression. Much of this work is carried out in collaboration with colleagues at HESA, UCAS, and the further and higher education funding bodies.

All students who successfully complete Access to Higher Education courses are now awarded 'kitemarked' Access certificates bearing the Agency's Access logo.

## Subject overview reports

Since 1994, the Agency and its predecessor organisations have, on completion of a subject round, published a subject overview report for each subject area.

In essence, these overview reports evaluate the overall quality of HE provision at the level of the individual subjects; assist in the identification and promotion of best practice; and make a contribution to the enhancement of the quality of subject provision within the HE sector.

Each overview report also includes a list of providers in the subject area and the grades awarded to them.

The 1998-2000 subject round has now been completed and subject overview reports for the following 13 subject areas will be published at the end of February 2001.

Anatomy and Physiology
Art and Design
Dentistry
Mathematics, Statistics and Operational Research
Medicine
Molecular Biosciences
Nursing
Organismal Biosciences
Other Subjects Allied to Medicine
Pharmacology and Pharmacy
Physics and Astronomy
Psychology
Veterinary Medicine

### An improved process

Since publication of the last set of overview reports, the writing process has been improved to include greater input from subject specialist reviewers. The first draft of each report is now written following a workshop involving subject specialists guided by the review chairs, in which the specialists make a major contribution to the text. This means that the overview reports are essentially written by practising subject specialists, involved in the teaching of their subjects at higher education institutions. Preparation of the final text is carried out at our Gloucester office.

### Role of the overview reports

With increasing emphasis being placed on learning and teaching by institutions and their representative bodies as well as the funding councils, subject overview reports will become a focus of attention, both within and outside the HE sector.

Subject overview reports are published on our web site and can be downloaded for printing. They are also published as printed booklets, available from Linney Direct (for contact details see page 12). Copies of the reports are distributed free of charge to careers services, higher education institutions, and education specialists in the media.

The reports, which provide an independent view of the quality of teaching and learning in higher education, are a valuable, additional source of reference for students making choices about higher education. They attract much interest also from parents, and staff at secondary schools, sixth form colleges and further education colleges.

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

The Agency's web site hosts 1000s of documents and a wide range of information on our activities. It is also used to make available draft publications and consultation papers.

The site, which was relaunched with a new design and structure in August 2000, aims to meet the needs of a rapidly growing user base. Navigation has been improved, a site map has been provided, and search facilities introduced. An additional, text-only version of the site is being developed to enable easier access for users with disabilities and for those who use alternative browsers.

We welcome your comments as we continue to improve and develop our web site.



## Report from the Board

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The following report outlines the main areas of discussion and decision at the four Board meetings held between May 2000 and January 2001.

### Implementation of academic review

The Board considered at each meeting the progress that was being made in establishing the infrastructure for the academic review process and in setting up the initial programme of academic reviews in Scotland in 2000-01. The main parts of the infrastructure – completing the trials and pilots of the academic review method, publishing the first 22 benchmark statements, publishing the *Handbook for academic review*, publishing the guidelines for the preparation of programme specifications, and publishing the initial sections of the *Code of practice* – were all in place by autumn 2000. The other main area of development – the qualifications frameworks and their associated guidance – were finalised by January 2001. The programme of 25 academic reviews in Scotland in 2000-01 was agreed with the institutions in Scotland. Most of these reviews are under way; a small number will start early in 2001. In July 2000, the Board noted the very positive feedback from reviewers who had attended the first two training sessions; it is encouraging to note that this has been maintained through the later training sessions. The Board continues to monitor the implementation of academic review closely, and receives reports at each meeting.

### Collaboration with the NHS

The Board has welcomed the progress made in developing collaborative arrangements with the NHS. The Agency is already working with the NHS in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and with SHEFC in Scotland on the subject benchmarking of nursing, midwifery and health visiting, and professions allied to medicine. We have reached agreement with the Department of Health in England to carry out a programme of prototype reviews of the quality of NHS-funded subjects in England in 2001-02, with a view to working towards a full programme of reviews from 2003. Discussions are continuing with the appropriate bodies in the other countries of the UK on how best to review the programmes that they fund.

### Qualifications frameworks

In July, the Board received the published position papers on the two national qualifications frameworks; one for Scotland, and one for England, Wales and Northern Ireland (EWNI). These had been distributed widely and comments were invited by the end of September. In November, the Board considered the responses to these papers.

For Scotland, the proposals in the position paper had been relatively uncontroversial and the framework would be implemented along the lines proposed. For EWNI, the responses had been more mixed, particularly on the issue of the number of undergraduate levels, of which four had been proposed in the position paper. The responses suggested that employers, professional bodies and stakeholders generally favoured four undergraduate levels. However, the sector generally favoured three, as it had particular concerns about the place of the foundation degree and ordinary degree in a model with four undergraduate levels. In the light of the responses, the Board agreed that it would be sensible to have three undergraduate levels in the EWNI framework. It agreed the draft guidance for higher education institutions in England, Wales and Northern Ireland on implementing the framework, with qualification descriptors. The sector was given the opportunity to comment on the draft guidance by 18 December 2000. The general response was favourable, suggesting that a balance has been struck between the permissiveness of the frameworks and the introduction of a consistency towards recognising particular outcomes.

### Progress files for HE

The Agency has been working with the representative bodies to develop progress files for HE. In May 2000, the Board endorsed the draft policy statement attached to the paper.

### Access recognition and licensing

In November, the Board received a report from the Access Recognition and Licensing Committee (ARLC) on the withdrawal of an AVA licence. The Board endorsed the approach and decisions taken by the ARLC.

### Complaints and representations procedures

Following a review of the Agency's current procedures for handling complaints and representations from institutions, the Board endorsed a set of proposals for further developing those procedures and making them more transparent. The procedures will be published on the Agency's web site shortly.

#### Subscribers' meeting

The Board agreed to hold the inaugural subscribers' meeting on Wednesday 7 March in London. The event will include a general presentation on the work of the Agency. The *Annual report 1999-2000* will be published on 6 March 2001.

#### Business planning

In July, the Board agreed the *Business plan 2000-03*, and the *Annual operating plan and budget 2000-01*. The Board also agreed that the Agency's *Business plan* should be a public document. The *Business plan 2000-03* was published in October 2000.

#### 1999-2000 Directors' report and accounts

The Board agreed the 1999-2000 report and accounts that would be laid before the company's members at the AGM in January 2001.

#### Board membership

In November 2000, the Board reappointed Christopher Kenyon and Catherine McLoughlin to serve for a further term. In January 2001 it endorsed a recommendation from the Nominations Committee for the appointment of a new independent Board member - Mr Mike Killingley, Senior Manager, Executive Education, HSBC Bank plc. The Board also agreed, on the recommendation of the Nominations Committee, to invite Ms Alex Lewis, Postgraduate Students' Officer, University of Birmingham Guild of Students, to attend Board meetings as a student observer, initially for the balance of the calendar year 2001.

At January 2001, the Board's membership was as follows:

Mr Christopher Kenyon *chair*

Chairman, William Kenyon & Sons Limited;  
former Chairman of Council, University of  
Manchester

Professor Antony Chapman

Principal, University of Wales Institute, Cardiff

Ms Maggie Deacon

Director of Finance, University of Brighton

Professor Janet Finch CBE

Vice-Chancellor, University of Keele

Mr Mike Killingley

Senior Manager, Executive Education, HSBC Bank plc

Mr Graham Mackenzie OBE

Chief Executive, ASW Holdings plc

Professor Peter McKie CBE

former Chairman, Du Pont (UK) Ltd

Ms Catherine McLoughlin CBE

Management Consultant and Chair, St George's  
Healthcare NHS Trust

Sir Ronald Miller CBE

Chairman of the Court, Napier University, Edinburgh;  
former Chair, Dawson International plc

Mr Philip Robinson

Director, University College Chichester

Mrs Valerie Stead OBE

Director of Quality Assurance, Kent Institute of Art  
and Design

Professor William Stevely

Principal, The Robert Gordon University

Professor Roger Williams

Vice-Chancellor, University of Reading

One vacancy

*Invited observer representing Government Education  
Departments*

Mr Paul Cohen

*Invited observer representing students*

Ms Alex Lewis

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