

## UUK Policy statement on standards, June 2010

1. The Higher Education sector in the UK is large and diverse. There are more than 130 bodies with the power to award degrees, and more than 10,000 different courses. A key strength of the sector is the heterogeneity of its constituent institutions. Each has different missions, priorities, subject focus, research interests and infrastructure. This enables the sector as a whole to meet the various needs of different types of student, and to offer the range of disciplines required. Students undertake higher education for different purposes and will go to different types of institutions to achieve their purposes.
2. We have a national system which assures the quality and standards of our awards. This ensures that the standard of degrees is broadly comparable across the system; not equal or identical but broadly comparable. We have no national curriculum in higher education, nor do we have a national council of academic awards. We do not think that either of these would provide a good deal for students and employers. They would stifle innovation and diversity, and damage the enhancement of quality. They are also not necessary, given that there are already a number of important safeguards in place to protect the value of a UK degree, from whichever higher education institution it is obtained. This statement describes these safeguards.

### How are standards in UK universities assured?

3. The power to award degrees is regulated by law. In order to be able to award a recognised higher education degree in the UK, an organisation needs to be authorised to do so either by Royal Charter or Act of Parliament. It is an offence for an institution to purport to award, or to offer to award a UK degree, unless it is authorised so to do.
4. All institutions who are entitled to award degrees use the QAA's *Code of Practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*. This is made up of ten sections describing, for example, how programmes should be designed, approved, monitored and reviewed, how students should be assessed, and how appeals and student complaints should be handled. It sets out precepts which relate to both quality (that is, appropriate and effective teaching, support, assessment and opportunities for learning provided for students) and standards (that is, the level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an award).
5. In addition, all institutions are required to use the *Framework for Higher Education Qualifications*, which sets out the level of achievement represented by

all HE qualifications. This sets out what is expected of a graduate in any discipline, and ensures that UK degrees are recognised internationally.

6. At a subject level this framework is given meaning by *subject benchmarks*. They describe what gives a discipline its coherence and identity, and define what can be expected of a graduate in terms of the abilities and skills which illustrate understanding of and competence in the subject. These subject benchmarks are designed by expert academics recognised as authorities within their respective communities, who are joined by the representatives of professional or regulatory bodies where this is appropriate.
7. These subject benchmarks describe the principles, nature and scope of the subject, the subject knowledge, the subject-specific skills and generic skills developed within the subject, and the forms of teaching, learning and assessment that may be expected within the subject. They also set the minimum (threshold) standard that is acceptable within the subject. All universities are then required to produce programme specifications, which provide a clear description of what each programme includes and expects.
8. All institutions are expected to work within with this broad framework, and there are two mechanisms to ensure that they do this. The first is *external examining arrangements*. These independent and impartial academic advisers are drawn from other universities or from professional practice. They report on whether the academic standards set for the award are appropriate; the extent to which its assessment practices are rigorous; and the comparability of the standards and student achievements with those in other institutions.
9. The second mechanism for assurance is provided by the *Quality Assurance Agency*. The QAA has two roles. First, it is responsible for maintaining the tools which underpin standards and quality, such as the Code of Practice and the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications. Second, it visits institutions on a regular basis to review institutional practice and to make a judgement about their confidence in the university's management of the academic standards of its awards.
10. The audit (which is called slightly different things in different parts of the UK) provides a picture of an institution's procedures at a particular point in time, and is supported by an institutional self-appraisal, and the provision of a documented evidence base that will report on key issues covered by the Code of Practice and the Framework for HE Qualifications. Although the QAA does not observe teaching, their reviewers consider external examiners' reports and written feedback from students, and meet with students. They also look to ensure that the institution takes account of the views of employers.

11. Anyone who considers that there is a failure of standards at any UK institution, may invoke the QAA's Causes for concern procedure. This is free to do, and open to anyone, from external examiner to student to member of the public. The QAA will examine accusations carefully, in order to ascertain whether there is a systemic failure at the institution, and what should be done about it.
12. Should the QAA have limited or no confidence in the university's management of standards, they will report this to the Funding Bodies and publish this finding. The Funding Bodies have a legal responsibility to assure the quality of the provision which they fund. HEFCE, for example, has a policy on unsatisfactory quality, which sets out how they would react to accusations of failures in the management of standards, including, in extremis, through the removal of funding.
13. In addition, there are more than 50 professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) operating in higher education. These set the standards for courses which they accredit, in varying amounts of detail. This means that, in certain professional areas, there will be much greater similarity between courses. Some universities have the majority of their provision accredited by a professional, statutory or regulatory body. This accreditation will be withdrawn if a PSRB has concerns about standards.

#### **Future developments**

14. We believe that the quality assurance system should be continually reviewed and improved. With reference to standards, we are currently focussing on:
  - Reviewing external examining arrangements, to ensure that they are as robust as possible and to make recommendations about how they should be improved. This review will report in December 2010.
  - Recommending improvements to the quality assurance system as a whole in England and Northern Ireland, and in particular institutional audit, based on a wide consultation which ended in March 2010. This will include recommendations relating to strengthening institutional audit, to ensure that it continues to provide public assurance that threshold standards are being met. These will be implemented from 2011-12.
  - Supporting the QAA in their evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure (which encompasses the tools set out in paragraphs 4-7 above). This aims to establish whether the Academic Infrastructure is meeting its aims, whether it remains 'fit for purpose' and whether it is flexible enough to accommodate future developments in higher education. It will make recommendations later on this year.

#### **Comparability of standards**

15. Some people ask about a 2:1 at one institution compared to a 2:1 at another but in the same subject. Are they identical? We think that the only way to make them identical would be if there were a national curriculum and a national examination system. No-one is seriously arguing for that. So no, they are different, because there will be different curricula, in order to provide choice for students, as well as to capitalise on the specialisms of the staff who teach them and the needs of different employers. And there will be different assessment methods. But they are all designed and assessed against threshold standards published by the QAA and agreed by all universities. The Higher Education Achievement Report, which is currently being piloted in a small number of HEIs, will be useful in terms of providing the detail which explains what lies behind a particular degree classification for a particular student.
  
16. The question then comes up, which 2:1 is “worth more?” We think that this is the wrong question to ask, because it involves comparing apples and pears. What is right for one student and one employer won’t be right for another.

## **Conclusion**

17. So, to summarise, we think it is a good thing that there is variety in courses and not uniformity. A key strength of the sector is the heterogeneity of its constituent institutions and responsiveness to student/ employer demand. Each has different academic missions, priorities, subject focus, research interests and infrastructure. This variety, made possible through institutional autonomy, enables the sector as a whole to meet the various needs of different types of student, and to offer the range of disciplines required. Students undertake higher education for different purposes. Hence, different types of provision will not, and should not, lead to the same learning outcomes. Identical comparability is often not possible or appropriate.
  
18. But equally, we think it is essential that there are safeguards which ensure that courses are sufficiently rigorous. We are working, through the strengthening of institutional audit, the review of external examining and the evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure, to ensure that these safeguards are working well, and that there can be every confidence in the standards of UK degrees.