

First meeting of the Quality Assurance System in Higher Education Group

Thursday 25 February 2010, 1345 to 1530

Board Room, Woburn House, 20 Tavistock Square, London WC1HQ

Agenda

1. *Chair's Welcome*

2. *Introduction from sponsor bodies (oral)*

3. *Draft Terms of Reference- to be agreed and then published (QASHG-2010-01)*

4. *Introduction to consultation "Future Arrangements for quality assurance in England and Northern Ireland" (HEFCE 2009/47) (QASHG-2010-02)*

5. Programme of work related to quality assurance: outlines and progress (QASHG-2010-03)

6. *Future meetings- purpose and timing*

- 26 March- to agree the recommendations which will go to the sponsor bodies
- Early Sep- to consider the QAA's operational description before publication
- Early Dec- to be confirmed

7. *Any Other Business*

Quality in Higher Education Group Final Terms of Reference

The purpose of the Quality in Higher Education Group is to promote a quality assurance system for higher education in England and Northern Ireland which is accountable, rigorous, transparent, flexible, responsive, enhancement-led and public facing. Such a system should balance and respond to the needs of a wide variety of stakeholders, including students, prospective students, employers, HE and FE institutions, professional bodies, funders and others. The Group will support the sponsoring bodies (UUK, GuildHE, HEFCE, DEL NI) in working with others, including the QAA and NUS, to ensure that such a system is in place.

The group will have the following remit:

1. To take a strategic overview of the quality assurance system in England and NI.
2. To bring together, inform and be informed by relevant reviews of the quality assurance system¹.
3. To consider how the quality assurance system might best support the enhancement of the student learning experience.
4. To make proposals regarding the development of the quality assurance system in England and NI².

For substantive changes, the group will recommend a course of action to the Boards of the sponsoring bodies, including any arrangements for consultation as necessary.

For minor changes³, the group will have delegated authority from the sponsoring bodies to ask the relevant organisation to take the changes forward.

5. To consider Government or other stakeholder suggestions for improvements to the quality assurance system, and make recommendations to the sponsoring bodies accordingly.

¹ In the first year of operation, these will include: Review of External Examining Arrangements (led by UUK/ GuildHE), Review of Teaching Quality Information/ National Student Survey (led by the TQI/ NSS Steering Group), Evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure (led by QAA), Review of IQER (managed by the QAA on behalf of HEFCE)

² According to a protocol to be agreed by the Boards of the sponsoring bodies. This protocol will set out: the definition of a minor/ more substantive change in procedure (including the focus of audit beyond the core topics), and how these will be dealt with; kinds of changes which the QAA can make without seeking the views of the group or the sponsoring bodies; length of notice that institutions should receive for minor and substantive changes to audit or review; and any other necessary issues. It will be informed by responses to the December 2009 consultation on the future of quality assurance arrangements in England and NI, and will be guided by the principles of flexibility and responsiveness.

³ "Minor changes" will not include minor changes in the operational method, which the QAA will have autonomy to make. This will be clarified further when the definition of a "minor change" is agreed in the protocol described at footnote 2

6. To provide regular updates, and recommendations or advice where appropriate (including proposals for further work, if necessary), to the Boards/Executives of the sponsoring bodies, via the secretariat.
7. To consider carefully the cost and burden implications of any proposals, including through liaison with the Higher Education Better Regulation Group to ensure that proposals meet requirements for effective regulation.
8. To join other bodies and groups in advising on, clarifying and explaining the Quality Assurance System to wider audiences, including through publicising its own work, as far as possible using sponsoring and stakeholder bodies' publication methods and those of the QAA.
9. To keep its Terms of Reference under regular review, with the first review taking place no later than one year after the first meeting.

It will be jointly secretaried and owned by the sponsoring bodies: UUK, GuildHE, HEFCE and DELNI.

Scope

The Quality Assurance System is defined as:

- Institutional audits and collaborative provision audits *
- Integrated Quality Enhancement and Review *
- Teaching quality information (including National Student Survey)
- Institutions' own internal quality assurance processes
- Academic Infrastructure
- External Examining Arrangements
- QAA Causes for Concern procedure (England)
- HEFCE Policy on unsatisfactory quality (HEFCE 2009/31) (England)

(* indicates processes which are England and NI only).

The Quality Assurance System is complemented by the work of the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for HE and the Higher Education Academy, as well as more than 50 public, statutory and regulatory bodies. The Group will consider the synergies between the quality assurance system and the work of these other bodies, to ensure that the institutional audit method complements and avoids duplication wherever possible.

The Group will focus in particular on England and NI, but will have due regard for processes which are cross-UK. Where it wishes to make a proposal for England and NI which concerns a structure or system which is UK-wide, or where its proposal may have UK-wide ramifications, it will ensure that the proposal is fully discussed with Scottish and Welsh colleagues. Any agreement would need to involve alternative fora and could not be made unilaterally by this Group.

The Group's work will focus in particular on HEFCE and DELNI-funded taught provision (whether at UG or PG level), wherever it is delivered (including HE in FE colleges). The Group will have regard for the different purposes of the quality assurance system including: quality assurance, quality enhancement and the provision of public information.

The Group will not attempt to manage the work of the various reviews referred to at point 2 of the remit, as these already have (or will already have) their own distinct governance processes in place. Rather the Group will enable the sponsor bodies to see the reviews as part of a whole, feed into them in a more co-ordinated way and enable synergies between them.

Initial Priorities

In the first year of operation (Jan- Dec 2010), the Group will focus on the development of the revised audit method, through:

1) Considering responses to the consultation on the future of quality arrangements in England and NI, and enable the sponsoring bodies to agree advice and proposals to their respective Boards/ Executive Committee setting out an agreed way forward. This advice will include the protocol for the powers of this Group and recommendations for the QAA in preparing the Operational Description.

2) Considering the Operational Description for the revised audit method, with the expectation that the QAA would act upon any recommendations by the group, prior to its publication for open consultation.

It will also:

3) Take a particular interest in ensuring links across the following workstreams:

- Review of External Examining Arrangements (led by UUK/ GuildHE)
- Review of Teaching Quality Information/ National Student Survey (led by the TQI/NSS Steering Group)
- Evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure (led by QAA)
- Review of Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review (managed by the QAA on behalf of HEFCE)

Membership

Position	Name
Chair	Philip Jones, Vice-Chancellor, Sheffield Hallam University
HEFCE nominees	Janet Beer, Vice-Chancellor, Oxford Brookes University and Chair of TQI/ NSS Steering Group
	Tim Wilson, Vice-Chancellor, University of Hertfordshire and Chair of TQSE
DELNI nominee	Denise McAlister, PVC (Learning and Teaching), University of Ulster
UUK nominees	Joy Carter, VC, University of Winchester
	Saul Tendler, PVC, University of Nottingham
GuildHE nominee	Ruth Farwell, VC, Buckinghamshire New University
QAA nominee	Sir Rodney Brooke, Chair of the QAA Board
Chair of Academic Registrar Council's Quality Practitioners' Group	Ros Boyne, Academic Registrar, Birmingham City University
Head of Quality (nominated by Quality Strategy Network)	Ian Robinson, Dean of Quality Enhancement, Edge Hill University
Association of Colleges nominee	Clive Turner, HE Quality Learning and Teaching Manager , City College Norwich
PSRB representative	Matthew Harrison, Director: Education Programmes, Royal Academy of Engineering

Pre-HE sector representative	John Morgan, President of the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL)
NUS nominees	Charlie Leyland, Vice-President Education at University of York Students' Union
	Aaron Porter, Vice-President Higher Education
HE Academy Chief Executive	Sean Mackney, Acting Chief Executive
QAA Chief Executive	Anthony McClaran, Chief Executive
HEFCE Director for Education and Participation	John Selby (to end April 2010) (Heather Fry from May 2010)

Observers

BIS	Bev Thomas
HEFCW	Cliona O'Neill
SFC	Lesley Sutherland
AoC	Joy Mercer

Secretariat

UUK	Fiona Hoban
GuildHE	Helen Bowles
HEFCE	Emma Creasey/ Chris Taylor
DELNI	Helen Gartley

Practicalities

The Group should meet at least three times per year, but will also operate by correspondence. From 2011, meeting dates will be canvassed with a choice of dates where timetables permit. Where a member is unable to attend a meeting and would like to nominate an alternate, this will be at the discretion of the chair (applications should be made through the secretariat). All observers will be invited to every meeting of the Group.

The Group will operate transparently, including through publishing papers on a dedicated web page. In order to ensure that the Group is fully informed by a wide range of expertise, time-limited sub-groups or one-off meetings of interested parties may be set up.

Programme of meetings in 2010

25 February 2010

The first meeting of the Group will take place during the consultation period on future arrangements for quality assurance in England and NI (which closes on 5 March 2010). The Group should agree their Terms of Reference and receive papers to bring it up to date on all developments within the Quality Assurance System.

26 March 2010

At the second meeting the group will consider the results of the consultation and agree proposals to be put to the UUK Board (23 April 2010), GuildHE Executive (by correspondence) and HEFCE Board (6 May 2010).

16 September 2010

This meeting allows the opportunity to consider the Operational Description for institutional audit prepared by the QAA prior to its publication for open consultation. It also offers the opportunity to consider one or more of the following workstreams: review of external examining arrangements, review of Teaching Quality Information, evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure, review of Integrated Quality Enhancement and Review.

6 December 2010

Again, this meeting offers the opportunity to consider one or more of the following workstreams: review of external examining arrangements, review of Teaching Quality Information, evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure, review of Integrated Quality Enhancement and Review. It may also offer the opportunity to consider early responses to the consultation on the Operational Description.



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Introduction to consultation on the future of quality assurance

QASHG-10-02

Agenda item 4

25 February 2010

Issue

1. The representative bodies for higher education (Universities UK and GuildHE) and funders (HEFCE and DELNI) published a consultation document “Future Arrangements for quality assurance in England and Northern Ireland” in December 2009 (HEFCE/2009/47). This consultation sets out proposals for revisions to the system used for quality assurance of higher education in England and Northern Ireland. It was produced with support from NUS, QAA and AoC.
2. It is an open consultation, and as such was provided to employer groups and students, as well as to higher education and further education institutions, as well as to Professional Statutory and Regulatory Bodies. We clearly stated that we would welcome views from anyone with an interest in higher education, and in order to support this we published a plain English version accompanying the longer and more technical document.
3. The consultation is provided to the Group in hard copy (separately provided by HEFCE), and all members are encouraged to read it. A short oral introduction to the consultation will be provided at the meeting, with the opportunity to ask questions of the sponsors and other stakeholder bodies. The immediate purpose is not to ask the Group to take a view on the consultation questions, but to prepare them for their important upcoming role with regard to the consultation findings.
4. When the consultation closes on 5 March 2010, the sponsor bodies will analyse the responses and bring a paper setting out recommendations to the next meeting of the QASHG. The QASHG will then need to agree what recommendations should be put to the HEFCE Board, UUK Board and GuildHE Executive, in order that a joint way forward is agreed. The sponsor bodies will then advise the QAA of the specification for the principles and intended outcomes of a revised quality assurance system, in order that the QAA can consult on the operational description (the detail of how institutional audit will operate) in Autumn 2010.
5. As background, Annex A contains a note of the discussions about the consultation questions which took place at the consultation seminars run in January 2010.

Recommendation

6. Following the oral presentation, the group are invited to ask questions in order to ensure that they understand the consultation's purpose and coverage, and their role in taking the consultation findings forward.

Further information

7. Further information is available from Emma Creasey at HEFCE (e.creasey@hefce.ac.uk); Fiona Hoban at Universities UK (fiona.hoban@universitiesuk.ac.uk) or Helen Bowles at GuildHE (helen.bowles@guildhe.ac.uk).

Summary of discussions at consultation events

As part of the consultation process for future arrangements for quality assurance, the sponsoring bodies (HEFCE, DEL Northern Ireland, Universities UK and GuildHE) held two seminars in January 2010.

The aim of the seminars was to enable delegates to make a fully informed response to the consultation. The events provided delegates with an opportunity to talk to the sponsors about the background to the consultation, explore the consultation questions further and discuss their opinions with other delegates.

The events were attended by a wide variety of staff from public higher education and further education institutions, as well as a small number of students and employer representatives and one private provider. The QAA, NUS and AoC also spoke at both events.

Delegates discussed the consultation questions in breakout groups, which feedback indicated were the most useful part of the day, allowing detailed consideration of the issues around the questions.

The following note is a summary of those discussions, prepared by Emma Creasey (HEFCE). It summarises the oral views and questions of nearly two hundred delegates and, as such, should not be read as a definitive account of views of the sector. In particular, some of the suggestions made may have been made by only one or two delegates, while in many places it was hard to capture the strength of support for particular ideas. There was great variety of views, as would be expected given the range of institutions and institutional roles represented. The consultation will take these oral views into account, but will place particular weight on the written responses which are due to be submitted by 5 March 2010.

Consultation question 1: Do you agree that the principles in paragraph 31 are broadly the correct ones on which the revised quality assurance system should be based?

Consultation question 2: Do you agree that the objectives set out in paragraph 32 are the correct ones for the revised quality assurance system to meet?

- i. There was broad agreement to the general principles and objectives, but delegates agreed that “the devil was in the detail”. The QAA’s consultation later in 2010 on the detail of the audit method would be crucial in pinning this down.
- ii. Some delegates wondered whether the proposed changes, which represented alterations to the existing institutional audit method, were radical enough. Others thought that not enough was made of the view that quality in HE was still good overall.

- iii. Some suggestions for additional items to include specifically in the objectives and principles were:
- a. *Informing the public.* With regard to “commanding public confidence” and “providing publicly accessible information”, delegates agreed in principle, but felt that more clarity was needed around what the term “public facing” meant, who the “public” actually were and how they should be involved. All of the public, not just those with immediate interests such as parents and prospective students, had a right to know that money was being spent wisely, providing a private benefit but a public good. Value for money should be proven, especially in the current funding climate. With the high profile of the “public facing” agenda, there could be an objective to inform the public about the quality assurance system and how it works, in order to manage expectations – particularly with regard to the change between school and HE. There was recognition of the increasing importance of publicly accessible information in accessible language, with the NSS increasing in importance as a driver for change.
 - b. *Quality enhancement.* A number of delegates considered that quality improvement (some preferred the term “quality enhancement” as being more accurate) should be more strongly emphasised, although enhancement did not sit well with audit judgements, especially as focusing on getting a good audit outcome did not necessarily mean that key institutional challenges were addressed. The developmental engagement stage of IQER was mentioned as a positive example.
 - c. *Institutional autonomy.* The key principle of institutional autonomy should be included prominently and its benefits better explained. The focus of a QA system should be an institution’s internal mechanisms, confirmed to be suitable by external judgement. It had to be recognised however that FECs, which were also included under the key principles and objectives, were not autonomous but depended on awarding bodies.
 - d. *Independence.* The independence of the system also needed to be clarified. This might require changing structures and/or perceptions and perhaps involving outside agencies. Some commented that principles e.iii and e.iv should be combined.
 - e. *Collaborative partnerships.* The principles should explicitly mention the need to include the variety of collaborative partnerships within the quality assurance process, and taking different responsibilities into account. Some FEC colleagues felt that the HE system should link more specifically with OfSTED (although the QAA do already liaise with OfSTED and take their reports into account as part of a portfolio of evidence in IQER). “Collaboration” might include work with employers as well as other institutions.
 - f. *Teaching and learning.* The importance of teaching and learning to QA, including the activities of “front line” staff, should be specifically mentioned. There was some discussion of the extent to which academic staff needed to be involved with specific QA procedures - some delegates felt that they should not, as it would be a distraction from their main duties; others felt they should be more explicitly

involved, particularly if a more developmental approach was adopted. However, the contribution of their teaching and student support work to the institution's overall quality assurance processes, whether implicitly (through good teaching and adherence to university procedures) or explicitly (e.g. through specific reference to the Academic Infrastructure) should be recognised.

- g. *Student experience.* Students were at the heart of the system and should be more explicitly mentioned as a high priority. The challenges of creating a high quality student experience for an increasingly diverse student body, listening to their views, and maintaining student confidence, should be brought out. Students needed to be more involved not only in the QA system but in programme development. What exactly does "meeting the needs of students" mean and who assesses what these needs are? One question that no quality assurance system asks is "are the students here happy?" – but this is crucial.
- h. *Evaluation.* Evaluating the success of the new system (e.g. in 6 years' time) could be built in to the objectives.
- i. *Employers.* Meeting employer needs could be mentioned. Getting an employer response to the consultation was important.
- j. *Efficiency/Financial climate.* There were general questions about how the current financial climate might impact both on institutional QA systems and on the development of an external system. Any system needed to be demonstrably efficient; there were strong concerns about diverting funds from front-line teaching.
- k. *Avoiding burden/Proportionality.* It would be important that the system did not grow too much – if anything was added to it (e.g. an enhancement approach) then the sponsors would need to look carefully at what to take away. Proportionality could be a principle. Not all of the aims had to be met through audit or review; other aspects of the system, e.g. the Academic Infrastructure or NSS, could meet them.
- l. *Responsiveness.* The ability of the system to respond to problems should be included in the principles.
- m. *Establishing/maintaining minimum standards* should be an explicit principle.

Consultation question 3: Do you agree that the broad characteristics set out in paragraph 38 are the right ones to consider when revising the institutional audit method?

- i. As with the overall principles, there was general agreement to the characteristics but wide discussion over detail, particularly of the metrics by which institutions would be judged.
- ii. Some felt the characteristics did not express clearly enough the purpose of audit, which ought to be ensuring that institutions were providing a high quality

experience for students. It should also be clear that a “threshold judgement” was being reached.

- iii. There was some doubt over the suggestion in principle (b) that the public were the principal audience – the principal audience was HEIs. Institutional QA practitioners found the reports useful in their current form, and indeed felt that they could be made more technical. These useful aspects should not be lost to please a different audience. They agreed that the technical language meant that could not use them to involve academic staff in QA discussions, but they saw it as their role to “interpret” the reports for colleagues. One suggestion was to provide a “plain English” overall report with a technical annex for QA practitioners.
- iv. Some delegates felt that aiming for “no increased overall level of demand” (principle e) was unrealistic. Others argued that audit was only one form of regulation - HEFCE audits, HESA data and PSRB accreditation were other examples – and therefore HEIs could not be viewed as under-regulated. It was important to be clear that reducing burden did not necessarily mean reducing scrutiny, particularly if the emphasis was on auditing information that the institutions already produced. However there should be recognition that the sector were being asked to “do more with less” in the current financial climate.
- v. There were comments that audit had become a “staged event” and there was scope for a more developmental approach (linking to discussions about quality enhancement under question 1) that could potentially involve more departmental staff. There was acknowledgement however that an imminent audit was a lever to make things happen in institutions. The development phase of IQER and its focus on improvement was mentioned as an example of good practice.
- vi. Some suggested that in becoming more flexible, a new system should tailor amount of scrutiny to risk, while acknowledging that clearer metrics of what determined risk would need to be developed. An audit should be looking at an HEI’s own risk management processes. Some felt that QA audit should link more closely to HEFCE finance and governance audits.
- vii. Suggestions for additional principles included “accessibility” (e.g. of handbooks, overall language used, etc), a focus on quality enhancement, which some were concerned could be lost, and consideration of international as well as national comparability.
- viii. There was a question over whether the principles and objectives of independent, external judgements should be reiterated in the principles of audit (i.e. a specific acknowledgement of the importance of peer review).

Consultation question 4: Do you agree that institutional audit should be more flexible, focusing both on key areas common to all institutions, plus additional topics to be determined as necessary?

- i. Delegates were interested in the idea of thematic approaches being used to “spotlight” particular themes and provide the ability to respond to current issues – although thematic approaches were not the solution to fixing all the perceived problems.
- ii. Several groups discussed whether the proposed flexible themes would contribute to the overall audit judgement. As themes might differ between institutions, some delegates considered that making judgements on them could result in an institution being disadvantaged, and that they would not be comparable. Judgements should be made only on the “core” of the audit, and themes used to look broadly at the sector as a whole and/or used for development and enhancement – in this case audit could be seen as a form of external consultancy. Reporting on the themes could be done compositely without HEIs being identified. Some even felt that the thematic enquiries should be entirely separate from audit.
- iii. Others argued that comparability between audits was not necessarily sacrosanct, particularly in an increasingly diverse sector, and that institutions needed to be less sensitive on this issue – 6 years was a long time to wait for a new development. The public might not be interested in cross-institutional comparisons (interest in cross-subject comparisons was more likely). A lack of comparability could be helpful in avoiding the “ranking mentality”. Real comparability of audit judgements between different, individual auditors was difficult in any case.
- iv. Some commented that as investigating a theme could add burden and cost, something would need to be dropped to keep the core manageable. It would also be important to ensure that the thematic scrutiny was proportionate, especially for smaller institutions or “niche” institutions where a particular theme might result in a disproportionate focus upon them. The greater flexibility could be a benefit if it allowed for better proportionality. The audit team would probably need to vary in size according to the size and complexity of the institution.
- v. There needed to be clarity on how themes would be identified and by whom. The QAA and sponsoring bodies would need to be proactive in identifying themes and communicating them to the sector in advance. Responding to moral panic in the media should be resisted!
- vi. Once again, the QAA’s operational description would need to be very clear on how this would work. It would be helpful to look at how similar approaches worked in Scotland and in FE colleges.

Consultation question 5: Do you agree that the QAA should be asked to consider how comparability of standards might be better addressed in institutional audit and the Academic Infrastructure?

- i. The issue of how to provide better information specifically on “standards” was widely discussed. Some commented that the problem of distinguishing between

“quality” and “standards” had still not been addressed properly in the consultation document, and should be clearly explained in any guidance.

- ii. Delegates agreed that the QAA should consider this issue but did not reach a conclusion as to how. As institutions were so diverse – in programme content, approach to teaching, contact hours, facilities etc - it was felt that, beyond a threshold level, standards could not be compared. To make sensible comparisons, which would be across disciplines rather than HEIs, would require a national curriculum or “tick box approach”, which was obviously not desirable. It might be useful for the QAA to propose alternatives.
- iii. Institutional responsibility should not be forgotten. It was up to autonomous institutions to interpret standards – otherwise there was a risk that standards could be seen as prescribed. However it could be that the real problem was not standards themselves, but a lack of public understanding about how standards were set and maintained in HE – and about what the system could and could not do - and this needed to be clearly explained. At the same time the existence of high threshold standards which were met by every programme in the UK, and the role of the Academic Infrastructure as the overarching structure for promoting this, needed to be better publicised. The fact that there was a wide variety of “standards” above the threshold level reflected the diversity of the sector and should be celebrated.
- iv. It was also important not to forget the student “journey” and the widely differing starting points of different students. These also made comparable end points difficult.
- v. If standards were looked at in more detail, audit was not the correct tool to attempt this; a whole range of other things were important to gauging comparability. Professional bodies had rigorous threshold standards. Published information was an important tool with which the public could make their own comparisons, but any public presentation had to take the needs of its audience (students, employers, public) into account. More detail might be needed about how the quality of programmes was assured.
- vi. The external examiner system was also intended to promote comparability of standards, but was only partially adequate, as it was not a national system. There was scope for better strengthening and control of the system. The role of the external examiner should be better explained to the public.

- vii. Benchmarking of subjects could appear too generic, but too much detail could again result in prescribed “curricula” or hold back innovation. Delegates questioned why subject benchmarks were used at degree level but not at masters’ level.
- viii. There needed to be clarity on what was being compared. To a certain extent the current audit judgement was about confidence in institutional processes – that was a separate issue from a judgement on standards.
- ix. A sector-wide agreement was needed on “condonement” and “compensation” – the flexibility that institutions had to moderate students’ marks up or down to take circumstances into account.
- x. Some commented that the academic infrastructure functioned well if applied intelligently, but did not have a high enough standing in some institutions.

Consultation question 6: Do you agree that the QAA should be asked to review the terms it uses to describe the different levels of confidence expressed in audit judgements?

- i. There was a strong view that the existing terms were poorly understood and needed to be changed, but no decision on a suitable alternative.
- ii. The term “limited confidence” was particularly disliked as it was often perceived as meaning failure rather than as a “pass”. However it was a strong lever for change within an institution.
- iii. Some delegates felt that the lack of grading above “confidence” – i.e. there was nothing to distinguish between “good” and “excellent” - was a disadvantage in that institutions could not use an excellent score in their publicity (this was compared with FEC OfSTED scores which include an “outstanding”), nor could they benchmark themselves against each other. However it was agreed that the diversity of institutions and the difficulty of comparing standards above a threshold, particularly amongst different auditors, made differentiated judgements a challenge.
- iv. There was a need for some differentiation between judgements. If every institution received the same score of “confidence” or its equivalent, this might have a negative impact on public confidence in the system. The popular criticism that “nobody ever fails institutional audit” itself lowered public confidence. However, the more different judgements there were, the more risk there was that the media could create “league tables” with audit results.
- v. There was some discussion about the length of time that a judgement remained current; an institution that received “limited confidence” under the current method could have addressed the problems within a year, but the original judgement remained on the website albeit with an update note. There was scope for a more dynamic system, especially since greater flexibility was proposed.

- vi. Some groups suggested that judgements should be set within a wider narrative context that explained how they had been arrived at. One suggestion was that the judgement should simply be “pass” or fail” with contextual qualifiers. A standard phraseology for expressing judgements would be helpful. There also needed to be an explanation that the judgements were about processes for assuring standards rather than the standards themselves.
- vii. The QAA and sponsors again needed to be clear about the “audience” for the judgements – who needed to know and how much detail would they want? Ultimately the overall judgements probably needed to be the most accessible aspect as they were what most people were interested in, but would a judgement really change a student’s mind about where to apply?

Consultation question 7: Subject to sector agreement on the data that the institution makes available to inform prospective students and other interested parties about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards:

Do you agree that institutional audits should make a judgement about the reliance that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of this information?

- i. In general, most delegates agreed that published information should become the subject of a judgement – many saw it as inevitable. This was however conditional on clarification over the data set which in turn would be informed by the TQI/NSS review. The “audience” for the dataset was once again a key issue, with potential students identified as the main audience.
- ii. The QAA operational description would have to be clear on exactly how the data would be used in, and inform, institutional audit. There needed to be clarification over whether it was the data itself that was being audited, or the institution’s processes for checking that it was accurate. Accuracy and completeness were not the same thing as usefulness!
- iii. Burden was a concern; if something was being added to audit, then something else should be taken away. It would be helpful if there was a section of the code of practice on providing public information. Some questioned whether an audit every six years on average would provide government with enough confidence on accuracy.
- iv. Some delegates queried whether, given the complexity of the data set, and the fact that much of it would be at programme level, it was appropriate to include this in institutional audit as it would mean a lot of extra work for an audit team. There was a suggestion that this could be done as a desk-based exercise, perhaps by QAA officers or even by HEFCE. Information that was already subject to scrutiny, e.g. HESA returns, should not be included.

- v. Students' comments were important; as well as including a comment on information in the student written submission, another suggestion was to include a question in the NSS to ask students if the information provided to them met their needs was accurate.
- vi. There were concerns that raising the status of the information set could leave institutions open to litigation if information was found to be inaccurate. However others agreed that institutions could not use the complexity of the process to provide information as an excuse for not getting it right. Some felt that datasets were unlikely to be comparable – as data would be presented in different ways - and information about differing contact and study hours etc would need to be explained. However, institutions had the opportunity to explain their own dataset. Others were concerned that league tables might be formed from the judgements.

Consultation question 8: Do you agree that the QAA should provide summaries of institutional audit reports for a non-specialist audience?

- i. Several groups advised that the sponsors had to be clear about who the “audience” would be for such a summary and indeed for the audit report itself, as output should be tailored to the audience. “Non-specialists” were a very wide group, including academic staff as well as the general public. Some delegates were doubtful that a plain English summary was needed for a general audience as a whole-institution report was of limited interest. Others felt it would be worthwhile to assure the public that the HE system was in good shape, but agreed it was a difficult task.
- ii. Potential students were only likely to be interested in headline judgements – if at all. If students were found to be a potential audience, then one idea might be for student auditors to write the summaries. Students themselves were an increasingly diverse group.
- iii. Employers might be interested, but again might want a summary directed at their perspective.
- iv. There was agreement that the process did need to be better publicised and explained – “everyone has heard of Ofsted, no-one has heard of QAA”.
- v. Writing a simple version of an audit report was easier said than done. In particular, care should be taken in expressing judgements; it might be misleading to simplify these without providing any contextual explanations.

Consultation question 9: Do you agree that institutional audits should be organised on a rolling basis rather than in a fixed cycle?

If you agree, what would be your definition of a minor change to procedure, compared to a more substantive revision?

- i. There was broad agreement that the audit method would benefit from the increased flexibility of a rolling plan and from a constantly up-to-date process, as long as this did not mean “knee-jerk” reactions to media stories or political

interference. There was hope that this would also mean more flexibility in the method to take a more proportionate approach to different types of institutions. The interests of students should remain a priority.

- ii. Concerns included:
 - the risk that auditors and institutions might not keep up with revisions to the process and there could be major training and resource requirements
 - changes being made too frequently – some suggested that phases for change should be planned in
 - the amount of notice given of a change
 - “moving goalposts”, meaning institutions did not receive comparable judgements
 - The possibility of being audited too frequently – although the sponsors intended that the process should still follow a 6-year interval
 - Possible confusion for a public audience.
- iii. Sponsors advised that an example of a “minor” change could be a change in choice of theme. A “major” change that had occurred in the current cycle, requiring consultation, was the introduction of student auditors. Delegates commented that notice was required even of a minor change. In deciding between “minor” and “substantive” issues, some were concerned that the impact on judgements should be considered; anything affecting a judgement was “substantive”, as this could affect comparability. As with earlier discussions over audit, others argued that comparability should become less of an issue, as an audit should focus on a particular institution and not the sector as a whole.
- iv. The new QASHE group would have a crucial role to play here; it needed to be very robust to resist overly reactive changes and avoid making changes too frequently, but it should also be encouraged to think fundamentally. Some felt that if the group members were carefully chosen it should be left up to them to decide whether a particular issue was substantive or not, and thus whether it would require consultation with the sector.
- v. The comment was also made that a more flexible and dynamic system would require the QAA to engage more in a regular dialogue with institutions, which was a benefit.

Consultation question 10: This document has set out a number of ways in which we might improve the quality assurance system, to make it more accountable, rigorous, transparent, flexible, responsive and public-facing. Is there more that we might do? If so, please give details.

The following general points were raised amongst the groups (in no particular order):

- i. The Unistats website doesn't get used enough. Work may need to go into making it more accessible, changing the format, and/or advertising the site more intensively.

- ii. Quality Assurance should be about improving things for the student, but some felt that this priority did not jump out of the document. The roles of student auditors and representatives needed to be brought out.
- iii. Students take more notice of league tables, rankings etc than of audit reports.
- iv. Audit reports were never going to be a marketing tool. A good report had no overall effect, but bad ones could be devastating and could lead to a fall in recruitment.
- v. The sponsors could have been more radical. The NSS, for example, had met with initial resistance but was now perceived as a very useful tool.
- vi. There should be more reference to using evidence from PSRBs. Academics tended to take PSRB accreditation more seriously than audits.
- vii. Don't get swept up in the "moral panic" – the need for change should be challenged. Make sure you are not trying to tackle problems that don't exist.
- viii. How about comparability with other QA mechanisms, nationally and internationally? The system still looks too insular.
- ix. It might be useful to look at wider aspects of the QA system – this consultation is very focussed on audit and the Academic Infrastructure.

Programmes of work related to quality assurance: outlines and progress

**QASHG-10-03
Agenda item 5
25 February 2010**

Issue

1. In addition to the consultation on the future of quality assurance discussed at agenda item 4, other work is underway to evaluate, revise and improve different aspects of the quality assurance system in England and Northern Ireland, and in some cases the wider UK. This paper outlines the different projects and provides an update on progress. It also describes the work of the Better Regulation Group, with whom the Group may wish to liaise.

Recommendation(s)

2. Members are invited to note the paper and progress on the workstrands, and to ask further questions if they wish.

Timing for decisions

3. There are no timing requirements.

Further information

4. Lead contacts for the work are as follows:
- Review of TQI/NSS – Chris Taylor, HEFCE (c.taylor@hefce.ac.uk, 0117 931 7264)
 - Review of external examining arrangements – Greg Wade, UUK (Greg.Wade@UniversitiesUK.AC.UK, 0207 419 5479, or Helen Bowles, GuildHE (Helen.Bowles@guildhe.ac.uk, 0207 387 7711)
 - Evaluation of Academic Infrastructure and thematic enquiries – Jayne Mitchell, QAA (j.mitchell@qaa.ac.uk, 01452 557014)
 - Higher Education Better Regulation Group – Brooke Sperry, UUK (brooke.sperry@universitiesuk.ac.uk, 020 7419 5621).

Work in Quality Assurance – overview

5. In 2009 several bodies published reports which made recommendations for changes to the quality assurance system for English HE, in response to concerns that quality might be dropping or assurance systems not fit for purpose. These included a report into “thematic enquiries” by the QAA, a report from a sub-group of HEFCE’s strategic committee for Teaching, Quality, and the Student Experience, the IUSS Select Committee and the “Higher Ambitions” report from BIS (commonly referred to as the HE Framework).

6. HEFCE, DEL Northern Ireland, Universities UK and GuildHE, along with stakeholders such as the QAA, NUS and Association of Colleges, are currently undertaking several strands of work to address these recommendations. In summary, these are:

Future of the quality assurance system for HE in England and Northern Ireland

7. The sponsoring bodies, together with key stakeholders, have published a consultation on the overall principles and objectives that should apply to the quality assurance of all HE in England and Northern Ireland from 2011-12 onwards. The consultation also outlines broad proposals for changes to the institutional audit method used in higher education institutions (HEIs). Once the consultation responses have been analysed in March 2010, QAA will develop detailed proposals for the operation of a new audit method, and will consult the sector on these in autumn 2010.

Review of policy on Teaching Quality Information (TQI) and the National Student Survey (NSS)

8. Information about higher education which is made publicly available – for example, by institutions themselves and on the Unistats website - is a central part of the quality assurance system. The National Student Survey also has a high profile and is seen as an important lever for change in institutions.

9. A review of TQI is underway to consider what information is needed, who will use it, how it will be published and how it will fit with the institutional audit method. Primary research work with students and a range of stakeholders to establish the evidence base to answer these questions is now underway and being undertaken by a team from Oakleigh Consulting and Staffordshire University. The Institute of Education has also been commissioned to look at how the National Student Survey might be best developed and enhanced. As Scottish and Welsh institutions also take part in the NSS and contribute to Unistats, this work applies across the UK.

10. Both pieces of work will be completed by the end of May 2010 and will be followed by consultation with the sector in the autumn of 2010. It is envisaged that the consultation will set out:

- proposals for a revised information set
- proposals for the publication of that information and who should be responsible for making information available (including the future of Unistats.com, and proposals for changes to the NSS)
- where future work will be required
- how this relates to ongoing discussions around the handling of public information in QAA institutional audit.

11. The work will be overseen by the TQI/NSS Steering Group chaired by Professor Janet Beer, Vice-Chancellor of Oxford Brookes University.

Evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure

12. The Academic Infrastructure (AI) is managed by the QAA and consists of the Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, subject benchmark statements, programme specifications and the HE qualifications framework. The AI makes a vital contribution to maintaining academic standards at comparable threshold levels across the UK.

13. The QAA are currently evaluating the effect of the AI on UK higher education, asking whether it has been and continues to be successful in helping to assure public confidence in higher education, and considering how it might be revised and updated. A discussion paper will be published on 25 February 2010 asking the sector how the AI is used, how it relates to other quality assurance mechanisms, and how it might be changed. Three possible scenarios for the future are suggested:

- Revision and periodic updating
- Redefinition of the components and concept of the Academic Infrastructure
- Substantial overhaul.

14. A final report will be published in late summer 2010.

Review of external examining arrangements

15. Universities UK and GuildHE are carrying out a review of external examining arrangements in the UK, in order to consider and recommend what improvements need to be made to ensure that external examiner arrangements effectively support the comparability of academic standards and are robust enough to meet future challenges. This will consider the changing role of examiners, how it might be better defined and communicated, and what support might be offered. The QAA are also contributing to the review by developing and implementing a nationally agreed set of minimum expectations for the external examiner role, and producing a simple guide to external examining.

16. The work will be overseen by a Review Group chaired by Professor Dame Janet Finch, Vice-Chancellor of Keele University, and will also be informed by an expert group drawn from a representative range of institutions. The group will report in December 2010.

QAA – sustaining quality and standards in HE

17. This work stems from the QAA's thematic enquiries project and will develop action plans to address identified areas for development. Much of this work will be delivered in partnership with others and be included in the other workstrands above. The themes are:

- i. External examiners - developing a set of nationally agreed minimum expectations and producing guidance both for examiners and for the general public, as well as reviewing section 4 of the *Code of Practice* (this strand links in to the UUK/GuildHE project and to the evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure – see above).
- ii. Public information - developing and promoting ways of informing the public about academic standards and quality and about HE more generally; and looking at how to include information in quality assurance methods (this fits in with the development of the future quality assurance system in England).
- iii. Contact hours - providing clear information about the nature and amount of contact and the expectations of institutions and students, and promoting a national discussion.
- iv. Assessment - reviewing assessment practices, supported by developmental activities aimed at improving the robustness and consistency of assessment and classification practices, and explaining how and why practices vary.
- v. International students - provision of clear guidance to students and their advisers about HE teaching, learning and assessment practices in the UK and about transition to UK study; provision of guidance about the support arrangements that international students should expect from HEIs; and reviewing the efficacy and appropriateness of established schemes for testing English language skills.

Progress of the work

18. Annex A shows a timetable showing the key milestones for each of the five areas of work described in paragraphs 7-17 in parallel. If the group find it useful, an updated version of this can be brought to each meeting.

Higher Education Better Regulation Group

19. The Higher Education Better Regulation Group (HEBRG) is the successor group to the Higher Education Regulation Review Group (HERRG) and was established to build on the work of HERRG in reducing the regulatory burden on the HE sector. It has a small secretariat based at UUK.

20. HEBRG members include representatives from each of the sponsoring bodies (representative bodies and funding councils), representatives from QAA, HESA, AHUA, BUFDG, CUC, and ARC, RCUK, Dept of Health, TDA, and Ofsted. The first two members' meetings will be held in mid-April and late June 2010. The secretariat hope to organise a more formal launch (including a website) by June 2010.

21. The HEBRG independent chair is Professor Sir Graeme Catto. In terms of background, Graeme recently came to the end of his term of office (30 June 2009) as President (and recently Chair) of the General Medical Council, having been President since February 2002.

22. The Group's Strategic Aims and Functions will be signed off by members at the first meeting. They include:

Strategic Aims

- To bring together HE and a range of organisations and regulators to raise the profile of better regulation and increase commitment to better regulation
- To be an independent check on new regulation and on institutional claims of overregulation
- To provide independent support to the work of sponsors in this area
- To provide an additional means of pressure/challenge and a way of accessing key individuals and organisations

Functions

- Acting as a gatekeeper in relation to any new regulation of the HE sector
- Managing and promoting the HE Concordat
- Raising the profile of better regulation more widely amongst regulators and HEIs

23. A number of key priorities have been identified for the Group:

- Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs)
- Health
- Research councils
- Teacher education.



Annex A – Timetable of work

Date	HEFCE, DEL NI, UUK, GuildHE - Future of QA System	HEFCE - Review of TQI/NSS policy Research into Public Information Enhancing and developing the NSS	QAA - Evaluation of Academic Infrastructure	UUK/GuildHE – Review of External Examiner system	QAA – Sustaining quality and standards in HE
2009	Dec 4 th - Consultation on key principles and processes of the revised QA system published Dec 4 th .	Nov – Oakleigh Consulting/Staffordshire University appointed to PI project and began research in December	For updates see http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/evaluation09/ Stakeholder group first met 11 November and discussion document drafted	Announcement of Chair (Janet Finch) QAA formed internal project group, established liaison with UUK/GuildHE and mapped Section 4 of the <i>Code of Practice</i> onto the ToR	Approach to co-ordinated response agreed and internal cross-agency project co-ordination group set up.
2010					
January	2 consultation events for institutions held 21 and 27 th ; feedback indicates these were useful discussions	IoE appointed to undertake enhancement and development of NSS	Discussion paper circulated for comment	Discussion paper circulated for comment	(Up to Spring 2009) Public information: exploring methods of raising awareness (of AI, HE more generally) with academic and public audiences Contact hours: review programme specifications International students: review contribution made by programme specifications; develop

Date	HEFCE, DEL NI, UUK, GuildHE - Future of QA System	HEFCE - Review of TQI/NSS policy Research into Public Information Enhancing and developing the NSS	QAA - Evaluation of Academic Infrastructure	UUK/GuildHE – Review of External Examiner system	QAA – Sustaining quality and standards in HE
					simple guide to UK HE; collate and disseminate good practice
February	25 th – first meeting of QASHG	25 th - TQI/NSS steering group consider a range of contributions from stakeholders and updates on research progress	25 th - Publication of consultative discussion paper inviting comment on the Academic Infrastructure and its constituent parts	19 th - Review Group Meeting	
March	5 th - Consultation closes. Results analysed by HEFCE, discussed by stakeholder group and proposed joint management group owned by HEFCE, UUK and GuildHE. Draft recommendations paper prepared. 25 th – QAF Stakeholders meeting 26 th – 2 nd meeting of QASHG		24 th – QAA roundtable event consulting quality practitioners on “minimum expectations” and on Academic Infrastructure (Leeds)	5 th – QAA presentation at HEA subject centre event 24 th – QAA roundtable event consulting quality practitioners on “minimum expectations” and on Academic Infrastructure (Leeds)	
April	In discussion with stakeholders/management group, QAA drafting handbook and operational		1 st – QAA roundtable event consulting quality practitioners on “minimum	1 st – QAA roundtable event consulting quality practitioners on “minimum	(Summer onwards) Contact hours: convene subject-specific roundtable meetings to

Date	HEFCE, DEL NI, UUK, GuildHE - Future of QA System	HEFCE - Review of TQI/NSS policy Research into Public Information Enhancing and developing the NSS	QAA - Evaluation of Academic Infrastructure	UUK/GuildHE – Review of External Examiner system	QAA – Sustaining quality and standards in HE
	description for revised audit method.		expectations” and on Academic Infrastructure (London)	expectations” and on Academic Infrastructure (London) 13 th - Expert Group Meeting 23 rd - Review Group Meeting	identify types and nature of contact and collate/disseminate good practice Public information work included in operational description and consultation
May	HEFCE, UUK and GuildHE Boards to consider results of consultation and approve general guidelines for the QAA to develop the operational method	Public information research and NSS enhancement work completed TQI/NSS steering group consider outcomes	7 May – deadline for responses to discussion paper. Analysis of responses will determine whether or not significant changes are needed	19 th - QAA presentation at HEA subject centre event	
June	Summer – QAA drafting consultation on operational description for institutional audit		Drafting report of findings and recommendations	25 th - Review Group Meeting Summer – QAA complete work on “minimum expectations” and “simple guides”.	
July		TQI/NSS Steering group consider recommendations for change and first draft of consultation			

Date	HEFCE, DEL NI, UUK, GuildHE - Future of QA System	HEFCE - Review of TQI/NSS policy Research into Public Information Enhancing and developing the NSS	QAA - Evaluation of Academic Infrastructure	UUK/GuildHE – Review of External Examiner system	QAA – Sustaining quality and standards in HE
August					
September	QASHG meeting QAA consult sector on operational description	TQI/NSS Steering group agree final consultation	(Autumn) Report published Begin to develop proposals for 'new' AI	17 th - Expert Group Meeting Autumn – QAA “simple guides” and “minimum expectations” published	(Longer term) Assessment: arrange roundtable meetings to identify range of assessment methods and good practice; produce simple guide to degree classification International students: supporting and disseminating research into English language testing (instigated by IELTS)
October		HEFCE Board, UUK Board and GuildHE Executive clearance of consultation document			
November		Consultation launched (jointly between HEFCE, UUK and GuildHE). Sets out proposals for revised information set, how it should be published, where future work is required and how it relates to institutional audit.		17 th - Review Group Meeting	

Date	HEFCE, DEL NI, UUK, GuildHE - Future of QA System	HEFCE - Review of TQI/NSS policy Research into Public Information Enhancing and developing the NSS	QAA - Evaluation of Academic Infrastructure	UUK/GuildHE – Review of External Examiner system	QAA – Sustaining quality and standards in HE
December	QASHG meeting			Report published	
2011	New method agreed Work towards roll-out of new method gets underway including auditor training	February – consultation complete	Jan-Mar – Consultation on “new” AI Apr-May – Drafting proposals for new AI June-July – Agreement on new AI September – Implementation of new AI		
2011-12	Audit visits commence				