



Evaluating the Academic Infrastructure

1994 Group response

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The following is the 1994 Group's response to the QAA consultation Evaluating the Academic Infrastructure.

For more detailed information please refer to the individual responses of our member institutions.

Members of the 1994 Group are: University of Bath, Birkbeck University of London, Durham University, University of East Anglia, University of Essex, University of Exeter, Goldsmiths University of London, Institute of Education University of London, Royal Holloway University of London, Lancaster University, University of Leicester, Loughborough University, Queen Mary University of London, University of Reading, University of St Andrews, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of Surrey, University of Sussex and University of York.

Question 1

- a) How widely recognised is the Academic Infrastructure?

The Group believes that the term Academic Infrastructure (AI), as reported in the consultation document, is familiar to Quality Assurance (QA) professionals, but not to the wider university community, nor to audiences external to the Higher Education (HE) community.

- b) Who should be the audience(s) for the Academic Infrastructure?

The UK HE sector needs to communicate to a wider public (students, employers, the general public) the range and robustness of the QA mechanisms that are currently in place in the national framework and in individual HE institutions (HEIs), but the external audience should not be the intended audience for the AI.

- c) What should be the primary purpose of the Academic Infrastructure?

The role of the AI should be to provide an agreed set of national reference points in relation to the characteristics of levels of study and awards (FHEQ), and expectations of good practice in quality (CoP). These reference points then inform further guidance to HEIs relating to particular disciplines (subject benchmarks) and are reflected in the information

made publicly available in programme specifications. This framework, together with external examining and Institutional Audit, should robustly assure that the awards of all UK HEIs meet minimum threshold levels of academic quality and standards.

- d) Does the Academic Infrastructure provide an adequate basis for the comparison of academic standards between institutions and between academic disciplines?

The Group welcomes the emphasis in the discussion paper on the role of the AI in 'ensur[ing] there are certain threshold levels of comparability and consistency' [paragraph 3.1] within the UK HE sector. This emphasis rightly recognises that the primary goal for the AI is to ensure broad comparability of academic standards in relation to nationally agreed threshold/minimum standards that all HEIs must meet or exceed, and that the quality of educational opportunities offered to students give them the opportunity to meet the academic standards required for successful completion of their programme of study. The nature of both undergraduate and postgraduate degrees across the sector varies considerably for good reason, therefore a precise comparison between institutions and disciplines is neither desirable nor possible. This must be made clear to stakeholders and the wider public.

In practical terms improvement could be made by making the FHEQ more explicit about threshold standards and incorporating the credit framework document. The quality of subject benchmarks could be improved, as there is variability between them. Additionally, it would be helpful to make clearer which aspects of the AI are for guidance and which for compliance.

Question 2

- a) How should the Academic Infrastructure be better connected to quality assurance and enhancement activities?

Our view is that it is for HEIs to ensure that interaction at institutional level with the AI is closely linked to quality assurance and enhancement activities.

- b) What further developments are needed?

As previously stated, the national quality assurance framework, through both the AI and Institutional Audit, should focus on ensuring that HEIs, as autonomous awarding bodies, are appropriately exercising their degree awarding powers and are providing programmes of study that meet minimum threshold levels of academic quality and standards. Therefore the Group believes that the AI should be revised to place emphasis on those elements of the Infrastructure that relate to issues that are essential to ensure that minimum threshold expectations are being met, whilst those parts of the current AI that in practice are currently being treated as guidance should be formally recognised as such and be given a lower status within the AI.

Alongside a clearer distinction, between those aspects of the AI which are considered mandatory, and those which merely comprise guidance, for both HEIs and Audit Teams and External Examiners, closer engagement between the QAA and other key external users of the AI, particularly professional, regulatory and statutory bodies would be helpful.

Where there is clear evidence of matters which are routinely covered by audit and review, but which are not specifically covered in the AI, there is a strong argument in favour of extending the scope of the AI accordingly.

Question 3

- a) Have the qualifications frameworks met their original aims, expectations and anticipated benefits?
- b) Are the ways in which they are currently used appropriate and effective in setting and maintaining standards and quality?
- c) What further developments are needed?

The recently revised FHEQ is useful for programme and module development, and for developing and revising assessment criteria. It has helped the sector to clarify the structure and nomenclature of awards (particularly at postgraduate level) and has encouraged innovation in the development of new programmes and awards. The inclusion of more widely used numerical levels which fit with other qualifications frameworks is very welcome. The ability to demonstrate the consistency of the awards made by UK HEIs with the *Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in the European Higher Education Area* is particularly helpful.

The Group consider that the FHEQ has certainly met its aims and is being used appropriately and effectively, although this could be better promoted to the wider public. Greater clarity regarding the concept of 'threshold' achievement at each level would assist in explaining standards to external audiences for example.

With regards to future development, merging the FHEQ and the HE Credit Framework for England could be envisaged so long as institutional autonomy is protected, whilst further reference to skills and possible co-curricular supplements would help in aligning with stakeholder demand. The Group also notes that the QAA discussion paper refers to the proposal that the national qualification framework should be underpinned by a credit accumulation and transfer scheme. While we recognise the potential value of this proposal, we would not support a move to a national scheme that did not leave to individual HEIs, as autonomous awarding bodies, the authority to make decisions on whether to permit credit transfer in specific instances.

Question 4

- a) Have the subject benchmark statements met their original aims, expectations and anticipated benefits?
- b) Are the ways in which they are currently used appropriate and effective in setting and maintaining standards and quality?
- c) What further developments are needed?

Broadly speaking, subject benchmark statements are useful reference points for programme design given their role, as described in the QAA discussion paper, as 'guides to develop quality processes and academic curricula' rather than 'statements ... demanding strict compliance' [paragraph 4.2.4]. However, there is great variation between different statements in the way in which benchmark standards are presented.

A more rigorous focus on threshold/minimum standards within the benchmarks would help achieve their original aims, expectations and anticipated benefits, without encroachment on institutional autonomy. The Group therefore suggests that all subject benchmark statements should set out only the threshold/minimum standards for the subject area in question. These threshold/minimum standards can then serve as a reference point against which issues of broad comparability can be considered. Requiring all the benchmarks to adopt more consistency regarding length, content, use of language and achievement reference point would help in this regard.

We welcome the increasing alignment between the subject benchmark statements and the criteria for professional accreditation in areas such as engineering, which increases the relevance of the benchmark statements in such areas. However, we note that there is only partial coverage of subject areas, and it is difficult to find appropriate reference points for multidisciplinary programmes.

Question 5

- a) Have programme specifications met their original aims, expectations and anticipated benefits?
- b) Are the ways in which they are currently used appropriate and effective in setting and maintaining standards and quality?
- c) What further developments are needed?

The Group has mixed views on the value of programme specifications. Whilst they have been useful in developing intended learning outcomes for programmes, they are difficult to present in student-friendly language, at the same time as retaining the technical detail which makes them useful in processes such as approval and review.

Programme specifications should permit the simple summary of key QA information in relation to FHEQ and internal requirements.

We believe that other work currently being undertaken at a national level on the information that should be provided for students and prospective students, will ensure that appropriate and comparable information about the content and nature of programmes of study will reach this audience. That students are not the intended audience of programme specifications should therefore be acknowledged.

Question 6

- a) Has the *Code of practice* met its original aims, expectations and anticipated benefits?
- b) Are the ways in which it is currently used appropriate and effective in setting and maintaining standards and quality?
- c) What further developments are needed?

The *Code of Practice* has delivered considerable benefits, encouraging HEIs to constructively and effectively engage with a set of precepts and guidance in respect of which there is a strong sense of sector ownership and improved practice within the sector.

However, there is scope for refining and streamlining the Code. For example, having one introduction rather than one per section would reduce the volume and also force clarity on the status of content held within the individual section introductions. An overarching introduction with some key guiding principles/precepts that cover all areas might prove useful, followed by sections of more focused guidance. There are also issues arising from the current structure of the *QAA Code*. The *Code* can be difficult to use due to overlap and duplication between different sections. The lack of clarity in the relationship between Section 2 on *Collaborative provision*, and Section 9 on *Work-based and placement learning*, is an example of this but there are others.

We would welcome a comprehensive review of the structure of the current *QAA Code*, in order to reduce its size and complexity. Such a refined Code would enhance an already useful tool.

Question 7

What do you think the future of the Academic Infrastructure should be?

The concept of having an agreed set of national reference points in relation to academic awards remains valid, and increasingly important in the context of growing public interest in the assurance of standards. Nevertheless, it also needs to be clearly understood that institutions differ and that standards can be achieved in different ways. The QAA should not extend the AI to a point where it is unduly prescriptive or constraining for curriculum development, programme design and learning outcomes. The future focus of the AI should therefore be to provide an appropriate set of reference points against which the effectiveness of individual HEIs, as autonomous degree awarding bodies, which manage their academic quality and standards, can be judged, and broad comparability of provision across the sector can be demonstrated and maintained.