
**The future of quality
assessment in
higher education**

Institute of Physics response to
a HEFCE call for evidence

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The future of quality assessment in higher education

Question 1: Have we identified the trends that you expect to see over the next decade? Have we missed any likely changes that you feel should be included in a discussion about the most appropriate arrangements for quality assessment by 2025?

Most of the issues have been identified but one variation not covered explicitly is the need for the system to be robust in legal terms; for example to deal with students who might challenge the comparability of standards between different institutions.

Question 2: What types of quality assessment arrangements would be necessary to:

- ensure that barriers to institutions implementing their mission or strategic direction of travel over the medium term are minimised?*
- ensure that providers are able to be as swift, agile and imaginative in developing new provision as is necessary?*
- retain any valuable enablers present in the current system?*
- facilitate new (types of) partnership arrangements and other innovative forms of provision?*

Here and elsewhere, we would like to emphasise the importance of professional body accreditation in quality assurance and assessment in HEIs. Accreditation provides an external, independent evaluation of the content and delivery of the specified courses as well as setting minimum standards in terms of level and academic demand. Where there are well-established accreditation routes (for example, the Institute of Physics accredits every physics programme in the UK), much of the quality assurance and assessment may be delegated to the accrediting body, with an appropriate light touch from the HEI. It follows that any material that is produced by the funding councils, notably the Benchmark Statements, should continue to be developed in partnership with the relevant professional body.

Question 3: What competitive or reputational advantages do you think the current quality assessment system gives UK HE providers in the international arena which you would want to see retained? Are there disadvantages which you would like to see addressed? How do you think the situation may change over the next ten years? How important is the European quality framework to you?

We have no comments on competitiveness but, in recent years, we have been involved in several comparability studies between physics degrees in European countries, via the European Physical Society. It was clear in those studies that quality mechanisms in the UK far exceeded what was available in the rest of Europe, although it was less clear that this work affected the choices of international students. The main feature the studies did reveal was a significant difference between the UK and other countries in terms of degree structures and provision. This was highlighted by the fact that the research team had to rewrite completely its questionnaire for the UK physics departments – the rest of Europe managed with a single version.

There may, however, also be issues regarding the recognition of Masters level degrees, particularly integrated Master's, outside of the UK (and beyond Europe). MPhys type programmes are often not recognised as “proper” Master's, due to the absence of a corresponding Bachelor's degree. It is also not unusual for a UK Masters to be deemed unacceptable for entry to a PhD programme elsewhere in Europe, due to insufficient (ECTS) credits. This incongruity needs to be addressed.

Question 4: Are these the right principles to underpin quality assessment approaches for the next decade? Are any of these principles no longer useful? Are any principles that would be necessary for effective quality assessment in 2025 missing from this list? Are some principles more important than others? How should we manage the tensions between some of these principles?

As with the answer to question 2, we believe that partnership with relevant and respected professional accrediting bodies should be a core principle. With the possible exception of the external examining system, accreditation is one of the very few ways in which universities are answerable to external and genuinely independent organisations,

There are indeed real tensions between these principles. In particular, it is difficult how the quality assessment system incentivises excellence in terms of the academic standard of graduates.

Question 5: What are the characteristics of a quality assessment system that would incentivise, support and recognise outstanding learning and teaching? Should the scrutiny of institutional quality improvement activities be a component of a quality assessment system?

Any such system must recognise that there are differences in the nature and pedagogical challenges at the subject level.

A related point here is that good teaching and learning, in universities as in schools, should be linked to the best educational research. Currently, there is very little subject-based educational research in UK universities. A reason for this is the absence of an adequate and sustainable funding route for such research, which itself is partly a result of the funding structure of UK research. Funding and research councils should get together to address this issue.

Question 6: What do stakeholders want from a set of quality assessment arrangements?

a: What confidence should students expect to take from future quality assessment arrangements?

b: What confidence will employers seek from future quality assessment arrangements?

c: What assurance should Government and the taxpayer take from future quality assessment arrangements?

d: What value should quality assessment arrangements bring to higher education providers?

Quality assurance and assessment should represent a contract between students and the universities. Students are entitled to and should receive an education of high quality and should receive a high level of support.

Question 7: Should we seek to demonstrate to stakeholders that academic standards are comparable between providers? And between subject areas? If so, what assurances should be sought about such comparabilities?

Question 8: What assurances should we seek about the maintenance of academic standards over time? Are there new ways or models of providing such assurance that should be considered? Are current approaches to the assurance of academic standards adequately able to recognise student learning in a range of contexts, for example during placements, or professional practice?

In accredited subjects, such as physics, the accreditation process plays an important role in defining a *minimum* standard across departments. In the case of physics, core content is defined at an appropriate level and departments are expected to prove they are teaching and assessing the knowledge and skills defined. Accreditation panels comprise experienced academics from other physics departments; they visit the departments and amongst other things, they scrutinise the assessment material, such as examination papers. This process is an excellent means of ensuring the minimum standard for a physics degree is maintained across institutions and with time. However, it does not intend to ensure comparability of standards of the degree award. True comparability of national standards, as with, say, A-levels, would require national examinations, which would be neither desirable nor acceptable.

It is also worth noting that there continues to be some enthusiasm to adopt a grade point average (GPA) type system instead of the traditional UK degree classifications. While the GPA system also has a lot of detractors, it avoids arbitrary splitting of an essentially continuous spectrum of achievement into discrete categories. It does little, however, for comparability of standards between different courses and universities.

Question 9: How far should reliance be placed on the external examining system to provide judgements about standards? Is there still a role for it or not? Should it be strengthened? Should there be more of an international dimension to external examining arrangements? How far should reliance be placed on Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies to provide judgements about standards? Are there new ways or models of benchmarking degree standards that we should look at?

The system of external examiners works best in terms of the examiner acting as a critical friend. It serves as a solid check on processes and can play a role in setting minimum standards, although one should note that many universities choose their examiners largely from institutions they consider to be of a similar type to themselves. However, the system most certainly does not deliver comparability of standards. Indeed, the role of external examiners has changed in recent years. For example, it is no longer common practice for external examiners to hold *viva voce* examinations with selected students. It may be that without this close contact with students provided by these examinations that it is now more difficult to for external examiners to judge standards.

Where PSRBs exist, it would be a better approach to entrust them with the task of maintaining minimum standards within a subject. While accreditation typically takes place on a 5 year timescale, for most purposes that is perfectly adequate; standards do not change

overnight. There is still a need for an external examiner to oversee the processes of examinations and degree awards; it would not be satisfactory for a university to be completely autonomous in that respect. There may be advantages, both in terms of access and also in preserving standards of the creation a centralised pool of external examiners, possibly approved or even accredited by a PSRB where they exist.

Question 10: How far is it possible to place further reliance on an institution's own internal governance mechanisms and approaches to provide the assurances necessary for a quality assessment system?

Question 11: Can one concept of 'quality' still hold good? One external quality assessment system? For all providers? At all stages of their development?

Question 12: We currently have criteria – expressed in the Quality Code and tested through review conducted on behalf of the funding bodies by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education – for those seeking entry to the higher education sector (if their Home/EU students are to be eligible for fee loans). In your view is that 'threshold' bar currently set too high, too low, or is it about right? Do you prefer a low initial threshold with more scrutiny thereafter, or a higher threshold with less scrutiny thereafter? Should the threshold test include outcome measures as well as process measures; just process measures; or just outcome measures?

Question 13: Is there a case for cyclical review, against identical criteria, of all providers in the sector, regardless of their track record and performance or not? If so, what should its purpose be? If so, should this process be one conducted by the institution itself? Or should it be internal with an external verification that it has been done well? Or should it be external and completely independent of the provider?

No comments on Q 10 -13.

Question 14: What should the purposes of the Quality Code and Subject Benchmark Statements be, if any, ten years from now? Are these the right external reference points around which providers should continue to design and review their academic provision in the forthcoming decade?

The main purpose of the Benchmark Statements has been to provide guidance to HEIs in setting up courses in areas where the Statements exist. There is little evidence of either students or employers using them in any meaningful way and, in any case, because the Statements are not compulsory, it is possible to offer a course that does not satisfy the Benchmark with no sanction. Where the Benchmarks have been most effective is where they are used in conjunction with an accrediting body. In the case of the Institute, we played a major role in writing the Benchmark, which now forms the backbone of the accreditation process. It is therefore essential that, if Benchmarks do continue to exist, they are created and modified in close collaboration with accrediting bodies.

The major challenge to the Benchmark Statements is the perceived increase in interdisciplinary courses. In addition to its full accreditation, the Institute also has "Recognised" physics degrees which involve a lighter touch process but recognise degrees

in terms of the quantity of physics content and their quality assurance procedures. However, history suggests that rather than there being a free for all in terms of interdisciplinary activity there tends to be relatively slow realignments of courses and the establishment of new areas which themselves turn into homogeneous disciplines. In such cases, the establishment of an appropriate Benchmark can be even more valuable than for the existing subjects, due to its major role in helping the establishment of new programmes.

Question 15: What evidence and/or data should be used to identify quality issues in an individual provider? What assurance should providers give about their policies and approaches to handling these issues and the lessons learned/improvements made? Should quality assessment arrangements involve a mechanism to intervene where evidence suggests there are persistent, serious, or systemic problems in the quality of education or the standards provided? What should the range of consequences or sanctions be in cases where any issues or problems are confirmed by an investigation?

No comment.

Question 16: Should there be a mechanism to pick up any sector-wide issues of quality or standards which could be improved? If so, how should this best be done? Conversely, should there be a formal, sector-wide mechanism for disseminating good practice in learning and teaching, and enabling its uptake? If so, how should this best be done?

First, there needs to be a mechanism for identifying good practice that goes beyond self-selection and that implies development of evidence based on research. Secondly, it is important to note that, while there are generic issues, many of the pedagogical challenges are at the subject level.

Question 17: The current premise is that a provider is a single corporate actor in which quality and standards assurance arrangements – such as academic regulations, or monitoring and review processes – have to be applied identically and consistently to all degree programmes at the same level, wherever delivered. Does this continue to make sense in the next decade in the context of an increasing diversity of provision? Is it inhibiting pedagogic developments in different disciplines? Inhibiting collaboration? Or does it make it easier to develop, for example, multi-disciplinary programmes?

Clearly, one should expect that students experience a high-quality education regardless of discipline. However, there are many examples where regulations are rigidly defined within an HEI and do not take account of the different conventions and practices within subject areas. As an example, in STEM subjects it is common to use the full range of marks from 0 – 100%. In the arts and humanities, the range is much narrower. In an arts-based subject, failure of a module or course component is relatively rare whereas, in a subject such as physics, students at the 2(ii)/3 level typically fail a few modules while doing very well in others. It is neither sensible nor fair to apply the same regulations to both.

With regard to interdisciplinary programmes, there may currently be disincentives, owing to QAA disapproval of using the same module for different year groups, to development of such programmes and other innovative pathways. It should be clarified within standards that appropriate “levels” depend on context. For example, it may be entirely appropriate to

introduce some introductory physics into a second-year biology course. Assessments of standards should be made on holistic evaluations of programmes and at the module level. Evidence of “fitness for purpose” should include evidence that students are reaching their full potential. This cannot be done if all modules have to be norm-referenced with an average mark of over 60% (to ensure that most students achieve a 2(i)); students should be encouraged to explore the limits of their ability and not be penalised unduly for the occasional failure nor departments castigated for failing candidates in a few modules that students find challenging.

Question 18: Should a revised quality assessment system include scrutiny of activities taking place outside the UK? Should HE providers in the UK be given a choice of accreditation processes and accreditation agencies including some emanating from, for example, North America or Australia? Should we recognise them officially in some way? What recognition should we give to quality assessment or assurance systems in other jurisdictions where UK providers are actively delivering higher education courses?

Question 19: Does the current quality assessment system represent good value for money in your view? Which elements, if any, of the current arrangements represent value for money? Which, if any, do not?

Question 20: Are the questions posed in this discussion document the right ones for the context set out above? Are there other deep questions that are missing from this discussion document?

No comments on questions 18 – 20.