Consultation question 1: Are the three key purposes of public information outlined in paragraph 42 still appropriate? If not, what additional or alternative purposes should a public information set seek to address?

No.

There are two issues to be addressed. The first is that a key purpose should be to inform prospective students and others of what they need to achieve in order to participate in higher education. The statement that the information should: "...help (prospective students) choose what and where to study", does not reflect the process by which most students choose their course. Indeed, a recent report from the SCORE partnership entitled, ‘Progression Routes in STEM’ [http://www.score-education.org/publications], has demonstrated that unless students have a fairly precise notion of what they wish to study, the whole selection process is very difficult to navigate, with literally tens of thousands of degree programmes in STEM alone. It follows that a major purpose of the information should be to guide students in their choice of A-levels and other appropriate qualifications (something which the Russell Group of 20 leading UK universities has undertaken to do with the publication of its report, ‘Informed Choices’ [http://www.russellgroup.ac.uk/informed-choices.aspx], which provides guidance on post-16 subject choices for potential undergraduates).

The second issue is to address the difference between quality and standards. The second line of paragraph 42 refers to quality and standards but none of the three subsequent points refers to standards, at all. Members of the public are known to be confused between quality and standards, which have technical meanings in quality assurance circles. This ambiguity needs to be addressed. In addition, at present, the public are given almost no indication of standards and nothing proposed in the consultation document proposes to do so.

Consultation question 2: Do you think the KIS fulfils our objective of providing the information students have identified as useful, in a place they look for it, in a standardised and complete manner?

No.

There are omissions from the information and there is a major risk of simply adding to the vast and confusing amount of material that students have available. Taking the latter point first, if there were a separate KIS for each course, universities would be creating literally tens of thousands of extra documents. Such a plethora of repetitive and dense information will help no one. What is required is a more intelligent overview. The Institute of Physics produces an annual guide, soon to be web based entitled, ‘Physics on Course’ [http://www.iop.org/education/student/physics_on_course/page_41676.html], which provides both an overview and guidance on specific courses for anyone who is thinking about doing any type of university physics course. Similar, concentrated subject guides, would be far more useful than simply producing so much extra material.
In terms of omissions, one might expect links to the appropriate QAA Benchmark Statements and to any other material pertinent to the subject. The other important information would be what one needs to study and what one is advised to study in order to prepare best for the programme. As an example, most chemistry courses ask for chemistry as the only specific A-level but the universities would prefer students to have studied mathematics and another science, too. Other than the aforementioned Russell Group report, this kind of information is, as far as we are aware, currently not available and has been identified as a major lack of transparency in the system.

Other information that could be included might be information on who actually does the teaching at each level (e.g. is it tenured staff; are professors involved, etc.?), and also a diversity breakdown in terms of as many groups as possible with gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic status, in particular.

Consultation question 3: Do you agree that links should be provided to the KIS from the UCAS web-site?

Yes.

No comment.

Consultation question 4: Given that we want the production of the KIS to be as efficient as possible, are there particular administrative or logistical issues which the pilot phase should consider?

The idea of providing a KIS for every course seems to be a major administrative burden and it is far from clear that the benefits accrued justify that effort. As an example, many physics departments offer, say, 14 different programmes, many of them with an identical core but differing in the detailed options taken. It would make far more sense to write a global KIS covering all of these similar courses.

Consultation question 5: Should the information set to be published on institutional web-sites (shown at Annex F) include short, up-to-date employability statements for prospective students, in addition to information about links with employers?

Yes, but this is a contentious issue. What is urgently required at the sector level is a set of independent employability statistics that can be provided at both the institutional and subject level. Although there have been many studies of the relative employability of graduates in different areas, there is no central, widely accepted database. Given the data stored by the Student Loan Company on essentially all graduate earnings, this should not be beyond a reasonable amount of effort to achieve. Such data should not be left to individual institutions to collect, both for reasons of avoiding vested interest and because they can be obtained centrally at much less cost.
Another issue about employability statistics is that they need to be intelligent. Two typical and much repeated errors are: (a) to show the students who continue in further study as unemployed, which tends to show science subjects as having poor employment prospects; and (b) to use the DLHE data six months after graduation (see paragraph 65 of the consultation document). These data often reflect temporary summer employment and are really next to useless in informing potential students about long-term prospects. An indication of lifetime earnings and career prospects rather than the position six months after graduation would be considerably more useful.

Consultation question 6: Does Annex F set out the right information items for inclusion in the wider published information set (subject to agreement on the inclusion of employability statements as proposed in Question 5)? If you think items should be added/removed, please tell us about them.

Some of the responses to the previous questions cover this point; otherwise we have no strong views. However, we would reinforce our earlier argument that asking universities to provide data on, for example, average salary in the first year of completion of the course, manages simultaneously to create an enormous workload while producing a set of wholly unreliable data. Such exercises must be done centrally and independently. We also note that university mission statements and corporate statements merely add to the surfeit of information without much added value.

Consultation question 7: Do you agree that the list of items for the information set should be maintained on HEFCE’s web-site and updated as necessary on advice from HEPISG and QHE Group?

Yes.

No comment.

Consultation question 8: Do you agree that student unions should be able to nominate one optional question bank in their institution’s NSS each year?

We have no strong views but HEFCE should be aware of how the NSS distorts other information gathering exercises in universities. In response to the lack of adequate career progression data for physics graduates, the Institute of Physics attempted to track as many graduates as possible from a few successive cohorts, as part of its five year longitudinal study of final year physics undergraduates from March 2006 [http://www.iop.org/policy/diversity/initiatives/longitudinal/page_42655.html]. It proved very difficult indeed to persuade university departments to ask students to fill in our short questionnaires. Although the departments were very supportive of the project, they were not prepared to put pressure on students to fill in our questionnaire as the
Consultation question 9: Do you have any other comments on the proposals in this document, or further suggestions for what we might do?

It is not clear that the proposals really address the key purposes outlined in paragraph 42 of the consultation document. Instead of just increasing the amount of data available, there should be a more targeted approach to the data available to suit the needs of the potential students, their advisors and employers. Employability data at the university and the course level are vital but these must be independently provided and must take into account postgraduate study as a positive outcome. But, generally, the proposals seem to pay more attention to making existing information more available rather than concentrating on the currently unavailable information that would be useful, such as long-term career prospects, genuine standards and the transparency of course requirements.

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Director, Education and Science

The Institute of Physics

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