



House of Commons  
Innovation, Universities,  
Science and Skills Committee

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# Students and Universities

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**Eleventh Report of Session 2008–09**

*Volume II*

*Oral and written evidence*

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## The Innovation, Universities, Science & Skills Committee

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### Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk of the Innovation, Universities, Science & Skills Committee, Committee Office, 7 Millbank, London SW1P 3JA. The telephone number for general inquiries is: 020 7219 2793; the Committee's e-mail address is: [iuscomm@parliament.uk](mailto:iuscomm@parliament.uk).

# Witnesses

---

## Wednesday 28 January 2009 [HC 170-i]

Page

**Professor Rick Trainor**, President, Universities UK; **Professor Malcolm Grant**, Chairman of the Russell Group of Universities; **Professor Les Ebdon CBE**, Chair of Million+; and **Professor Geoffrey Crossick**, Warden, Goldsmiths, University of London, representing the 1994 Group; Ev 1

**Professor David Baker**, Principal, University College Plymouth, St Mark & St John, and Chair of GuildHE; **Ms Pat Bacon**, Principal and CEO, St Helen's College, representing the 157 Group; and **Professor John Craven**, Vice-Chancellor, University of Portsmouth, representing the University Alliance. Ev 12

## Monday 9 February 2009 [HC 170-ii]

**Wes Streeting**, President, National Union of Students (NUS); **Alex Bols**, Head of Education and Quality, NUS; **Rob Park**, Caring Responsibilities Officer and Acting Secretary to Council, Birkbeck Students' Union; and **Lisa Carson**, President of the Open University Students Association; Ev 21

**Carrie Donaghy**, student, Northumbria University; **Ricky Chotai**, student, University of Salford; **Lucy Hopkins**, student, University of Loughborough; **Arnold Sarfo-Kantanka**, Brunel University; and **James Williamson**, student, University of Sheffield; Ev 29

**Lucy Davidson**, student, Anglia Ruskin; **Ken Harris**, student, University of Wolverhampton; **Gemma Jerome**, student, University of Liverpool; **Luke Pollard**, student, Manchester Metropolitan University; **Anand Raja**, student, University of Birmingham; and **Steve Topazio**, student, University of Portsmouth. Ev 35

## Monday 9 March 2009 [HC 170-iii]

**Professor Bob Burgess**, Chair of the HEAR Implementation Group and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Leicester; **Professor Gina Wisker**, Chair, Heads of Education and Development Group (HEDG); **Professor James Wisdom**, Vice-Chair, Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA); and **Professor Geoffrey Alderman**, as a commentator on the quality and management in higher education. Ev 43

**Professor Paul Ramsden**, Chief Executive, Higher Education Academy (HEA); **Mr Peter Williams**, Chief Executive, Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA); and **Mr Anthony McClaran**, Chief Executive, Universities & Colleges Admissions (UCAS). Ev 51

## Monday 23 March 2009 [HC 370-i]

**Professor Gerald Pillay**, Vice-Chancellor and Rector, Liverpool Hope University; **Professor Michael Brown**, Vice-Chancellor, Liverpool John Moores University; Ev 92

and **Professor Jon Saunders**, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, University of Liverpool; **Professor Bernard Longden**, Liverpool Hope University; **Professor Lin Norton**, Liverpool Hope University; **Professor Mantz Yorke**, Lancaster University, formerly of John Moores University; Ev 101

**Ms Carly Rowley**, student, Liverpool Hope University; **Mr Tom Dutton**, student, Liverpool Hope University; **Mr Adam Hodgson**, student, John Moores University; **Mr Joel Martin**, student, John Moores University; **Ms Gemma Jerome**, student, University of Liverpool; and **Mr Edward Nussey**, student, University of Liverpool. Ev 108

### Monday 30 March 2009 [HC 370-ii]

**Professor Janet Beer**, Vice-Chancellor, Oxford Brookes University; and **Dr John Hood**, Vice-Chancellor, University of Oxford; Ev 117

**Professor Margaret Price**, Oxford Brookes University; **Dr Chris Rust**, Oxford Brookes University; **Professor Roger Goodman**, University of Oxford, and **Professor Alan Ryan**, University of Oxford; Ev 126

**Mr Gregory Andrews**, student, **Mr David Child**, student; **Ms Victoria Edwards**, student; **Ms Meagan Pitt**, student; **Mr Jun Rentschler**, student and **Ms Sally Tye**, student, Oxford Brookes University. Ev 131

### Wednesday 29 April 2009 [HC 370-iii]

**John Crompton**, Head of R&D Recruitment for Europe, Procter & Gamble for the CBI; **John Harris**, Higher Skills/Education Manager, SEMTA; **Mike Harris**, Head of Education and Skills Policy, Institute of Directors (IoD); and **Andrew Ramsay**, Chief Executive Officer, Engineering Council UK (ECUK); Ev 140

**Ricky Chotai**, student, University of Salford; **Carrie Donaghy**, student, Northumbria University; **Alasdair Farquharson**, student, University of Wolverhampton; **Gemma Jerome**, student, University of Liverpool; **Anand Raja**, student, University of Birmingham; and **Ed Steward**, student, University College London. Ev 147

### Wednesday 6 May 2009 [HC 170-iv]

**Professor Michael Arthur**, Vice-Chancellor, University of Leeds; **Professor Michael Driscoll**, Vice-Chancellor, Middlesex University; and **Professor Roger Brown**, Former Vice-Chancellor of Southampton Solent University; Ev 60

**Sally Hunt**, General Secretary, University and College Union; **Dr Natalie Fenton**, Goldsmiths, University of London; **Veronica Killen**, Northumbria University; and **Dr Gavin Reid**, University of Leeds. Ev 71

### Monday 11 May 2009 [HC 170-v]

**Rt Hon John Denham MP**, Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills and **Sir Alan Langlands**, Chief Executive of the Higher Education Funding Council for England. Ev 79

# List of written evidence

---

	<i>Page</i>
1 Note on informal meeting with staff at Imperial College London on 19 March 2009	Ev 156
2 Note of an informal meeting with students at Imperial College London on 19 March 2009	Ev 158
3 Note of an informal meeting with students at Liverpool Hope University on 23 March 2009	Ev 160
4 Note of informal meetings with groups of students at the University of Oxford on 30 March 2009	Ev 161
5 Summary of views and comments posted on the e-forum held by the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee during February–April 2009 in connection with its inquiry into Students and Universities	Ev 166
6 Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills	Ev 173, 532
7 Professor Stephen Gorard, University of Birmingham	Ev 182
8 Peter Dorey	Ev 184
9 James Boyle	Ev 185
10 Professor Alan Ryan	Ev 185
11 Richard Royle	Ev 187
12 Disability Forward Ltd	Ev 189
13 British Computer Society (BCS)	Ev 190
14 ASKe	Ev 194, 512
15 Research and Teaching Group (R & T Group)	Ev 198
16 Mantz Yorke, Visiting Professor, Lancaster University	Ev 201, 514
17 Professor G.R. Evans	Ev 207
18 Dr Stuart WG Derbyshire	Ev 211
19 Professor Geoffrey Alderman	Ev 213, 494
20 Education Committee, Birkbeck College Students' Union	Ev 217
21 Student Assessment and Classification Working Group (SACWG)	Ev 221
22 Charles Bland Tomkinson & Charles Edward Engel	Ev 223
23 Professor Bernard Longden, Liverpool Hope University and Professor Mantz Yorke, Lancaster University	Ev 226, 447, 481
24 Wellcome Trust	Ev 228
25 Institute of Physics	Ev 229
26 Royal Academy of Engineering	Ev 233
27 Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning (IFLL)	Ev 235
28 Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)	Ev 237, 518
29 Centre for Higher Education Research and Information, the Open University	Ev 242
30 Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE)	Ev 244
31 Medical Schools Council	Ev 246
32 Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit, Roehampton University, London	Ev 248
33 University Alliance	Ev 251
34 Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) Programme	Ev 253
35 Dr Rob Penhallurick	Ev 257

36	Catholic Education Service for England and Wales	Ev 259
37	National Union of Students (NUS)	Ev 261
38	University of Buckingham	Ev 265
39	Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA)	Ev 266, 526
40	Open University Students Association (OUSA)	Ev 269
41	British Medical Association	Ev 270
42	Anand Raja	Ev 274, 520
43	University of Plymouth	Ev 275
44	Semta	Ev 279
45	Institution of Engineering and Technology	Ev 281
46	York St John University	Ev 284
47	University of Leicester	Ev 286
48	Heads of Educational Development Group (HEDG)	Ev 291
49	University of Hertfordshire	Ev 292
50	Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP)	Ev 295
51	Learning and Skills Council (LSC)	Ev 299
52	Loughborough University	Ev 301
53	Liverpool Hope University	Ev 302
54	Higher Education Academy	Ev 305
55	Million+	Ev 310
56	University of Portsmouth	Ev 315
57	Executive Committee of the Quality Strategy Network (QSN)	Ev 318
58	157 Group	Ev 321
59	Council for the Mathematical Sciences	Ev 324
60	University of the Creative Arts	Ev 326
61	Institute of Directors (IoD)	Ev 332
62	Open University	Ev 335
63	Edge Foundation	Ev 339
64	Nigel Dyer	Ev 344
65	1994 Group	Ev 345
66	Imperial College London	Ev 349
67	Research Councils UK (RCUK)	Ev 352
68	Oxford Brookes University	Ev 355
69	Institute of Education (IoE), University of London	Ev 357
70	Royal Society of Chemistry	Ev 363
71	Engineering Councils UK	Ev 367
72	Biosciences Federation (BSF)	Ev 369
73	Professor Robert Burgess, Vice Chancellor, University of Leicester and Chair of the Burgess Implementation Steering Group	Ev 374
74	Staffordshire University	Ev 379
75	United Kingdom Arts and Design Institutions Association (UKADIA)	Ev 382
76	British Dental Association	Ev 384
77	Chartered Management Institute	Ev 388
78	Dr Janet Collett	Ev 393
79	GuildHE	Ev 397

80	Russell Group of Universities	Ev 401
81	University of Edinburgh	Ev 430
82	Institute of Materials, Minerals and Mining	Ev 432
83	Birmingham City University	Ev 434
84	Universities UK	Ev 436
85	The Royal Society	Ev 441
86	University of Oxford	Ev 444
87	UCAS (Universities Central Council on Admissions)	Ev 452, 534
88	Stephen Martin	Ev 457
89	Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)	Ev 458, 535
90	Professor Roger Brown, Professor of Higher Education Policy, Liverpool Hope University	Ev 462
91	Council for Industry and Higher Education	Ev 466
92	Dr Frederick G Page	Ev 467
93	Professor Barrie W Jervis	Ev 468
94	Dr Mary Stuart, Professor of Higher Education and Deputy Vice Chancellor, Kingston University	Ev 471
95	Stonewall	Ev 488
96	John Wildman	Ev 490
97	Professor Paul Ramsden, Chief Executive, Higher Education Academy	Ev 492
98	Professor Charles E Engel	Ev 495
99	University and College Union (UCU)	Ev 496, 530
100	Professor MS El-Sayed	Ev 500
101	National Audit Office (NAO)	Ev 503
102	Dr Stephen Dearden	Ev 513
103	Mr Peter Williams, Chief Executive, Quality Assurance Agency	Ev 516, 517
104	Lucy Davidson, Nursing Student, Anglia Ruskin University	Ev 521
105	Dr Gavin Reid, UCU	Ev 522
106	Trevor Mayes	Ev 522
107	Dr Garth Ratcliffe	Ev 526
108	Professor Roger Goodman, University of Oxford	Ev 528
109	Professor Michael Arthur, Vice-Chancellor, University of Leeds	Ev 529
110	Rt Hon Lord Mandelson, Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills	Ev 536
111	WJ Cairns, Manchester Metropolitan University	Ev 537
112	Sue Evans, Manchester Metropolitan University	Ev 545, 550

# List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

---

The reference number of the Government's response to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number.

## Session 2008–09

First Report	Re-skilling for recovery: After Leitch, implementing skills and training policies	HC 48–I (HC 365)
Second Report	The Work of the Committee 2007–08	HC 49
Third Report	DIUS's Departmental Report 2008	HC 51–I (HC 383)
Fourth Report	Engineering: turning ideas into reality	HC 50–I
Fifth Report	Pre-appointment hearing with the Chair-elect of the Economic and Social Research Council, Dr Alan Gillespie CBE	HC 505
Sixth Report	Pre-appointment hearing with the Chair-elect of the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council, Professor Sir Tom Blundell	HC 506
Seventh Report	Spend, spend, spend? – The mismanagement of the Learning and Skills Council's capital programme in further education colleges	HC 530
Eighth Report	Putting Science and Engineering at the Heart of Government Policy	HC 168-I
Ninth Report	Pre-appointment hearing with the Chair-elect of the Science and Technology Facilities Council, Professor Michael Sterling	HC 887
Tenth Report	Sites of Special Scientific Interest	HC 717

## Session 2007–08

First Report	UK Centre for Medical Research and Innovation	HC 185 (HC 459)
Second Report	The work and operation of the Copyright Tribunal	HC 245 (HC 637)
Third Report	Withdrawal of funding for equivalent or lower level qualifications (ELQs)	HC 187–I (HC 638)
Fourth Report	Science Budget Allocations	HC 215 (HC 639)
Fifth Report	Renewable electricity-generation technologies	HC 216–I (HC 1063)
Sixth Report	Biosecurity in UK research laboratories	HC 360–I (HC 1111)
Seventh Report	Pre-legislative Scrutiny of the Draft Apprenticeships Bill	HC 1062–I (HC (2008–09)262)
First Special Report	The Funding of Science and Discovery Centres: Government Response to the Eleventh Report from the Science and Technology Committee, Session 2006–07	HC 214
Second Special Report	The Last Report: Government Response to the Thirteenth Report from the Science and Technology Committee, Session 2006–07	HC 244
Fourth Special Report	Investigating the Oceans: Government Response to the Science and Technology Committee's Tenth Report of Session 2006–07	HC 506 [incorporating HC 469–i]



# Oral evidence

## Taken before the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee on Wednesday 28 January 2009

Members present:

Mr Phil Willis, in the Chair

Dr Ian Gibson  
Dr Evan Harris  
Dr Brian Iddon

Mr Gordon Marsden  
Ian Stewart

*Witnesses:* **Professor Rick Trainor**, President, Universities UK; **Professor Malcolm Grant**, Chairman of the Russell Group of Universities; **Professor Les Ebdon CBE**, Chair of Million+; and **Professor Geoffrey Crossick**, Warden, Goldsmiths, University of London, representing the 1994 Group, gave evidence.

**Chairman:** Can I welcome our first panel of witnesses to this, our first formal evidence session on the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee's inquiry into Students and Universities. This session is particularly about issues affecting undergraduate students from institutions and universities in higher education specifically in England, but it may be that you need to draw on experience from elsewhere in the United Kingdom and we are perfectly happy with that. Could I first of all ask my colleagues if they have any interest to declare before we introduce the witnesses?

**Dr Iddon:** I am a parliamentary adviser to the Royal Society of Chemistry. I am a member of the University and College Union. I am a member of the External Advisory Board in the School of Chemistry at Manchester University, and I think that I am still a visiting professor at the University of Liverpool in the chemistry department.

**Dr Gibson:** I am still a professor at the UEA—just!

**Chairman:** You might not be at the end of this inquiry!

**Ian Stewart:** I am a member of Unite, the union, and I am a member of the Council at Salford University.

**Q1 Chairman:** I am on the Court of Birmingham University. Our first panel of witnesses are Professor Rick Trainor, the President of Universities UK; Professor Malcolm Grant, Chairman of the Russell Group; Professor Les Ebdon, the Chair of Million+; and Professor Geoffrey Crossick, representing the 1994 Group. Welcome to you all. Can I say that on this panel you all have equal status but, Malcolm, I am going to ask you, if there is someone you feel would be better answering a particular question, to ask, as the quasi-chair of your panel—but I do that purely because I am looking at you, rather than because you are more important than anybody else on the panel!

**Professor Grant:** I understand that, Chairman, and I am very happy to assist.

**Q2 Chairman:** I wonder therefore if I could start with you, Professor Grant. This is really trying to look at higher education from the students' point of view and it is mainly about undergraduates. Two weeks ago, *Times Higher Education* published its annual

Student Experience Survey and, for the third year running, it was Loughborough University that came top. I wondered if you could briefly say what do you think matters most to students, and which universities in your view do you think are giving the best all-round student experience? What matters to them and who, in your opinion, is the best?

**Professor Grant:** Forgive me if I pass on the second part of your question but, on the first part of your question, I think that a number of things appeal to students and you can measure them by a number of indicators. My congratulations go to Loughborough, but I think that the choice of Loughborough as one of the most popular universities is down to being a relatively small institution that can create a sense of intimacy and personal relationships between students and the faculty who teach them. You will find a similar sort of intimacy in the Oxford and Cambridge colleges, where the loyalty and the allegiance of the students is more commonly to the colleges than it is to the university, which has less of an intimate personality. However, look at the other indicators as well. Look at the strength of response, both in the NSS survey and in the NUS survey, which demonstrates one of the highest levels of satisfaction with higher education compared with other quasi-public services in the country. Look at the very powerful figures which indicate overseas students' interest in coming to study in the UK. I think that it is rather important for the Committee to see the student experience in the round and to understand the causes that induce students from within the UK and outside the UK still to see this as one of the leading countries for higher education.

**Q3 Chairman:** Professor Trainor, you are President of Universities UK and so you see all the universities. What do you think is the key thing that students are looking for in terms of university?

**Professor Trainor:** I agree with Professor Grant that a sense of intimacy is certainly a help. Fundamentally, students are looking for an assurance that their interests are being looked after, and I think that can happen in a variety of ways. Students differ tremendously, as you know, in the type of courses that they pursue and the format in

which the courses are organised. I think that it is up to each university to marshal the resources it has at its command—and it is of course important that those resources be adequate to the task—in order to give students a sense that they are being properly looked after. I would emphasise, as Professor Grant did, that, although some universities come higher than others in the National Student Survey, the overall level of satisfaction is very high. Although we are not complacent about that, I think that there are good grounds for satisfaction there. We have to build on the stronger aspects, as perceived by the students.

**Professor Ebdon:** Perhaps I could add to that, first of all to endorse what Professor Grant has said in terms of the very high levels of satisfaction. In fact we are talking about very small differences in satisfaction in a wide variety of universities and, overall, an excellent level of satisfaction. That is against a context of great diversity amongst the student body. I think that your question disguises the fact that there is not a typical student. Forty-seven per cent of my students at the University of Bedfordshire are over the age of 24 before they join us, yet people always assume that students are 18-year-olds. The thing that students at my own university, and I think many similar universities, are most interested in is improving their prospects of employability. That may not be true of all students but it is certainly true of students who tend to return to education at a mature age. They are looking to improve their job prospects. Of course, that is a very significant thing at a time when we are going into a recession.

**Professor Crossick:** We are all agreeing with the principal lines of what has been said and I agree with that. I want to add something else, which is that most students at university want to be stimulated. I find that very strongly with students in my own institution. Last week we had an awards ceremony for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who had been given large scholarships, and I talked to one of them. She had come from a difficult educational background and I said, “How are you finding the course?” She had been in for one term. She said, “It’s an awful lot more than I thought and it is making me think an awful lot more than I expected”. I said, “Is that a problem?” and she said, “No, it’s great!”. I think that is something we must not lose sight of. One of the things that universities provide is a stimulus to young people, and to older people coming into higher education, to think in imaginative and different ways. I think that is what they want.

**Q4 Chairman:** Do you think, Professor Crossick, that if the student body as a whole were actually listening to this first piece of evidence from four very distinguished leaders of university groups, they would say that that bears a real relationship to what they are feeling on the campuses? You paint a picture between you of a perfect world, where every university is wonderful and all the students are happy. For instance, in terms of involving students in the life of the university rather than in the life of

the bar, what is actually happening as far as your group are concerned? Are there any real examples of that? It is not a real world you are talking about.

**Professor Crossick:** Your question was about what we believed students wanted, not what they were necessarily being given. Of course, the world is not perfect. If you had asked us where there were tensions, we could talk about some of the problems—and doubtless we will get the opportunity to in the course of this meeting—and to talk about some of the ways in which universities find it a challenge to deliver exactly what they want in current circumstances. I think that we are broadly succeeding and I think that the National Student Survey shows that. This is students on their own, with a huge response rate. Well over 80 per cent are satisfied with their education by the time they are third-years.

**Q5 Chairman:** They do not know anything else. They have nothing to compare it with, most of them, have they?

**Professor Crossick:** Most of them have been at school or college beforehand. One of the challenges that universities have risen to in the last few years is students coming on to university from an education environment which often was better resourced and more imaginatively resourced in IT terms and so on. We have risen to that challenge. Yes, of course they do not know other universities; but, as I think Professor Grant said, we get a much higher satisfaction rating than most other public services. People do not know other medical services either.

**Q6 Chairman:** Professor Trainor, why do not all universities publish how much time they will have in lectures; who will be the academic staff who are teaching them; the resources that are available to them, to give them the sorts of criteria by which they can judge between different universities, if you like, and also to evaluate the experience they have? None of that is made clear at all and I would have thought that would have been a key element of offering students a good experience—or am I being unfair?

**Professor Trainor:** Slightly, I think, in that there is a lot of information in the public domain. Universities, through their prospectuses and supplementary material, increasingly available on the web, tell students quite a lot about the kind of experience they will have on a particular course in the university. The students do not have to take the word of the institution for it, because they can now cross-refer to the publicly available information from the neutral source that is the National Student Survey. You may be correct, if I have your assumption correct, that even more information might be a good thing; but students are accumulating impressions of universities, which often matter more, by open days and visits of other kinds. In fact, students are very active consumers, with quite a lot of information. That, of course, is how they choose among the offers they get, in the many situations where they have multiple offers to choose from.

**Q7 Chairman:** With the greatest of respect, there are very few universities that advertise how little contact time students will actually have when they go to a particular university with academic staff. Very few seem to advertise the fact that, despite there may be great research departments, they will never actively meet some of those research-excellent professors. Why are they not doing that?

**Professor Trainor:** Evidence from the National Union of Students suggests that something like three-quarters of students are satisfied with the contact hours they receive. I think that this whole subject of contact hours is slightly misunderstood. The number of contact hours in the formal sense that are appropriate for different courses varies quite a lot. Even within a particular subject the teaching may be organised in different ways. Universities in recent years have put increasing emphasis on making their staff available at advertised times, above and beyond the contact hours, and many departments have an open-door policy. As for the access of research stars, certainly in my institution—King's College, London—the overwhelming majority of our academic staff do some significant undergraduate teaching; and I think that, roughly speaking, is the pattern across the country.

**Q8 Mr Marsden:** Professor Trainor, one of the aspects of student satisfaction is the balance of the time that they spend, as you have just touched on, between teaching and research and the ability of the one to feed into the other. Do you think the Government should accept the broad conclusions and the implications of grant distribution in the recent Research Assessment Exercise?

**Professor Trainor:** That is a slightly different issue, is it not?

**Q9 Mr Marsden:** It is not that different an issue, because the implications of the RAE proposals are to even out research money between a larger number of universities, and therefore that may have an impact on the student experience.

**Professor Trainor:** Indeed, but even under the current distribution of research money an effort is made in all universities to get research brought to bear on research and scholarship, of course is a related resource for the academics or the teachers.<sup>1</sup>

**Q10 Mr Marsden:** How would you define the difference between research and scholarship?

**Professor Trainor:** Research is original inquiry; scholarship is information about a discipline at the highest level of available knowledge, I suppose.

**Q11 Mr Marsden:** So from that point of view those universities who do more of the second than the first should still be given a decent share of the pot under that definition, should they?

**Professor Trainor:** The position of Universities UK is that excellence should be funded where it is found. We also think it is necessary to look at the stability of

funding from one year to another; but your original question, as I took it, was about the balance of time between teaching and research.

**Q12 Mr Marsden:** It was a dual question, to which I would like a dual answer.

**Professor Trainor:** I have given one half of it, I think. Would you like me to go on to the other?

**Q13 Mr Marsden:** I would like you to tell me what your view or what the view of UUK is on the proposals in the RAE.

**Professor Trainor:** I think I have given that in broad outline.

**Q14 Chairman:** What we are anxious to get at here is that you from Universities UK say—and indeed, Professor Crossick, your organisation has made the same point—that teaching and research are essential, and good-quality research is essential for good teaching in terms of the student experience. What we are anxious to find out—and certainly what I think Gordon Marsden is anxious to find out—is do you stick by that? Is that absolutely clear? Because there is then another question coming behind it.

**Professor Grant:** May I make two points on that? First of all, the interrelationship between teaching and research goes right back to the Humboldtian idea of a university as one of the fundamental pillars upon which a modern university should be constructed. Secondly, in the research-intensive end of the university sector we very strongly take the view that the finest teaching is informed by research. I think we also need to build onto that an understanding that a large proportion of what happens in those universities is at postgraduate level. I know that this is not part of this inquiry, Chairman, but in the Russell Group 30 per cent of our students are postgraduates; in a number of our institutions it is rising to parity with undergraduates. There is, if you like, a cross-institutional array of research and integration to teaching, to training and to PhD study. Thirdly, so far as the RAE is concerned, there are two phases to the exercise. First, an assessment by panels of the quality of research across 67 units of assessment in the country. The second phase is not yet complete. It is the allocation of funding against the findings of quality. That came last week to the board of HEFCE. There was a letter from the secretary of state outlining the nation's strategic needs for the allocation of QR. HEFCE have now adopted and approved a paper, which will accord with the secretary of state's strategic views. That paper, I understand, will be published today. The next phase of it will be—

**Q15 Chairman:** I am really not anxious to get into this.

**Professor Grant:** No, but I wanted to explain to you where we were currently with the RAE.

<sup>1</sup> *Note from the witness:* What I meant was that all universities attempt to use research and scholarship to enrich teaching.

**Q16 Chairman:** We just do not have the time during this session. I am really interested in this core issue and then I have to move on, I am afraid.

**Professor Ebdon:** Perhaps I could help with a response on this. Clearly, the Research Assessment Exercise has been declared a robust exercise by the Chief Executive of the Higher Education Funding Council for England. I think that it is absolutely right that it has looked very carefully, in a very robust way, and has found excellence much more widely spread than in previous years. We should be celebrating that and we should be funding that.

**Chairman:** Professor Ebdon, that is not the point that we are trying to get at.

**Q17 Mr Marsden:** Can I come back to you on that, Professor Grant, because you have rightly reminded us of the role not just of the Russell Group but of other universities in terms of postgraduate—but we are not looking at that in this inquiry. There is an essential question here, is there not? If I am a student at whatever sort of university grouping, one of the things that I want to know is that part of my teaching experience will encompass some of the top experts in the field, and you have acknowledged that point. The point about the Research Assessment Exercise, as it has certainly up until now been carried through, is that there have been widespread allegations—“allegations” is perhaps too strong a word—widespread suggestions that, because of the emphasis on where people rank in it, in some universities—and I will not name individual ones—there has been a transfer fee culture whereby people have been poached for their research abilities, and most of the students there never see hide nor hair of the academic in question, certainly not on a regular basis. That is an issue, is it not?

**Professor Grant:** There are two questions. One is the poaching one, which I will not go into because I do not think that it relates to this inquiry. The second one is quite a serious issue. We are trying in British universities to spread resources thinly across a variety of measures of excellence. We need of course to ensure that we return strong performances on the RAE; so it is necessary that we provide sufficient time, resources and facilities for our leading researchers to perform strongly in the research. We punch way above our weight internationally in research output. The consequence, however, is not as bleak as you paint it. The consequence is not an inevitability that that is time taken away from teaching. I think that all of my colleague vice-chancellors would be able to point you to instances where we insist upon world-class research stars undertaking teaching across the institution. However, world-class research stars will not be spending hours in one-to-one supervisions with individual students.

**Q18 Mr Marsden:** Nobody does except at Oxbridge, on the whole.

**Professor Grant:** And not there either. You have to understand that we are struggling with limited resources to do our very best on all fronts. The students are not the victims of this; the students are the beneficiaries of it.

**Q19 Chairman:** We really have to move on, but one final point, Professor Crossick.

**Professor Crossick:** My final point is this. We have already made the point about the benefits of students learning in a strong research environment. The point I would want to add to that is that if you look at—

**Q20 Chairman:** Perhaps you would just tell me where the evidence is that that occurs.

**Professor Crossick:** There are two types of evidence. One of them is, talk to students from research-strong departments in research-strong universities and you will see what their experience is. I do talk to them. I think that all the people on the panel do. Secondly, the really strong evidence is the National Student Survey. The National Student Survey's ranking of institutions does not suggest that there is any tension between being a research-strong institution and being a teaching-strong institution, from the students' point of view.

**Q21 Chairman:** Professor Crossick, your evidence and indeed that of Professor Grant is that if you have strong research in the university, that impacts positively on the teaching. Is that agreed?

**Professor Crossick:** Yes.

**Q22 Chairman:** Therefore, the spreading of research across all universities in order that we improve the access to research across all universities will improve teaching—yes or no?

**Professor Crossick:** It is essential that—

**Q23 Chairman:** Yes or no?

**Professor Crossick:** I am not going to give you a yes/no answer, because in fact this Committee has a broad concern for the whole of the quality of what universities deliver.

**Q24 Chairman:** Absolutely.

**Professor Crossick:** It is therefore false to try and ask in this inquiry, “Do you think it is teaching that should benefit, and in another should it be research?”. As Professor Grant said, we are responsible for managing the breadth of what we have to deliver to the taxpayer and to the public for the resources that we receive. That is research and teaching. I believe that in a research-strong institution students graduate with a very distinctive portfolio of skills and understanding and that, across the sector, there are a diverse range of ways in which that contribution to society and the economy is made. It is different in some institutions from others.

**Q25 Chairman:** Therefore, in those universities that are not research-intensive the teaching will not be as good.

**Professor Crossick:** It will be different.

**Q26 Dr Gibson:** You have not said anything about administration either. I seem to remember that, and it was one reason I got fed up. You have to do lots of other things, not just manage a whole department necessarily or your own lab. There came a time when people put up on the door, “Will see students only between 2 and 3”. I remember that coming when there was a student increase, which meant that more and more time was taken away from actual contact with students, because they had one other activity called “administration”. I am sure you would agree that all academics now have much more administration, which is necessary for the running of all the institutions.

**Professor Ebdon:** You said in opening that you wanted to look at this from a student perspective. I think that you are absolutely right: the student should be entitled, whichever university they are in, to have research-led teaching. All UK universities have signed up to the Bologna Declaration, which emphasises that all universities should be engaged in teaching, research and knowledge transfer; so I think that you are absolutely right.

**Q27 Dr Harris:** I am going to ask you about admissions policies and I will separate it out into two distinct issues. First, people presenting to the highly selective universities, all of whom have predictions or have three As; then I will ask you separately about where there is a differentiation in A-levels and what can be done to capture potential, versus simply academic attainment. Starting with the first, can you give reflections on how we do solve the problem of trying to select one out of five students for your course, when they all have or are reliably predicted to get three As? If you have a solution which is shown to work—and I would like to know if it has been shown to work in a fair way—how do we get consistency across the sector? Because if it is right for one university to do it and that is good practice, can we tolerate other universities not doing it?

**Professor Grant:** Can I start with that, Chairman, because I think the question was directed to the more selective end of the sector. Admissions is an area that worries us enormously, because there is a large amount of public interest in them, and it is generated of course by the press, because there is a feeling of injustice and unfairness if students are denied admission to a leading university. However, let me put it into context. First, in many of our courses the ratio of applications to places is more like 20 to one. In some of those highly specialised areas, selection is rather more easily undertaken because it depends upon a survey of an array of skills. For example, a student who is coming to do architecture, fine art or medicine will be examined on a different set of skills than they will be for other subjects. Secondly, within our institutions the A-level expectations do vary between disciplines. Thirdly, the historic approach to admissions has been to give a large measure of discretion and autonomy to well-trained admissions tutors and to academic staff who assist. Fourthly,

there is quite a variety, though, within the sector between the extent to which interviews are offered as part of an admissions process and the extent to which they are not. One of the reasons for that is that you have a relatively small handful of universities which are almost always the first choice of applicants and therefore have a strong incentive to interview. If you are the second or third choice for applicants you cannot possibly interview all those who come through. Otherwise, you would be wasting a great deal of time. Finally, we are presented with a problem at the very highest levels because of the fine degrees of distinction between quite outstanding students who present with these strong A-levels. We are conscious always of the need also to find talent which may not be represented in A-level results. Here we come to the tension which is inherent in the second part of your question. There is sometimes an expectation that A-levels should be the sole measure; that it is unfair for a university to take a student who has two As and one B over a student who has three As; whereas the wise admissions tutor will be exploring more the background of the student and trying to get a sense of two things. One is their potential, which is not reflected in A-levels; the other is their prior attainment and their aptitude for the particular programme for which they present. Given all of that, to try to get some objective measure of consistency across the sector is quite difficult. We need to understand that students do have a wide choice of universities that they can apply for, and that being rejected by university A is not necessarily the end of a line; there are other universities.

**Q28 Chairman:** What is the solution? You are telling us the problem.

**Professor Grant:** What is the problem?

**Q29 Dr Harris:** I have already asked that question, that it is difficult to select, with the confidence of being fair from the university’s perspective and the perspective of applicants, from lots of people with three As. I will come separately to the issue of identifying whether you can give a different approach, differential offers; but when three As is the offer generally and that the rare candidate with two As and a B, I accept, might exist, what are you doing to ensure that what you are trying works? Because interviews are controversial. Some would argue that they do go behind mere attainment or attainment that could be three scraped As or three brilliant As or A stars. How do you test that? What have you done? What work is going on to work out what is the best way of doing it?

**Professor Grant:** The answer is not a simple one. Because, for the reasons that I gave in my earlier answer, there is a huge difference within our institutions, let alone between our institutions. We have some disciplines in my own university where we are turning down up to 1,000 students with three As at A-level in one department every year. That is the degree of competition. With those it is quite difficult. You can do a correlation between A-level

performance and ultimate degree performance, but it does not tell you a great deal because the sample is so small.

**Q30 Dr Harris:** They are all getting As as well. That is the point. Have you tried to identify any factor that is predictive from among all these people, all with predictions and getting three As?

**Professor Grant:** The second part of the question is again that it varies from discipline to discipline. In some disciplines it is not necessary to have a high level of prior attainment; in others, like chemistry or physics or mathematics, it is. You therefore need to measure strengths in particular disciplines as opposed to a broad-brush grouping of A-levels.

**Chairman:** Can we get another response? Professor Ebdon, from your point of view . . . ?

**Dr Harris:** In fairness to Professor Ebdon, I do not know how many applications you get from people with three As. I have a separate set of questions for you in respect of the second part.

**Q31 Chairman:** I am just anxious to get a different view to Professor Grant's and the Russell Group, that is all; so perhaps, Professor Trainor, from the broader aspect?

**Professor Trainor:** I think one point is that, although as Professor Grant says there are particular courses and particular universities that are heavily oversubscribed with people with three As, the percentage of people coming out of school who do have three As is a small minority of the total. It is growing, but it is still a minority. I am not saying this is a trivial problem, but the second part of the agenda that Dr Harris pointed out is actually, in quantitative terms, much the greater one.

**Q32 Dr Harris:** I agree. I just wanted to get that out of the way. Let me come to that, if I may. What can be done to ensure that we do not simply look at attainment in terms of letting people in but we look more closely at potential? There is a huge gap in attainment based on socio-economic group—massive. I do not believe, and I do not think the evidence suggests, that there is a gap in intelligence that matches the gap in attainment; and I understand the potential factors in intelligence as well as attainment, if I can use those broad terms. What is your solution to not relying strictly on attainment, i.e. predicted A-level scores or GCSE scores?

**Professor Trainor:** There is no single solution, is there? One thing we need to keep in mind on this is that, although it is very important that students get into the appropriate course, even more important is that they get into higher education—full stop. Widening participation is therefore the most urgent agenda. The question of where they end up, which particular university, though not a trivial question, is of secondary importance. On that important second issue, however, the most important thing is for universities to have the flexibility to take into account a variety of different kinds of indicators. Professor Grant was putting that forward with

regard to people at the top end. Often there are a lot of pressures on universities, not least from the press, to be rather mechanistic in their approach to A-level scores; whereas in practice I think that every university in the land is trying to look at the total circumstances. In so far as we can get information from school reports, from evidence of what people have done in access programmes, in some cases in foundation years, in some instances—though it is very difficult in a large education system—from interviews, then those are taken into account. A great deal of effort goes on in universities and in the departments to try to balance up those factors.

**Q33 Dr Harris:** Why should each university have to invent the wheel here? If it is appropriate in the North East to say to someone from a very poor educational background that the offer made to them is going to be, say, five UCAS points lower than someone from a private school—and that works and it is shown that those two people get the same results overall on average—why should that not be the case for all universities? Because universities that do not do that, or do not do that as much, are clearly being in effect discriminatory in requiring the same UCAS score from people from vastly different educational backgrounds and therefore vastly different potential.

**Professor Trainor:** That would be a uniform, mechanistic system. It would risk trading one form of inflexibility for another. What we are trying to get, at the level of the applicant, is to assess their potential, not to create a simple sorting out of people according to their educational background.

**Q34 Dr Harris:** It is mechanistic to say equal pay for equal work of equal value. That is mechanistic. It is a requirement laid upon all universities, because although it is mechanistic the outcome is fair and it is shown that that is right—academically speaking, intellectually. Even though it is mechanistic and does not allow individual universities to do individual things, if it has been shown to be fair overall—and this is the biggest challenge, part of that is this issue as well as school performance—then should not all universities be doing it and be required to do it?

**Professor Trainor:** Your analogy, equal pay for equal value, is a very good principle. Applying that to particular circumstances, I am sure all institutions find, is often a complex matter. The principle all universities would adhere to is that we are trying to get the students with the potential to be able successfully to complete the course and to get the most benefit from it and contribute to it. My scepticism is that any single formula will attain that objective, given the huge variety of courses and circumstances of students that present themselves to us, not least in terms of age. Professor Ebdon pointed out earlier that a huge percentage of his students are coming not from the school population but from elsewhere. I do not think any single formula will—

**Chairman:** I am sorry, I am going to have to stop you there. I want to bring Gordon in here with the FE<sup>2</sup> links.

**Q35 Mr Marsden:** Professor Crossick, we know that—there is ample evidence for it—the future structure of higher education will be much more variegated; people will be coming in and out of higher education and that many of those people, far more than in the past, will be coming potentially from an FE background or from other backgrounds. You are the Warden of a college that sits on the edge of inner and outer London. What are you doing at Goldsmiths to make those links and those connections with FE colleges? What are members of the 1994 Group doing? What do you think, more broadly, some of the other groups represented here today should be doing?

**Professor Crossick:** I will answer on behalf of Goldsmiths because I know that best and indeed you have asked the question about Goldsmiths, though obviously I am really here on behalf of the 1994 Group. Goldsmiths is an interesting example because, as you have said, we are very much an inner city, research-strong university, which gives us some distinction within the 1994 Group, though there are of course others as well, like Queen Mary. In terms of FE colleges, recognising entirely what you are saying, one of the things that we are particularly proud of at Goldsmiths is our success in bringing in students who often are having a second chance at education. They are coming in their twenties. They are not in their thirties and forties, though some are; but students who have returned to education, possibly through FE colleges; others who are coming to us directly from FE colleges at the normal progression age. We have significant relationships with the principal FE college in our area. At Lewisham College we have progression agreements and we have access agreements with them; but we are building relationships with other FE colleges and, through Lifelong Learning networks in particular, we have some quite exciting relationships, which at the moment are working. I think that Lifelong Learning networks have proved a successful way of linking FE colleges to universities in precise areas of work. Is there more that we would like to be doing? Yes. We would like to develop that further, but I think that we are doing a lot at the moment. I would not dare to give advice to other universities outside the 1994 Group because, as we have tried to be pressing in our evidence today, the diversity of the UK higher education system is not one of its problems; it is one of its great successes.

**Q36 Mr Marsden:** That is a nice mantra and I appreciate the point. Could I ask you a very specific question then? In all this hive of activity that you are describing, both at Goldsmiths and the 1994 Group, what has the impact been on your figures for admissions?

**Professor Crossick:** What do you mean by “figures”? Figures for what?

**Q37 Mr Marsden:** In terms of admitting people from non-traditional school entry backgrounds.

**Professor Crossick:** From Goldsmiths’ perspective, our record on that is pretty strong. It is strong amongst universities of Goldsmiths’ kind. It is strong partly because of our location; strong because of our links; but also strong because of our subject mix. We recruit a lot of students into creative, performing arts subjects and the cultural subjects.

**Q38 Mr Marsden:** The statistics will bear that out, will they?

**Professor Crossick:** I do not have the statistics in front of me.

**Professor Ebdon:** The statistics show that 48 per cent of university admissions come from colleges. Obviously in a university like mine, and most Million+ subscribing universities, the vast majority of students come from further education college backgrounds. Most of us have strategic planning with colleges. For example, in Bedfordshire we have the Bedfordshire Federation of Further and Higher Education, which seeks strategically to plan the progression of students. We have a range of foundation degrees, as do many Million+ universities, which are delivered in further education colleges; university degrees delivered in further education colleges with the idea of promoting progression into university.

**Q39 Mr Marsden:** Professor Grant, I will ask you to comment briefly on this issue but can I also say that there is an elephant in the room here? We are all talking about the fairness of the access process on the people who apply, but one of the big issues of course is the people who do not apply. While I am aware of the fact that the Russell Group and indeed other university groups have done a significant amount of work with summer schools and everything else, the Sutton Trust and various other bodies show that you—I do not mean you particularly but universities in general—have to be far more proactive, going out there and identifying students at the age of 12 and 13 in schools that do not traditionally send people to the sorts of universities that you represent. What are you doing about that?

**Professor Grant:** The question is an absolutely valid one. Indeed, the work that we are doing—you will have seen a briefing on it and we can send further briefing—is extensive. However, it does not lead necessarily to applications to Russell Group universities. Other work that we do in liaison with schools and in liaison with colleges of further education often leads to students raising their aspirations to go to university, not necessarily to us. The elephant in the room is one that we completely accept. We cannot admit to Russell Group universities people who have not applied. We need to work on raising aspirations, but in a very complex landscape. If you look at the way in which educational opportunities develop across the broad

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<sup>2</sup> Further education

socio-economic strata, you see that those in the lower socio-economic strata are not having their aspirations or their educational attainments raised at a sufficiently early level to get them into a schooling that will fit them to come to a research-intensive university. We work with schools, with teachers, with students, to try to raise aspirations and attainment. Some of us are in partnership with schools; some of us are proposing to sponsor city academies, to try and put university input back into this all-important part of education. You cannot solve decades of socio-economic inequality in this country by simply widening the gates of admissions to universities. This is a problem that we all own and we, I can assure you, are dead serious about how we should approach it.

**Q40 Dr Iddon:** I want to turn now to some questions on quality and standards. I have to tell you, gentlemen, that we have had some critical comments made about the Quality Assurance Agency. I think we could summarise it by saying that the comments point to the fact that the QAA is only interested in process and that it lacks independence and teeth. Indeed, the QAA itself says that it does not judge standards. How on earth are we to get consistency in quality and standards across the university sector, all of it, when we are getting comments like we have had in this inquiry? Is it not time that we review the QAA itself and ask the question: is it doing its job and should we be replacing it with a new body that does have teeth and does measure consistency across the sector?

**Professor Trainor:** This is a very important subject and one that all universities in the UK are very concerned about. We have a really strong stake in maintaining our standards, our good processes, and our reputation for having them. That matters to a significant degree, of course, in terms of our ability to retain interest from students applying from around the world, but it is also a crucial bit of our responsibility to our home students. I would query the assumption that the QAA lacks teeth. Any institution coming up to a periodic institutional audit—mine happens to be preparing for one and we will be putting in our self-assessment in two or three months' time and be having the visits in the autumn—I can assure you does not think that the QAA lacks teeth. We also see it as having a great deal of independence. Whatever the intricacies of the funding mechanism, it is a body that is, and quite rightly so, above any ability of an individual institution to influence what is going on. Also, I think that we need to keep in mind that it is not just the QAA which is looking after the question of standards and processes in UK higher education. In a sense, they are policing the whole system but each institution also is policing itself; so it is a combination of the two. An individual institution, just like the system as a whole, has a really strong interest in upholding its standards. We therefore have systems of periodic review of our programmes and, crucially, we have the external examiner system. I know that there has been a lot of criticism of that over the last six months or so. I think that it is unjustified. The external examiner system is a jewel in the crown of UK quality maintenance. It is

something that in my native country, the USA, is unknown, except in the rarefied reaches of PhD examinations. We have a double system, double insurance, in the UK of internal scrutiny and external scrutiny, and the two join together in the external examiner system. I agree with you that we need to be looking at this in a critical way. That is one reason why Universities UK took an initiative last summer to tighten its input, or rather its receiving information from the QAA, about any general problems detected in the system; and of course the QAA, as I understand it, is looking critically at the way it is organised itself.

**Q41 Dr Iddon:** Can I stay with Professor Trainor and pose another question to you? In your evidence you say that “the level of understanding required between different universities is broadly equivalent”. What evidence do you have to back up that statement so that everybody involved in the sector—from students and potential students, the taxpayer of course, across to the employer—knows that when they are getting a First from one university it is equivalent to a First from another university? Anecdotally, I have to tell you that people come to me all the time and say, “A First from that university is certainly not equivalent to a First from the other university”. I do not want to name any, obviously. Why are we getting those comments?

**Professor Trainor:** I think the statement that you quoted, Dr Iddon, was “broadly equivalent”. Universities differ in all kinds of ways, as you know. It is not simply a question of levels of perceived excellence; there is a tremendous difference in the balance of kinds of courses and the kinds of learning objectives that different universities—

**Q42 Chairman:** Can you concentrate on Dr Iddon's question? You have said that it was “broadly equivalent” and we are questioning the validity of that statement.

**Professor Trainor:** Yes, I was coming to that. I agree; that is a very important point. There has been a lot of talk and publicity on this in the last six months or so, about degree classification, and so on. It is important to note that the patterns of degree classification have not changed all that much over the last ten years—only a six per cent rise in the percentage of Firsts and 2.1s. However, getting to your point of comparison among universities, there is a significant difference among universities in the extent to which they give Firsts and 2.1s.<sup>3</sup> We are not saying that a First in ancient history from Poppleton is exactly the same thing as a First in tourism management from

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<sup>3</sup> *Note from the witness:* What it was regarding to here is that, overall, universities which admit undergraduates with relatively high average entry credentials tend to give a higher proportion of firsts and 2.1's than do those institutions which admit undergraduates with relatively lower average entry credentials. Although this is a complex topic, the pattern provides indirect supporting evidence for my contention that there is a broad equivalence of degree standards across the diverse universities of the UK.



Poppleton Metropolitan; what we are saying is that, roughly, both are upholding the standards that fulfil the purposes of their courses.<sup>4</sup>

**Q43 Dr Iddon:** Perhaps I could come back to the criticisms of the QAA and ask the other three panel members to comment on the first question that I posed to you, Professor Trainor.

**Professor Grant:** The issue of the QAA is that this is an organisation that primarily looks at processes and institutional structures, to try to ensure that these are well-run institutions, to try to ensure that what they do is dedicated to improving and enhancing the quality of teaching and that there is consistency in examining. However, we should not confuse that mission with providing us with a basis for an accurate comparison of a First from Uttoxeter and a First from Oxford. That is not its job. It does not do that; it cannot secure that. It is absolutely fundamental to understanding the diversity of the nature of our institutions to realise that that comparison is too simplistic. The only way you will ever get there, as far as I can see, is by prescribing a national curriculum and having national examinations—which can kiss goodbye to the diversity and the dynamism of British higher education.

**Q44 Dr Iddon:** Or we could abandon the classification system altogether and measure the students' ability in some other way, like a percentage mark.

**Professor Crossick:** I agree entirely with what Professor Grant has said and I do not think that the QAA is the answer to this. However, Dr Iddon's point is a very important one. It may be that we are pursuing the wrong target in trying to unravel precisely what a First means here and what a First means there, as if, if we got that right, that would provide all the information that those who want the answers to the question would need. I think—this is a personal view, not the position of the 1994 Group but I know that a lot of the 1994 Group institutions agree with this—we ought to be moving to something like the higher education achievement report, which Professor Burgess's group is working on, in which we actually provide as the outcome of a student's time at university a much broader picture of their achievement in a whole range of ways while at university. Not least how they did on different courses and different programmes but also lots of other activities, so that employers and other public interests, potential users of that student's skills, can see the breadth of it. A First or a 2.1 does not really tell us very much. Some would like to keep that; some would like to see that replaced; but I think that most of us agree that something much broader, of the kind you have described, is what is needed.

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<sup>4</sup> *Note from the witness:* I would like to clarify that this last sentence was in response to Dr Iddon's earlier question [Q41] regarding my written evidence that "The level of understanding required between different universities is broadly equivalent". The context—a discussion about quality and the evidence for there being broad equivalence of standards across the sector—has become unclear. Confusion became apparent in the subsequent media reportage of my oral evidence.

**Professor Ebdon:** To underline that, I think that you are quite right in suggesting that the classification system is outmoded. It always used to strike me as a chemist that I would be telling my students not to average the unaverageable, and then I would walk into an examination board and do exactly that! As a chemist, I know very well that some people have very strong practical skills; others are stronger theoretically. I would like to be able to identify that, and I think that the higher education achievement record will enable us to do that. I am therefore strongly in favour of that. Can I also say about the QAA that the key thing about UK universities is that they are self-regulating, and I do not think that this Committee should have concerns that that self-regulation has broken down. The role of the QAA is to make sure that self-regulation is working properly. Self-regulating systems are always better than policed systems, particularly when you are dealing with highly intelligent people, because they will find a way round any policed system; but ask people to self-regulate and you will get a much better form of regulation.

**Q45 Dr Gibson:** Would it concentrate the mind if we looked every ten years or so at a university's right to award degrees? They are given the right to award degrees and it is a job for life, as it were. Is that something that you might welcome? Yes or no would do.

**Professor Trainor:** No.

**Professor Grant:** No.

**Professor Ebdon:** No.

**Professor Crossick:** No.

**Q46 Chairman:** The speed at which you answered that has been noted!

**Professor Trainor:** There are such systems, as Dr Gibson will know, in use elsewhere in the world. I do not think that they have any more teeth than the institutional audit system that we have here because *de facto*, periodically, getting a good result from the institutional audit is prerequisite for the university carrying on with its reputation in good order. Even if it were allowed to continue in some form, without the confidence of the QAA's institutional audit it would be gravely weakened.

**Q47 Dr Gibson:** When it comes to the student time that is spent, HEPI, a very august body of whom you will have heard, have done a very fulsome study of the time that students spend. I come from a background where scientists spent more time doing a piece of work than the art students, who were in the Students' Union passing resolutions and becoming politicians, and all that kind of stuff. Thank goodness! We could never get the scientists interested. When you look at biological sciences, I can give you quotes from HEPI that show you that in one place a student will do 18 hours a week and in another they will do 35 hours a week. Does that worry you at all? You kind of answered it earlier, but does it worry you that students can see or hear from the grapevine that you can get a

degree for less time spent on it and that you can do other things? Nowadays you have to get a job, of course. You can do a real job as well as be a student.

**Professor Ebdon:** The key thing that a lecturer does is to motivate students, and to motivate students to work. Therefore, the broad figures do not worry me because they do not actually go down to the complexity of how we do things. You will be pleased to know, Ian, that at the University of Bedfordshire we have recently completely restyled the way in which we teach business. I have told them that they have discovered practical work, which scientists knew years ago. We teach them in a simulated business environment.

**Q48 Dr Gibson:** At least they have to spend a certain amount of time. If you are a football coach you know you have to take people for a certain number of hours. Why not with students? That there is a set number of hours that you can agree with each other that they need to do?

**Professor Ebdon:** Footballers volunteer for extra training when they think they need it as well. The point I am making is that if you are motivated to break into the first team, then you will be motivated to work hard.

**Professor Crossick:** There is an assumption that the learning goes on only when a student is in the presence of an academic, and the ways in which university education has been transformed in recent years has meant that is not the case. In all our institutions, students do an awful lot of learning, not on their own but in groups together, doing group projects and working together. I think that contact hours, while it has some relevance and importance, actually is a chimera.

**Chairman:** Can I stop you here, Professor Crossick, because the question that Dr Gibson asked was about the HEPI study, which did not just look at contact hours but it looked at everything involved.

**Q49 Dr Gibson:** Are you saying it is a bunch of bilge?

**Professor Crossick:** I would never dream of saying that what Bahram Bekhradnia has done is a bunch of bilge. Of course not. What I would say about it is that it takes contact hours as a proxy for the quality of an education in a way that I do not think is correct.

**Q50 Dr Gibson:** So it is not a measure that you would consider at all?

**Professor Crossick:** On its own, no.

**Q51 Dr Gibson:** Others would agree with that, presumably?

**Professor Grant:** Yes, I think you also have to distinguish between disciplines. Amongst contact hours will be some of the physical sciences, medicine and veterinary sciences, where you would have laboratory sessions, which would of course increase the volume of contact hours; whereas in arts and humanities the tradition has been much more one of lone scholarship.

**Q52 Dr Harris:** This study was for the same subject, like for like, and they were two similar universities. The figures we have are 18 hours and 26 hours.

**Professor Crossick:** What one has to ask then, as I said, is to look at the totality of the ways in which those students are learning in that subject at that university. We can impose the same structure of learning, the same curriculum, in every university—

**Q53 Dr Gibson:** Each university is happy with that situation. Who is going to compare them and say, “At the University of Bedfordshire you have to do 36 hours but at King’s College you only have to do 18”? Not because you are brighter or whatever but because of less hours—

**Professor Crossick:** Why does that comparison need to be . . . ? No, not done in less hours of contact. I have tried to suggest that there is so much more than just contact.

**Q54 Dr Gibson:** So they are writing essays, all the other time?

**Professor Crossick:** No. Mr Marsden is a passionate supporter of history in universities; he knows how much time history students spend in libraries, doing work.

**Chairman:** Could you use the actual figures that we have in a particular subject?

**Q55 Dr Gibson:** Yes. In biological sciences, students at Goldsmiths get 18.7 hours per week, while those at UCL do 26.1.

**Professor Crossick:** I have to say that we do not have a degree in biological sciences or a department of biological sciences at Goldsmiths<sup>5</sup>. This is referring to something else.

**Q56 Dr Harris:** But apart from that?

**Professor Crossick:** Apart from that, this sounds like—

**Q57 Dr Gibson:** They have got it wrong again, have they?

**Professor Crossick:** I do not know what was being referred to there, but we do not do biological sciences at Goldsmiths.

**Q58 Dr Harris:** Is there any data that would worry you on any of the questions we are asking? Because every time we have asked a question you have said, “Everything is fine. Universities are doing their best. Each university is doing its own thing in its own way and we don’t see anything we are doing is wrong”.

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<sup>5</sup> Note from the Witness: Although Goldsmiths has no department of biological sciences nor degree programmes in the biological sciences, which was the basis of my response, it turned out subsequently that Dr Gibson was citing the Higher Education Statistics Agency subject category of that title, in which psychology is included. Goldsmiths does have a department of psychology, which explains the misunderstanding. Psychology is funded at a significantly lower level than the other subjects in the biological sciences category, in recognition of the lower teaching needs to a subject that is only partially laboratory based.

**Professor Ebdon:** The data that worries me most is not the data that you expressed earlier about the 2,000 to 3,000 students with good A-level results who may end up with a different university than the one they first aspired to go to, but the 100,000 students a year who come into the UCAS system, who are qualified to go to university and do not go to university. That worries me. I think that we have presented ourselves in a complex way. People find it difficult to penetrate into universities; we are not sufficiently open and welcoming to them. I think that we have recognised that and we are trying to do a number of things; in particular, the extra energy that we are now putting into links with schools and colleges is important and overdue.

**Q59 Dr Gibson:** Do you think academics are trained sufficiently in how to mark a final exam paper?

**Professor Trainor:** There is a lot more training of academics in all the skills of the teaching role than there was a generation ago.

**Q60 Dr Gibson:** Could you tell the difference between a 68 per cent and a 70 per cent, given that you never give anybody 100 per cent that I know of? You might in mathematics or something where there is no other answer. I think that I once awarded somebody 100 per cent and I always suspected that he had read the proceedings of the National Academy the week before and had got the answer! Mostly you know, you are taught, or it just happens and you do not go above 75 per cent. Is that true?

**Professor Trainor:** External examiners and individual universities are always trying to encourage people to use the full range of—

**Q61 Dr Gibson:** Let us talk about external examiners. They come in on a Sunday; they go away on the Tuesday or Wednesday, whatever, and in some universities they may last longer. They do not read every paper for a start; some of them conduct interviews with students and invariably the classification from the paper mark goes up after they have met the student. They say, “Actually I think they are first-class”. “Would you like to do a PhD with me?” I have heard said occasionally. All these things go on in that kind of environment. Do you recognise that?

**Professor Trainor:** I do not really. There may be an occasional abuse, I do not know. In my time of teaching in universities I never knew of a case of an individual student meeting an external examiner before the result was finalised. However, my point would be that it is not just external examiners; there is a huge amount of double-marking that goes on and then the usual practice is for borderline candidates to go to external examiners; and I think it is entirely appropriate. We also have to keep in mind that, for the last 20 years or so, external examiners have been used by universities to look at the overall programmes, to comment on changes to the curriculum as well as to monitor the overall rates of attainment.

**Q62 Dr Gibson:** You do not think that the external examiner system is an old boy/old girl network? I have been an external examiner. “I’ll do yours if you do mine”—and you got 50 quid for it in my day.

**Professor Trainor:** You are very poorly paid. It is a labour of love. People do it to uphold the standards of the system. The external examiner is a very powerful figure in UK higher education. I think that we do a discredit to the country’s higher education system if we ignore that.

**Q63 Dr Gibson:** Why do we not have a register of externals and a price?

**Professor Trainor:** We have a system of training external examiners, which is attaining the same objective by a different route.

**Chairman:** It would have been wonderful just to hear that there was some slight flaw in the higher education system this morning. It is quite remarkable. I want to try to leave the last word to my colleague Ian Stewart on one area that you might feel is flawed.

**Q64 Ian Stewart:** Before I ask the questions, Chairman, I have to declare an interest, in that I am registered currently at Manchester University as a part-time PhD student, self-funded. The reason that we want to ask these questions is to see whether there is a different approach, or any difference in approach, between the old and the new universities towards funding for part-time students. Can you please put yourself in the position of students in answering these questions as best you can, rather than as a university? How would you justify the different amounts of institutional bursary that the same student with the same needs can receive from different universities? Are you concerned that students in those universities that can only provide the smallest bursaries will suffer academically because they have to take more paid employment? Would a national bursary scheme, for example, be the right answer if we are interested in increased affordability and better outcomes for poorer students?

**Professor Ebdon:** The answer is yes, we should have a national bursary system. It is completely preposterous that students get a size of bursary not depending on their need but depending on which university they go to. It is as logical as getting a different-sized pension depending on which post office you go to.

**Professor Grant:** Can I disagree completely, for two reasons? One, there is a national bursary scheme. If you are going to have a national bursary scheme you should run it nationally. What I disagree entirely with was the report from HEPI, which I think was very disappointing in its analysis and in its conclusions, which suggested that the way of rectifying the inequality of bursaries was to remove money from those institutions who were paying higher bursaries and to transfer it to those institutions who were paying lower bursaries. In other words, I would need to explain to students coming to UCL that part of their fee being paid to UCL would be paid to support education at UCL and part would be paid to support education elsewhere. Have a national bursary

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28 January 2009 Professor Rick Trainor, Professor Malcolm Grant, Professor Les Ebdon CBE and  
Professor Geoffrey Crossick

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scheme—yes. Do not have a cross-transfer which runs completely contrary to the whole point of introducing variable tuition fees.

**Professor Crossick:** I agree entirely with Professor Grant's position on this. I do think that we would be confusing the two. The Government decided not to cover the costs of this through taxation; they decided to do it through fees associated with bursaries. A national bursary scheme could be created. It would be something that came out of taxation and we would be perfectly happy to consider that. One point about the further weakness of a national bursary scheme, just to develop what Professor Grant said, is that it would actually confuse the funding contract. Students come to a university, pay their fees to an institution, and for those fees then to be given to another institution would undermine the relationship. I think that relationship would be particularly undermined in the eyes of parents of 18 and 19-year-olds coming to university, who would ask what on earth is happening.

**Q65 Ian Stewart:** Professor Trainor, could you also pass comment about whether you think that part-time students get a raw deal? What sort of improvements could be made to assist them, and should the review of fees cover part-time students as well as full-time students?

**Professor Trainor:** The position of Universities UK is that we should be seriously considering more generous funding for part-time students. If the pot remains the same, of course, that is an acute difficulty because, as you know, we have a large number of full-time students in the system and I do not think that anybody is suggesting—certainly not your line of questioning—that they are oversupplied with funds. However, there is a good case to look more sympathetically at funding for part-time students. As for the issue of national bursaries, on the very few

issues on which members of Universities UK disagree I do not pretend to put forward a position that assumes that that is not the case. However, it is important to remember—and this is implied in part by Professor Crossick's statement—that we ended up with a system of bursaries because of a desire to get badly-needed additional money into the university system. The bursaries were a way to try to keep the fees, which were to lead to the additional money, from impeding fair access. I think that the underlying difficulty, of getting adequate money for learning and teaching into a system where the recurrent funding and the infrastructure funding is much smaller than in our major competitors, is something that we should be looking at alongside the issue that you raise, Mr Stewart, about the fairness of the bursary system.

**Dr Harris:** Is it fair to point out to Professor Grant that it is transferring money from where there are few poor students to universities where there are more poor students? It is not generous versus ungenerous; it is the numbers, and that is what the HEPI report shows.

**Q66 Chairman:** It is an issue which we will clearly return to. I am sorry that it has been a very tight session this morning. The purpose of it was to try to raise those issues which we need to spend more time on. The trouble is that every one of them comes into that category by the end of the session. Can I thank you all very much indeed for your evidence this morning?

**Professor Grant:** Chairman, you have set yourself a very broad frame of reference for this inquiry. We all stand ready to assist you with further information if we can, and we look forward to a rigorous report.

**Professor Trainor:** And without a hint of complacency, Chairman, because we want to improve the system constantly.

**Chairman:** Thank you very much.

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*Witnesses:* **Professor David Baker**, Principal, University College Plymouth, St Mark & St John, and Chair of GuildHE; **Ms Pat Bacon**, Principal and CEO, St Helen's College, representing the 157 Group; and **Professor John Craven**, Vice-Chancellor, University of Portsmouth, representing University Alliance, gave evidence.

**Q67 Chairman:** Can I welcome our second panel before us today and indeed thank you all, Professor David Baker, the Chair of the Higher Education representative body GuildHE, Pat Bacon, representing the 157 Group and Professor John Craven, representing the University Alliance. Thank you very much indeed for coming this morning and for sitting through the earlier session. I am sure that you enjoyed some of those exchanges! I wonder if I could start with you, Professor Craven, and ask you this question. *Times Higher Education* did publish a survey and Loughborough came out top. What do you feel matters most to students when they attend a college or university?

**Professor Craven:** I think that one should also take into account the National Student Survey, which of course is a much bigger sample than the *Times*

*Higher* survey was, but I think that the same question is valid. My view is that students choose universities—and from our research certainly in my institution—first because they think the course is the right course for them; second, because they like the location; when they come and see it, they feel at home in the institution; third, because they expect that with their pre-qualifications—and I would want to say in response to some of the things said in the last session that not every student by any means comes in with A-levels, we take in students with all sorts of qualifications—but they will want to know that they are going to get the support that they will want, given their background and perhaps given their likely grades or whatever it is. They take those three things into account, therefore. Our experience of student satisfaction is that if they feel they have

got that right—in other words, that the course does deliver what they were expecting and the place is a nice place to be—then they will be satisfied. They do have expectations when they come, therefore, and we normally seem to fulfil them. The National Student Survey does say that a great many students are satisfied. I would therefore say that that is what drives student satisfaction.

**Q68 Chairman:** Pat, your organisation represents a significant number of high-quality further education colleges. We heard in the previous session that significant numbers of students, particularly to the Million+ universities, are coming directly from further education; but are you concerned that the prospectus does not include clear information about the number of hours taught, who will actually be doing the teaching—those other facilities which you would get with any other product that you were purchasing anywhere else in the system? Does that concern you or not?

**Ms Bacon:** I think that it is an issue and, in the end, it is also an issue that students themselves need to be asked, because clearly they are the ones who are using the information to make the decision. It is the case that within the 157 Group quite a number of us are directly funded by the Higher Education Funding Council and therefore are delivering a range of higher education provision. Our contact with students will be very personal. We often know them. If we do not know them, we will certainly interview them. We will give them the opportunity to come and see exactly what they are going to get. I sense that there is a growing issue about how much teaching, the quality of teaching and so on, throughout the higher education world. I therefore had a great deal of interest in the line of questioning you were pursuing.

**Q69 Chairman:** Professor Baker, do you share that concern that we are not transparent about what is the actual offer we are giving to students, in terms of the product which is going to be delivered in a particular institution? Does that concern you?

**Professor Baker:** I think that there are some concerns. One of the points that GuildHE has made in its submission is about information, advice and guidance at schools. You have mentioned the prospectus. The prospectus is only one element of the information that is given—the hard-copy prospectus. There is very much the website, for example. There are very much open days, and other information that is given both in printed form or other media, and also face to face. Institutions that are in the membership of GuildHE have very close relationships with schools and colleges, the FE sector or the secondary sector. We very much have the kind of relationship that encourages people onto campus much earlier than the 17 and 18.

**Q70 Chairman:** I understand what you are saying but I do not know how you advise students. When you compare two particular universities with the same course, you do not know how many hours are taught on each; you do not know who will be

actually teaching it; you do not know how much work students will have to do; you often do not know about assessment procedures; you do not know that, because it is a high-quality research university, you will actually get a leading academic rather than a post-doc or indeed a postgraduate student teaching you. How on earth can you get careers departments in schools to give that sort of advice to students when there is no evidence there?

**Professor Baker:** I think that there are good links between universities of all kinds and careers departments. One thing that was not mentioned in the earlier discussion which I would want to bring to the fore is SPA—Supporting Professionalism in Admissions—where there are very extensive guidelines that are widely followed in the sector, across all admission groups, with regard to good practice in admissions, and it relates *inter alia* to things like the transparency of the process. I would also go back to the point about the prospectus as one element of the information given. Before students come to institutions to study, and as they are there, in the vast majority of cases there is significant information given about a description of what they will be taught, by whom, for how many hours; programme descriptors, module descriptors, and so on.

**Q71 Chairman:** Can I come back to you briefly, Pat, before handing over to my colleague Gordon Marsden? Those of us who worked in mainstream education—I was a head for 20 years before I came into the House and I have a good knowledge of FE—know that if I wanted to employ staff in my school or you, as a college principal, wanted to employ staff in FE, unless they had the appropriate qualifications to teach they cannot do it. Yet the universities can have people who are totally untrained as far as teaching students, who are then paid for that privilege. Is that right?

**Ms Bacon:** I think that teachers should be professionally qualified, and I am a professionally qualified teacher myself.

**Q72 Chairman:** Does that apply in higher education? Should it apply?

**Ms Bacon:** Certainly the teachers who work for me who are delivering higher education—and I am sure that is the case throughout FE where it is delivering HE<sup>6</sup>—will be professionally qualified teachers. In further education we have a very strong culture around pedagogy. We have a very strong culture around quality of teaching and learning. I think that goes back over many years. We may well come back to the QAA, but if you look at recent QAA reviews, while they were still very much focusing on teaching and learning, generally reviews of HE in FE (i.e. delivered by the FE) have come out very well indeed. Because the two things we do really well are that we teach well and deliver learning well, and we support students very well; so I think there is a great deal of focus on that.

<sup>6</sup> Higher education

**Q73 Dr Gibson:** People in higher education, universities, are recruited because of their research; the number of papers they have; how they are going to figure in the RAE. “Yes, you can do a bit of teaching but don’t take it too seriously. The real way of judging a university is by research.” I can hear vice-chancellors saying that.

**Ms Bacon:** I am slightly uncomfortable about that. What I would say about further education is that we do not always necessarily take people in who are qualified on day one. It is incredibly important that we have people who come out of industry. Many of my staff are still practising in terms of whatever is their particular expertise; but we train them and they become qualified teachers. I know that is enshrined in law now, but it was something we had as a policy before that.

**Professor Craven:** It is a bit of a caricature of universities that I do not recognise and I do not think applies across the institutions that I represent. In my university we require anybody who comes into teaching who has not previously had such training at least to take a certificate. Many of them go on to further pedagogical research. We do require people to be trained in teaching. As has just been said, they do not come in with it, because there is not a methodology perhaps for doing it before we recruit them; but within the early time with us they are required to do that. I would strongly reject the idea that we do not take seriously the training of people to teach.

**Q74 Dr Gibson:** Do they do serious research as well?

**Professor Craven:** Of course they do, yes.

**Q75 Dr Gibson:** They publish in high-flying journals?

**Professor Craven:** Yes. If you look in the Research Assessment Exercise you will see that Alliance universities have a lot of high-quality research.

**Q76 Chairman:** With respect, you do not know that, do you?

**Professor Craven:** Do not know what?

**Q77 Chairman:** You do not know whether all university lecturers are qualified to teach?

**Professor Craven:** I would know that about my institution and I would guess that other vice-chancellors would say the same. I am not sure what it is you think I do not know.

**Q78 Dr Gibson:** David could answer this. We were colleagues once.

**Professor Baker:** Indeed. I have to agree with Professor Craven that I think your description of the academic who does research and a bit of teaching if they have to is an old-fashioned and out-of-date one. That is not the case across the sector. Speaking particularly for GuildHE institutions, as with Alliance members and as with Professor Craven’s institution, we require colleagues who are appointed to undergo training and some kind of certification process. We also strongly encourage, if not require, membership of the Higher Education Academy.

There is therefore a very strong emphasis on being prepared for and qualified to teach. It is not quite the same as being a schoolteacher, but there is a very strong emphasis on that. Bear in mind, of course, that in institutions like mine you are dealing with professional and vocational subjects in many respects. Those people who have come in probably already have some kind of appropriate qualification anyway. In terms of research, we are not going to perform very strongly in the Research Assessment Exercise, though we did do so in terms of small pockets of excellence in our institutions; but, again, we do require scholarly and research activity to be undertaken in our institutions as part of underpinning teaching at university-level education.

**Q79 Mr Marsden:** Pat, I wonder if I could come back to you. You heard in the previous session the discussion about the relationship between FE, FE networks and higher education; but, from the point of view of a student doing HE in FE, is that student getting a fair crack of the whip compared to someone doing HE in HE? I do not ask that from the standpoint necessarily of is the FE college itself not providing as good facilities; I ask it more from the standpoint of when that student leaves or wants to transfer perhaps, as university courses become more portable, are they disadvantaged compared to people who do an HE course in a traditional HE institution?

**Ms Bacon:** I think that there are a number of issues in that question. If I take the example of the foundation degree, for example—and we deliver, as do many 157 and Association of Colleges members—this was very much designed with an articulated progression route. That was the concept behind it. We have certainly found very good progression from the foundation degree. I know that it is a qualification in its own right and that often gets overlooked, but none the less there is a good take-up of people going on. We have had ex-students of ours who did the foundation degree coming out of the university of their choice, in some case with First-Class Honours; so there is some real evidence. I do not think that they are disadvantaged in that sense, therefore. I was inevitably thinking also about the resources issue. The student survey reflected very positively on students following HE in FE. Where we think the relationship works best with our universities—and I am thinking here of the validating universities that we use for our provision—it is where there really is an academic community. In the end, therefore, it is not just about going through a process of validation; it is also about joint professional development and about staff working together. Where the relationships are good, I think that there are some real positives. In the end, it is the student who benefits because they can be confident of a local experience, which is often what attracts them sometimes in a familiar environment, but with the knowledge that they can access university resources; that they can be confident about the quality and level of the experience; and, with the progression, generally the experience has been good so far.

**Q80 Mr Marsden:** It remains the case, though, does it not, that in many cases, not all, progression from FE qualifications—and I am thinking particularly for adult learners returning after a long period out, where they may have either no qualifications or what are regarded as outdated qualifications—their ability to make that progression is very much dependent upon the individual relationships between the college at which they are and the HE institution they are trying to get into? We still do not have a proper, national accreditation, portability scheme, despite good efforts and various reports. Is that not the case?

**Ms Bacon:** I think that there are a number of issues about progression into higher education, wherever it is delivered. In fact, I have just been reading, and I would commend to the Committee, the Campaign for Learning report. It is an excellent piece of work, I have to say, and it is incredibly well researched; but one of the statistics that really stood out for me was that three-quarters of the funding in 2010-2011 will go on full-time 17 to 20-year-olds. While instinctively, in preparing for this, I would have been thinking about the adult student, I think that they pick up extremely powerfully the question of the young student who may well be looking for part-time progression and for whom, by and large, the finances, the support and the transition are not there. It is a really powerful piece of work.

**Q81 Mr Marsden:** You have pinched one of my later questions, though the Chairman will be very grateful! Can I ask John—because you were nodding—an add-on question to one I have asked of Pat? In the previous session you heard—I will not say a “ding-dong”—the discussion about the balance between teaching, research, and all the rest of it. It is the case, is it not, that, whether you regard teaching or research as being paramount, there is a lot of stuff that goes on, particularly from younger academics, that does not necessarily fit into either category but certainly fits into the outreach areas and the links with FE colleges and local schools that we are talking about? Do we do enough to reward or support them?

**Professor Craven:** In both of those areas. One of your colleagues said something about “It doesn’t seem as though there are any negative issues coming out”, but I think that there is a lot of work still to be done, both in terms of the networks of higher education and further education colleges, to promote progression. I worry about short-term initiatives and short-term funding for that. It is a long-term process that requires the building of trust and the building of better relationships there. Regarding your point about outreach into the community, one of the things that is very important in institutions like my own is to say to staff that often the Research Assessment Exercise is a rather narrow definition of what counts as research, what counts as contribution into the prosperity of local businesses, public sector organisations, whatever it might be, and making available the undoubted expertise of my staff—and, increasingly, students—out into the community is important. You ask whether it is

properly rewarded. I think that there is still a lot of work to be done on the career progression of academics. As you say, many of them are younger and so they care about this rather a lot—about how their careers can progress. Perhaps they are doing hugely valuable work, but it may not—depending on what happens to research assessment in the future—be picked up by those sorts of metrics. Yes, I agree with you. I think that we have a lot of work to do. There are things on which we need to work as a sector, but also we have to talk with our staff, colleagues, and so on. Yes, that is a hugely important point.

**Q82 Mr Marsden:** I would like to come on to you, David, if I may. You said in your written evidence, and in a way it picks up on the previous question, that your institutions “have a proven track record in widening participation” and that “diversity in the higher education ecology”—which is an interesting phrase—“can too easily be honoured in principle in government policies while being overlooked in practice”. I just wondered what your institutions are doing that other higher education institutions are not, and what is being overlooked—if I can put it that way.

**Professor Baker:** In terms of widening participation we are particularly strong on community engagement, not just with the schools and the FE colleges in the region but with local community organisations, public and private partnerships. I think to a large extent that comes from the heritage of GuildHE-type institutions. Most of us were founded in the 1840s or 1850s; we have always had very strong teacher education; we have had very strong links with professions; and we are very much based in our communities. At Marjon, we do not recruit nationally; we recruit locally, sub-regionally or regionally. That does place a very strong emphasis on building up community relations.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, in my own institution for example, we do not wait until students are 17 or 18 to think about encouraging them to look at the campus; we work with people at primary school level, because the vast majority of our students are first-to-go-to-university students. One of the things you therefore have to do is to break down what might be seen as intimidatory barriers to encouraging them into higher education. It is working with the whole community; it is working with the whole family.

**Q83 Mr Marsden:** Can I just cut across you there? That is immensely valuable but, unless I am wrong, you do not get any formal or informal recognition either from HEFCE or the Government for that, do you—certainly not in financial terms?

**Professor Baker:** There has been a widening participation premium that has been added.

**Q84 Mr Marsden:** That would apply to primary as well, would it?

<sup>7</sup> *Note from the witness:* Thus 81% of Students are from South West, 9% South East or Greater London, and 10% other locations—of those South West Students, 85% are from Devon and Cornwall, and 56% from Plymouth post codes.

*Professor Baker:* To primary . . . ?

**Q85 Mr Marsden:** You were talking about your engagement at primary level.

*Professor Baker:* No. We have in the past had special funding, for example for summer schools for primary children and so on; but I was thinking about the widening participation premium that we get from HEFCE when the students arrive. What I am saying is that it is a long build-up. It is something that you start several years before the student actually arrives in higher education.

**Q86 Mr Marsden:** That brings me rather seamlessly to the issue of the Aimhigher initiative. I would like to ask for your views on that. In your evidence, Pat, the 157 Group was a bit critical of the initiative. You said, “It lacks the drive, innovation and crucially the ability to connect with the very young people from disadvantaged communities that it seeks to target”. Anecdotes are always dangerous, but my experience in my own neck of the woods in Blackpool is that the Aimhigher programme is working quite well, in an area where we have had a poor take-up in the past; but obviously yours is a broader perspective. What is your essential critique of it and what improvements do you think should be made?

*Ms Bacon:* I must admit that I think in my own area it has also been powerful. You ask for a critique. In Merseyside it came out of the Excellence Challenge, and one of the great strengths of that, particularly from a further education perspective, was not just the focus on the one end, on the widening participation—because I would argue that has been our focus for many years—but also on the gifted and talented. If there was a weakness in some parts of the FE sector, maybe we were always a bit focused on what people did not have and therefore what they needed extra, rather than perhaps raising people’s aspirations. In an area like mine, where participation in HE is relatively limited, then the aspirational part is very important indeed. I think that there has been quite a strong focus on aspiration. There is perhaps not enough of a focus on some of the curriculum issues about the ladder through. Again, in Merseyside I know that they have done some very interesting work—

**Q87 Mr Marsden:** Do you mean by that making sure that schoolchildren take courses that then steer them to appropriate degree levels for them?

*Ms Bacon:* Yes, there is an information, advice and guidance strand to that, which is absolutely critical—and your questioning has already touched on it and has raised the issues very well around that—but the other strand is that sometimes people do not necessarily always have, at any age, the skills in totality that will help them really succeed. There has been a big focus on aspiration and I am not convinced that there has been quite so much focus on some aspects of that.

**Q88 Mr Marsden:** John, you are the Vice-Chancellor at Portsmouth. You are on the receiving end of the products of this process. What is your take on where it is going?

*Professor Craven:* We are also participants in the Aimhigher programme, which has closely involved universities. One observation that I would make on it from my particular area in Hampshire is that we have 11 to 16 and then all students go on either to a sixth-form college or an FE college or some mixed version. One of the challenges, not only for Aimhigher but for our own aspiration-raising activities—as we work very hard even from primary school level, but certainly in the early years of secondary school, to raise the aspirations—is then the students have to cope with the discontinuity, which is quite disruptive to the process of our engagement with them because they are focusing on something else, which is the discontinuity in their education. I think that Aimhigher has had some success in our area in enabling that transition to be less disruptive; but there is a lot of work to be done. As I said earlier, I think that all the aspiration-raising, widening-participation activities, which I certainly welcome and my Alliance colleagues certainly welcome, which have grown over the last ten to 15 years, need to be sustained. It is important to get the first person from a family, the first generation, into higher education and then you have solved a lot of the problems—if I can put it that way. However, it will take some time to crack that first participant from many disadvantaged families, and the whole process—Aimhigher or some other initiative—does need to continue for quite some time. It is not a quick fix.

**Q89 Dr Harris:** Ms Bacon, from the perspective as the head of an FE college, what is your reaction to the HEFCE study published in 2005 that said that students from state schools and colleges like yours “appeared to do consistently better (at university) than students from independent schools, when compared on a like-for-like basis”? Do you think, therefore, that it is reasonable that extra credit should be given to applicants from state schools and FE colleges over independent school students, who are otherwise the same in terms of their attainment?

*Ms Bacon:* The issue at the back of that clearly is one of value added, because presumably this is also about how far people have travelled, given their backgrounds and so on. If we are serious about widening participation—and as a college that was judged by Ofsted as “outstanding” in terms of social inclusion, it is absolutely part of our mission and vision—for an area of relative social and economic deprivation like the one in which I operate, then education has to be the route out. So, yes, I am concerned, because we have to find a way of teasing out the brightest and best of our communities. In a way, that is where that Campaign for Learning report is so critical, because there are an awful lot of young people who are not at Level 3 by the time they are 18; therefore, the opportunity for part-time study, for picking up higher education further on, is



important. One of the things the report is calling for, which we would certainly wish to see, is a review of Level 3 provision as well.

**Q90 Dr Harris:** I need just to focus on this question. Professor Craven, the corollary of that is that if you treat students from independent schools and state schools the same, if they are otherwise the same and you do not factor that in, and essentially you give equal offers to equal numbers, if you like, those independent school people will do less well—not badly, but less well—than the others. Do you think that is a strong argument for putting a premium on educational background?

**Professor Craven:** I think that the admission process should take note of educational background. I have no difficulty with that at all.

**Q91 Chairman:** That was not the question. It was not “take note of”.

**Professor Craven:** No, and you are asking whether we should make different offers to people from different backgrounds. Is that it?

**Q92 Dr Harris:** Consistent with the fact that they do better, even if they are slightly less—

**Professor Craven:** I would say that there is quite a lot of that already happening within institutions like mine and, yes, I support it.

**Q93 Dr Harris:** My follow-up is, if that is right to do, should not all institutions do it? Otherwise, independent schools may complain that they are being discriminated against by a university that is proud of the fact that it is doing the fair thing, the right thing, by having that as one of the factors. Secondly, would it not help if all students and schools knew, so that they were not deterred and they felt that they were getting fair recognition? They do not know that if it is sporadic and buried.

**Professor Craven:** I am certainly in favour of clarity of information, clarity of what we publicise about our admissions policy. That, I think, is absolutely vital. I do not think that it is for me to say what all universities should do. We are autonomous institutions and I would not wish what we do to be dictated from above; but there are good practice guidelines, which I would support.

**Q94 Dr Harris:** So it should not be dictated from above that they all do the right thing in terms of fairness; because, even if it means that you do not do the right thing and continue more unfair practices—not totally unfair but less fair—that is a price you pay for autonomy, because different flowers must bloom?

**Professor Craven:** I think that the price you pay for autonomy is that we do not have a single view in this country of what the right thing is, which is imposed on everybody. I have told you what I think the right thing is and I would like to see other universities do it; but I think that is a separate question from anybody having the right to impose it. That is politics, not higher education. That is what I think individual freedom and autonomy means.

**Q95 Dr Harris:** I just wish I could have explored that more with the other panel. My last question is about how we encourage people to apply; because you have to be in it to win it. Part of the problem is that there is not the aspiration.

**Professor Craven:** Correct.

**Q96 Dr Harris:** I wondered if you, Ms Bacon, thought it was time for radical measures, such as the best students from the least-performing schools being guaranteed a place in higher education; that there will be a separate funding pot to do that, and it is piloted to make sure that they are not dropping out but are coping, and to see how they do. It would not have to be large numbers, but that would say to every student in a school, “If you do well enough, you can be assured of a place”.

**Ms Bacon:** There is also something that has to be explored about whether it really is that people are choosing not to go, or whether—I come back to my earlier point—if the choice is predominantly seen to be about full-time or nothing, then there is a huge deterrent.

**Q97 Dr Harris:** I am not saying it is the be-all or end-all, but for those students who think, “I’ll get a job. I probably wouldn’t get in, because my family hasn’t been”—if they knew they had a guaranteed place if they were in the top five per cent in any institution.

**Ms Bacon:** I think that is interesting to explore. I am very pleased to say that we have just been given the go-ahead as a college—and we are certainly not the only one—to sponsor an academy. We are working with a local university partner on that. Clearly the whole drive is around a school that is seriously underperforming in our area. I think that there is a fantastic opportunity to start to explore what I suppose in my world we tend to call “compacts”—those kinds of access arrangements where, as you say, they can be very motivational and lead to something. However, there clearly has to be a university partner in that.

**Q98 Dr Harris:** Finally, to the university partner then, Professor Craven. Let us say you are getting only two per cent of students from Portsmouth Comprehensive into your university, and they said, “Will you take the next three per cent? We will give you specific funded places, and we will monitor to see how they do and provide you with resources for support”, would you welcome that? Would you be a willing participant or would you see that as social engineering?

**Professor Craven:** I would welcome it. Whether or not I see it as social engineering does not really matter, because one might think that was good or bad. I would welcome it. The operation of it is tempered by the fact that Portsmouth comprehensives stop at 16. The ones who are successful enough then go on to a sixth-form college or whatever, and then we have to make sure that we identify the right ones. I chair the governors of a local inner-city school, which is on its way to becoming a city academy, and I think that it would be—

**Q99 Dr Harris:** Sorry to hear that!

**Professor Craven:** I shall not be chair of the governors after that, because of course they change these things. The point is that, within the school as it stands at the moment, I would dearly like there to be enhanced incentives and opportunities for the undoubtedly bright children who do not perform as well as they should, in some sense or another.

**Q100 Chairman:** A brief comment, Professor Baker?

**Professor Baker:** GuildHE institutions would also welcome an idea like that. We would certainly like to explore it; but I would be concerned if it were seen as the only thing that needed to be done. It is the tip of a very large iceberg. It might take the next five per cent from Plymouth Comprehensive, but what about all the other people who, if they had the right aspiration, could also make it? And we are not getting to them, because we need to get them much sooner than 16, 17 or 18.

**Q101 Dr Gibson:** It is rumoured that Oxford and Cambridge will start it all off. That would really be something, I suppose.

**Professor Baker:** That will be the day!

**Q102 Dr Gibson:** I am very pleased that we have cleared up this business of the contact and workload that students have and the comparison. The other lot slid out of it by saying it was contact hours; it is much more than that. The Chairman pointed that out and so we have that clear. The other thing I wanted to ask you about is the QAA, Professor Baker. What do you think of the QAA?

**Professor Baker:** I would agree with the comments made in the previous session, that it does have a lot of teeth. Bear in mind that GuildHE institutions have had a lot of experience of the QAA over recent years, because we have not been dealing with them just in terms of institutional audit but most of our members have been awarded taught degree-awarding powers; after a rigorous assessment exercise, university title; and, in a smaller but growing number of cases, research degree-awarding powers. My own institution went through the taught degree-awarding powers assessment some three years ago, and it was a two-and-a-half-year process. Believe me, it was not easy. So I think that the QAA does have teeth; it does look very long and hard at institutions, and their quality assurance processes in particular. It does not give away the confidence vote or the taught degree-awarding powers award lightly; so I do think that it is fit for purpose.

**Q103 Dr Gibson:** But you think there is something missing? In your submission to us you did suggest that its interaction with the public left a lot to be desired.

**Professor Baker:** I think that there are issues about the PR relating to the QAA.

**Q104 Dr Gibson:** Such as?

**Professor Baker:** In terms of the assay group, as we also call ourselves, the fact that we are different but equal to the rest of the sector. That is the kind of

point I would particularly want to make, in terms of the public being aware that the QAA is a body that does not regulate the sector but it is one element of a particularly strong and robust set of mechanisms, which includes self-regulation internally, externally, within the sector, and the QAA is an overarching body which does give the requisite confidence in the system.

**Q105 Dr Gibson:** Your body language says you agree with that, Ms Bacon.

**Ms Bacon:** Yes, it certainly has teeth as far as further education delivering higher education.

**Q106 Dr Gibson:** Let me ask you about the degree classification business. We are comparing degrees now in this session. A First from the University of Portsmouth or the University College Plymouth St Mark & St John—is that the same as a First at Oxford, in your opinion? Or would my snobbery come out if I were looking at two people with Firsts from different places?

**Professor Craven:** It is a different description. There are different elements to the courses, as colleagues said in the previous session. I am firmly in favour of the achievement record as a much better record of what a student has achieved. One of the points that I think is very important is that more than half of the degrees in my institution are in one way or another accredited by a professional body, whether they are architects, accountants, pharmacists, engineers, or whatever it might be. We have a very strong belief that they are—“enforcing” is perhaps not quite the right word—working to national standards; so I am comforted in those areas that there is very serious comparability between the degrees in different places. I think that it is inevitable that universities will have different reputations—publication of league tables does not help that—and that employers will take different messages according to the name of the university on the degree certificate; but I suspect they differentiate more than they should rather than less than they should.

**Q107 Dr Gibson:** Would you stand up and say publicly that the QAA keeps standards pretty uniform across the country?

**Professor Craven:** I bear the bruises from a recent QAA audit, which came out very successfully. They were very clear, however, in making sure that our processes for ensuring our standards were robust and delivered what we said they did—and that is what they should be doing.

**Q108 Dr Iddon:** What is the attraction for higher education institutes and further education colleges in becoming universities? Why is there that upward pressure?

**Ms Bacon:** I cannot necessarily speak for all FE colleges, but I am not looking to become a university. I do not deliver higher education out of some desire. We are very proud of where we sit. We know where we sit and we know why we deliver the HE that we do. I suspect that any academic drift is likely to be influenced by funding. I do see things in

the FE sector that are being influenced by funding. I think that targets—and we have touched on league tables—are the kinds of things that do influence behaviour. I suppose there is an ambition for a lot of academic staff to be able to teach at what they perceive as a higher level, and I see nothing wrong with that. I certainly believe that my students generally benefit from the fact that we have a core of staff who are able to deliver very successfully at a higher education level. I guess it is about funding. I think that there will be a drive coming out of the demographic change. Interestingly, as I understand it, one of our university validating partners has just stopped working with all of its existing FE network. I throw that into the discussion, because I think that, both with the current economic downturn—which has not been touched on and clearly will be a key factor—but also the demographics around that core age group of 17 to 20, it will start to change behaviour; and we have to be very careful in looking at what is there now as against what may be there in the future.

**Professor Baker:** I think that there is a very clear answer, certainly from institutions like GuildHE institutions, my own included, where we have university title or university college title. That is about continuous improvement and self-determination. The process you go through to be awarded taught degree-awarding powers, to call yourself a university or a university college, is a very rigorous one. It is one that we want to go through to be able to pass the test, to improve in the process. Certainly our experience in GuildHE institutions is that we have improved as institutions; we have become more confident as institutions; that we are on a par; we are different from but equal to other institutions that already have the title. The ability to award your own taught and research degrees does mean that you have a lot more freedom of manoeuvre to respond, in terms of what you are good at and what the communities that you serve want.

**Q109 Dr Iddon:** Professor Craven, have you anything to add to that?

**Professor Craven:** I represent the Alliance, which is the only mission group of universities that has both pre and post-1992 members. I was in a pre-1992 university when that change happened and moved to Portsmouth in 1997. By the time I moved, I was quite clear that the activities of the university into which I moved at Portsmouth were of comparable quality in some very broad sense to the institution I had left. That includes the sort of local engagement that Mr Marsden talked about; it includes selective research activities. From the point of view of somebody who has moved across that line, therefore, I think that the acquisition of university title by those of us who gained it in 1992 is absolutely justified.

**Q110 Dr Iddon:** Can I put it to you that when an HE institute or a college moves up the university scale it sheds some of its lower-level teaching, which is really critical to the local economy?

**Professor Craven:** I do not observe that in my own institution particularly. We run foundation modules.

**Professor Baker:** I do not agree with that. We have not shed anything at all; in fact, quite the opposite. The flexibility that we now have in our institutions, including my own, is that we are offering a broader range and are able to introduce foundation degrees: both in terms of being awarded at Marjon and also, much more appropriately, in partnership with FE institutions and indeed sixth-form colleges that we are working with—so not at all.

**Q111 Dr Iddon:** What about Merseyside, where these skills are critical?

**Ms Bacon:** Absolutely critical. The Association of Colleges' National Skill Group was meeting yesterday and one of the things that we were particularly focusing on was the whole issue of seeing further education colleges as part of the solution, not just as deliverers of skills. I still think that there is a whole debate that we need to embrace around learning as against skills. The colleges have much to offer as strategic partners. We are well informed by our local communities. We know what the demands are on the ground, and indeed very much welcome and hope to see more of the flexibilities to enable us to deliver. For example, I know that my staff were in a manufacturing company yesterday, helping them with some skills during the current downturn. I do not think that we need to be precious about at what level. It could be about basic skills; it could be about foundation degree level.

**Q112 Dr Iddon:** I have one final question on external assessors. Can I put it to you that most universities perhaps have too cosy a relationship with their external assessors—I am talking of course at the undergraduate level—and that perhaps they ought to be appointed to the universities from an outside organisation, so that this cosiness no longer exists? Have I provoked you?

**Professor Craven:** I do not believe that it is a cosy relationship. We certainly have a very clear practice that if somebody from the department of economics in another university is our external examiner in economics, we do not reciprocate; so that none of our economists become their external examiners. That is not the case, therefore. We train external examiners. They come to induction sessions when they begin. They have the opportunity to write to me as vice-chancellor, as well as to interact with the department. When I was an external examiner I did write to the vice-chancellor of a university, raising a particular problem, and was properly dealt with. I am not sure that the selection process for external examiners is the issue, therefore. I think that it does need to be a professionally conducted activity, and I believe that in most cases it is.

**Professor Baker:** I would very much agree with that. I do not recognise the cosiness. If there is a phrase that applies to external examiners, it is “critical friends”, with the emphasis on the “critical”. They are there to oversee the appropriateness of our processes in relation to examinations. Again,

practically all the GuildHE members have gone through the system in terms of taught degree-awarding powers over the last few years, and that process has been very rigorously and independently assessed; so I do not see the cosiness at all.

**Q113 Dr Gibson:** Have they ever failed to sign? “I refuse to sign the final paper.” In other words, they say, “This has all been done. We have scrutinised it and this is the degree stratification”. Have you ever had the experience of someone saying, “This is rubbish. You guys are dominating the First-Class market for various purposes”?

**Professor Baker:** Not in my institution.

**Q114 Dr Gibson:** You have never had that?

**Professor Baker:** No.

**Q115 Dr Gibson:** Do you recognise it happens?

**Professor Craven:** I recognise that external examiners write critical reports and sometimes report things to the vice-chancellor that need changing. That does happen.

**Q116 Ian Stewart:** You may have been in the room in the other session and heard the questions about part-time students. All three of you have put submissions in with comments about part-time students. Why do part-time students get a raw deal, and what needs to be done to change that?

**Ms Bacon:** Again, the report I referred to earlier covers this extremely well.

**Q117 Ian Stewart:** The Campaign for Learning report?

**Ms Bacon:** Yes. There is a considerable expectation, I think, that part-time students will be supported by employers. It was an interesting statistic in the report, because it is borne out by our experience. Only half of employed students in full time work and therefore studying part-time are actually supported by the employers, and then usually only fees—nothing else. It drops to only a fifth for part-time. That is an issue. We see it all the time with our adult students: that, time and time again, they may be working but they are not necessarily supported. Some employers will give some time; some may make a financial contribution. We have had students saying to us, “Please don’t tell our employers that we are studying”, because that may not go down very well. I think that there is therefore a big gap between what employers recognise they need—and we are

obviously keen to and do deliver—and what individuals need, in terms of that whole lifelong learning agenda.

**Professor Craven:** I certainly agree with that, but I think that “full-time” and “part-time” is a convenient description. To make it much more flexible for students to be able to complete a course, sometimes doing what one would call a full-time load and sometimes not doing a full-time load, is very important. That is something the fees review, which we expect fairly soon, has to look into, to make that more flexible.

**Professor Baker:** I think part-time students get a raw deal because we are still stuck in a mindset that assumes that the vast majority of students are full-time and 18 years old. Life simply is not like that. I hope that we can move away from a division between full-time and part-time and just call them students who are learning in different modes.

**Q118 Ian Stewart:** Should there be a national bursary scheme?

**Professor Baker:** Broadly speaking, I would argue for a national bursary scheme. I would hope that it would be part of the forthcoming review. For me, it is about equity, fairness and transparency, and making sure that all those people who are able to benefit from higher education are able to do so, regardless of the financial issues.

**Q119 Ian Stewart:** I think we can take it that the other two on the panel are nodding?

**Ms Bacon:** Yes.

**Professor Craven:** Yes, I am happy to support that.

**Q120 Chairman:** The issue of funding is absolutely crucial to this whole argument and I just wanted briefly to put this to all the panel. Are you saying that you want part-time HE students to be funded on a par with full-time HE students? Is that what we are saying?

**Ms Bacon:** It is certainly what I am saying. We need to get to a stage where, as the jargon has it, the funding is “mode-free”. There is also an issue about funding both for first-step learning, for people to get onto the learning ladder—and I am thinking particularly of mature students there—and about funding of Level 3.

**Q121 Chairman:** I am talking specifically at Level 4.

**Ms Bacon:** Yes, I think that it should be mode-free.

**Professor Baker:** Yes.

**Professor Craven:** Yes.

**Chairman:** That is a very interesting note on which to end. Could I thank you all very much indeed. I am sorry that we have rushed through the session, but there is always so much to ask.

## Monday 9 February 2009

Members present

Mr Phil Willis, in the Chair

Mr Tim Boswell  
Dr Ian Gibson  
Dr Evan Harris  
Dr Brian Iddon

Mr Gordon Marsden  
Ian Stewart  
Graham Stringer

*Witnesses:* **Wes Streeting**, President, National Union of Students (NUS), **Alex Bols**, Head of Education and Quality, NUS; **Rob Park**, Caring Responsibilities Officer and Acting Secretary to Council, Birkbeck Students' Union; and **Lisa Carson**, President of the Open University Students Association, gave evidence.

**Chairman:** Could I welcome very much indeed our first student panel, student representative bodies, to our inquiry on students in universities. Some of my colleagues have interests to declare, so I will allow them to do so.

**Mr Boswell:** I would like to declare my interest as a member of the Board of Governors of UIG in Cardiff. We have, as one of my colleagues, the student representative Adam Painter, who makes an outstanding contribution and it is a very good relationship. Can I also declare my absence, because I shall have to go to fulfil another parliamentary duty between about 4.30 and 5.00, so I may catch the beginning of you and the panels which we are having afterwards, but thank you for coming.

**Dr Iddon:** I declare that I am a member of the University College Union, visiting Professor at Liverpool University, member of the External Advisory Board at Manchester University School of Chemistry. There is something else I have missed, but it cannot be important. It is the same declaration as I made last time, Chairman.

**Dr Gibson:** I am an honorary Professor at UDA and I have relative experience in politics, biology, international development and something else that I have now just forgotten.

**Ian Stewart:** We have got to do all this formal stuff so that it goes on the record. I am Ian Stewart, currently registered as a post-graduate student at Manchester, self-funded, and I am an Honorary Fellow at Salford University, and I am interested in Manchester United!

**Q122 Chairman:** Thank you. Could we welcome our first panel today, Wes Streeting, the President of the National Union of Students, welcome to you, Wes, to Alex Bols, the Head of Education and Quality at NUS, welcome, Rob Park, Caring Responsibilities Officer—that sounds good, does it not?—and Acting Secretary to Council, Birkbeck Students' Union, welcome to you, Rob, and last but by no means least Lisa Carson, the President of the Open University Students Association. I wonder if I could start with you, Wes? What makes a good university experience? Could you be as brief as possible with your answers.

**Mr Streeting:** What makes a good university experience? Well, I think it's one that manages expectations in advance, it meets the expectations which have been set out for students. I think it's one

that stretches students but at the same time supports them throughout their courses. It has learning facilities which meet the expectations which were set out. It has regular and handy contact with a range of staff, support staff and academic staff, at the institution and ultimately prepares those students for graduation to further study or for the world of employment, confident and articulate in the skills and experience they have gained, ready to take on the challenges of the rest of their lives.

**Q123 Mr Boswell:** That was very comprehensive. Thank you. Could I just take you up specifically on the communication point? In your experience and across the range of institutions you represent is that cardinally important, does it vary a lot and could it be improved, communications, staff/student in particular?

**Mr Streeting:** I think it matters enormously, actually, and I am glad you asked because there is a lot of attention in the national press on the issue of contact hours with staff at institutions, and I think that is only part of the story. Sure, quantity is important, but I think the quality of that experience matters very much more. The student experience research we published last term and sent in to the Committee identifies that students do want more contact with their support staff and with their academic staff, not least in terms of the area of feedback, for example, which is another area often seen as a source of concern. I don't believe at the moment students are getting the quality of contact they would expect in too many cases. I know from our own research that on feedback, for example, 25 per cent of students cited they do receive verbal feedback on their assessment, but 71 per cent actually want it. So I hope that as the inquiry progresses and institutions are looking at how they can continue to enhance the quality of experience of their institutions they might look at how their academic staff are currently deployed and employed and think about how their time could be put to different uses to enhance the experience by having greater direct contact with their students.

**Q124 Chairman:** I am going to come on to that very issue later. I wonder if, Lisa and Rob, I can bring you in here? You work with a lot of part-time students and mature students. What is a good university experience for you? Rob, do you want to start?

**Mr Park:** Yes, thank you, Chairman. Flexibility is the first thing, particularly with more mature students and part-time students who are juggling care and responsibilities, full-time jobs, and also if you are travelling a long distance onto a campus, and obviously Lisa will talk more about the distance learning aspects of the student experience. It is flexibility and a varied extra-curricula access to new skills.

**Q125 Chairman:** Lisa, in terms of yourself, what is your response there?

**Ms Carson:** To me, a university experience is about changing your life. Now, that can happen in many ways.

**Q126 Chairman:** It sounds a bit grand that, does it not?

**Ms Carson:** It sounds grand, but it does have an impact on what you do and it is the whole experience rather than just a small offering of a course or anything like that. It is the overall impact on the individual, but to get there, certainly for the distance learner, which is where I am coming from, the quality of your teaching and the quality of the educational experience is obviously the thing. Because you don't have that contact, the same type of contact, actually having the quality of contact and quality of materials is going to be extremely important.

**Q127 Chairman:** I find this quite difficult to grasp because both your universities are world leaders in terms of distance learning, part-time learning, and yet you have said, Rob, in terms of your evidence to us that you want more student engagement. How do you get more student engagement when you are doing most of your work over the internet? What does that mean?

**Mr Park:** For Birkbeck College about two-thirds of our students are distance learning, although they do have a requirement to come into the campus once a week. More student engagement comes from both the students' representative body itself in terms of how views of students are being communicated to the institution but also, vitally, it has got to come from the student support services run by the institution itself, notably things like students' finance. For instance, if someone is a part-time student and they are self-employed they may have a variable income and at the start of their course they will be paying, let us say, their full part-time fee and would not be entitled to hardship funding. However, as that course progresses and their income, for instance, reduces they may not know that they have the right of access to financial hardship funding, so it is vital –

**Q128 Chairman:** That is what you mean by “engagement”?

**Mr Park:** Absolutely, yes.

**Q129 Chairman:** So it is nothing to do with the actual interrelationship between professorial staff and the actual course materials, this is more about just existing at the university?

**Mr Park:** For Birkbeck Students' Union, yes, it is, but we are operating on a federal structure of faculty so each super-school (as it will be from next year) will be doing the local engagement between professorial staff and student representatives.

**Q130 Chairman:** All right. Alex, when students apply to any university one of the things which concerns us as a Committee and one of the things we want to look at during this inquiry is actually the experience they get in terms of what is on offer, and yet if you look at many prospectuses they do not say how many hours of teaching they will have, it does not say who will teach them or what they are going to be asked to do in terms of their commitment. It is just an utter free-for-all. Does this not indicate that students really are not bothered provided they get there and do the least amount of work and get out with the best quality degree?

**Mr Bols:** I think it is certainly interesting, coming out of the student experience Wes referred to earlier, that actually students referred to the fact they have an awful lot of information when they are applying to university, particularly about accommodation and so on, but the area they particularly identified they wanted to get more information about was actually about their course, and that is things like reading lists, and so on. So actually I think students probably do want a bit more information about the academic side of that, but I think the key point, particularly in terms of something like contact hours, is looking at actually how that all fits together in terms of when they go to university they are getting an experience, certain outcomes—“learning outcomes” is the phrase which is used—which they expect to get at the end of that course or at the end of each module. In terms of something like contact hours it is not just as simple as saying, “Oh, yes, this course has more contact hours, therefore it is higher quality,” it is about looking at the quality of that contact but also how those contact hours have been put together within the context of, “This is the outcome of the course.”

**Q131 Chairman:** Can I just stop you there because I just think this is verbiage really. When I apply to the Open University to do a course I know exactly what I am getting. I know how many hours I am expected to work, I know what the input will be in terms of staff input, I know what it will take to be assessed, but for most universities, including the Russell Group universities so let us not differentiate, who is going to teach me I think is quite an important issue and yet I do not know. They might have research stars who I never see, but I get, you know, sort of a student. Do you think we ought to put all that down? Should that be part of the contract when students apply for a university, that that is the contract they get?

**Mr Bols:** I think it is certainly true that students want more information –

**Q132 Chairman:** No, I am not asking you that. Do you think it should be a contractual agreement between a university and an individual student so that they know what it is they are going to get?

**Mr Streeting:** Can I jump in on this point?

**Q133 Chairman:** Why can't Alex answer that? He is supposed to be in charge of quality!

**Mr Streeting:** Oh, I'm in charge of National Union –

**Q134 Chairman:** You are in charge of everything! All right.

**Mr Streeting:** I think you are absolutely right in terms of the thrust of your question, particularly when you have now got a mass higher education system and more diverse institutions designing and delivering the curriculum in very different ways. It is important that information is given out clearly and transparently to potential applicants, not least –

**Q135 Chairman:** What is the answer to my question?

**Mr Streeting:** In terms of what is actually presented in a prospectus, you are right, there can be more clear and quantifiable information, but it does not boil down quite so simply to the number of contact hours, and so on, because I think what you've missed there is more of a descriptive sense of the experience on offer. But should institutions be more clear about who they are going to be taught by? Yes, they should. Should they be setting out clear expectations, the amount of reading time, outside the lab or the lecture time? Yes, they should. Some of these things are quantifiable in terms of the actual hours, some of it is more descriptive, but you are absolutely right, that information is generally missing from the university prospectus.

**Q136 Chairman:** And it should be there?

**Mr Streeting:** It absolutely should be there. Whether or not we need to go down to the language of contract and consumerism, I think there are lots of pitfalls there for students, but nonetheless I do absolutely agree, the information should be there.

**Q137 Chairman:** Just while you have got the floor, your survey indicated that there is a very low level of satisfaction with facilities at UK universities. I think we as a Committee would accept that there has been a significant investment in our universities over the last ten years. I certainly feel that is the case. What are your concerns exactly? What sorts of facilities are you missing?

**Mr Streeting:** I think it is a range of things really. It is partly access to specialised facilities as and when they're needed. If you are, say, a student with more practical components to your course, say an art student or a musician, or even a scientist, getting access to those key facilities when you need them isn't always a prospect or possibility. Bear in mind students are now working longer hours than ever before with part-time paid employment and so the times when they are able to access those facilities

may vary significantly. It is also about things like library and learning resources, and IT facilities as well. If you think about the fact that you've got a whole range of key, particularly sort of core text and things like that which may be missing as and when you need them. So yes, I think the aesthetics of our campuses have been improving with that capital investment. Have all of these facilities necessarily been geared towards directly the student experience? I think that is more questionable. There are lots of nice, pretty buildings on campuses but we need to make sure they're actually serving and delivering for students as and when they need them.

**Q138 Chairman:** Okay. Thank you for that. Rob, in your evidence you stated that research was “a vital component of any quality teaching environment,” and indeed NUS backed that up, saying that “research activity is crucial to the development of effective pedagogy”. But several research institutions have been placed quite low down in terms of the Times Higher Education survey and indeed in terms of the NUS survey in terms of quality, indicating that perhaps teaching is a second order activity. Does that worry you? Do you share that concern?

**Mr Park:** It does actually worry me, yes, if teaching is a second priority for any institution. At the end of the day—dare I use that phrase?—researchers who are at the upper end of their research field will provide quality international standards of teaching and with collaborations across all universities and further education colleges we should be able to raise our standards of teaching.

**Q139 Chairman:** I want to link it to research, you see. It is no good you saying, or indeed the NUS saying, “Look, you have to have strong research in a university and that impacts on teaching and raises teaching quality,” and then on the other hand students saying, “Sorry, the major universities in terms of student satisfaction are saying, “Teaching is not very good here.”

**Mr Park:** If I may, one of the things we have said in our written evidence is that if the Government and the Committee could consider the introduction of national academies so that we would have access to research throughout the HE<sup>1</sup> and FE<sup>2</sup> sectors, it would not necessarily be vital to have in a university or a college a research or a research centre but there would be access to that research so that academics would be able to gain the experience by having part-time sabbaticals, for instance, at other research centres, for instance, in the 1994 Group or the Russell Group.

**Q140 Chairman:** Lisa, do you think every lecturer in higher education should be appropriately trained and qualified?

**Ms Carson:** I think there are elements of scholarship where I think they should be appropriately trained.

<sup>1</sup> Higher education

<sup>2</sup> Further education

**Q141 Chairman:** No, I am not talking about scholarship, I am talking about their ability to actually teach. Should they be qualified?

**Ms Carson:** Qualified to teach or able to teach would be my take on that.

**Q142 Chairman:** Now, that's a PhD thesis somewhere, is it not? Wes, yes or no? Should every lecturer in higher education be qualified to teach?

**Mr Streeting:** They should be appropriately trained and supported. What you don't want to do is have a system of qualification that is so cumbersome, bureaucratic and expensive that it deters good people from teaching. You definitely don't want that. But while progress has been made, you know, you've got the Higher Education Academy doing their national teaching fellowship scheme, you've got more higher education institutions than ever before putting in place structures to recognise and reward teaching. That's all great progress, but I think there are still too many horror stories of people being put in a position where they could be brilliant at writing books, top-notch academics, but do they have the interpersonal skills, the communication skills to teach? Not necessarily, and those people need to be supported. It happened in schools, it happens in colleges but it doesn't happen in our universities. So I think I would be cautious about moving towards a sort of PGCE-style training or accreditation route for teachers in higher education

**Q143 Chairman:** Wes, you cannot have it both ways. You cannot have this fluffy world whereby some students have, as you have rightly said, a really disastrous experience and I think we could all quote that. It was the same when Dr Iddon was teaching. I did not mean that in a personal sense! Sorry, I will stop there. The point I am making here is that if we want to raise teaching standards—and the Academy was supposed to do that—do you not feel, as a students' union, you ought to be campaigning to make sure that every university accepts the need for its academics to be properly trained?

**Mr Streeting:** I think if you ask the majority of students up and down the country, "Do you want your lecturers to be trained to teach?" they would say yes.

**Chairman:** Okay. Thanks for that.

**Q144 Ian Stewart:** I suppose, Chairman, if we're going to be truthful, I'm on the Council of Salford University as well. I am interested to hear your views. As an MP, I get families coming to me screaming that their child has not been able to get access to a medical course at a particular university with five grade A A-levels. How do you see the current system for access? What do you think could be put in its place, if it needs replacing, and what do you think would be better for people from poorer backgrounds who want to go to university?

**Mr Streeting:** In terms of the current situation, I would describe it as not good enough by any stretch of the imagination. You have got organisations like the Sutton Trust which produce very good and

robust research which demonstrates that there are plenty of well-qualified state applicants who do have the grades to get into straight A courses but nonetheless are choosing not to apply or do not get in. I think that is a big problem. There are people out there who are qualified but who don't necessarily see themselves on those courses.

**Q145 Ian Stewart:** What if they are not even given an interview?

**Mr Streeting:** That is also a big problem. In terms of how we need to change admissions, I think there are two things here. First, the best decisions about admissions rely not only on attainment but potential and take into account contextual factors relating to an applicant's background. We know that someone's family background or education background, their schooling, all of these things can have a direct impact on their attainment and their A-level scores don't necessarily measure that potential. We know there are universities like Bristol and St George's Medical School which taken into account those contextual factors, sometimes offer lower grade offers. There is all sorts of moral panic about social engineering, but actually those people they admit go on to perform just as well, or indeed out-perform their colleagues who are admitted from different social backgrounds on straight As. So I think the evidence is there to take that bold step.

**Q146 Ian Stewart:** So are you in favour of what you have just described as social engineering in those circumstances?

**Mr Streeting:** Big time. I think when we talk about phrases like "social engineering," let's be honest, the social engineering is the same social engineering that sees those universities disproportionately full of people from independent schools and top-performing state schools from relatively affluent areas. The second area I would change is the issue of the timing of the application strongly in favour of post-qualification applications. We know that too often applicants get under-predicted in terms of their scores, particularly disadvantaged students from the state sector where they get under-predicted. I think having a system whereby you know your grades when you apply to university is common sense. It would make the system not only fair but to be seen to be fair so you know who you are up against and what's going on there and it is also a case that I know the Government has pressed hard on and various parts of the higher education sector have pressed hard on, and another area where the higher education sector seems to do all it can to drag its heels through what I think is a common sense reform that will eventually happen, but not without an awful lot of wasted time in the meantime.

**Q147 Ian Stewart:** Were those answers on behalf of NUS?

**Mr Streeting:** Absolutely.

**Ian Stewart:** Okay. Can I just take you on to another area? We have heard evidence from professors sitting where you are today previously and they certainly implied that they spoke on behalf of students and



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9 February 2009 Wes Streeting, Alex Bols, Rob Park and Lisa Carson

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said that students reject the bursary scheme. We are aware that NUS policy is in favour of a bursary scheme. What do you say to that? Let me pose some rhetorical questions to help you give the answer, if you don't mind. Why should a bursary system help people who are applying in the Million+ Group as opposed to the Russell Group?

**Q148 Chairman:** This is a national bursary scheme.

**Mr Streeting:** I thought you were going to ask me a stream of questions and I was getting ready to write them all down! Look, I think the idea that there are these great pools of money out there to help students in hardship and students just don't want or need them is just cloud cuckoo land. How can that possibly be the reality when we know there are plenty of students out there who are in need of financial support, who are working longer hours. Are you telling me that if they knew that money was there they wouldn't be taking it? I've not met a single student who, if offered some free money, wouldn't take it. So I just think that is absolute nonsense. I think universities need to get a lot better at publicising their scheme, but I also think there is a deeply faulty systemic problem with them, that they are so widely variable across different institutions that, you know, it's not as straightforward as filling out your student finance application form and then being guaranteed a bursary.

**Q149 Chairman:** I am sorry to cut you off, but Ian Stewart's question was really quite specific about a national bursary scheme and the business of Russell Group universities having students paying in fees which will be distributed to these metropolitans.

**Mr Streeting:** Yes. The next point I was going to make was that we've got a widely variable bursary scheme where in Million+, for example, the average annual bursary awarded in 2006/7 was just £680; in Russell Group universities it was £1,790 and the issue is this: you could have one student at the University of Cambridge with exactly the same financial needs and experience as someone at the university down the road, at Anglia Ruskin. One will have an all-singing, all-dancing bursaries package which will help them out through their hardship at Cambridge and the other one will have a less generous bursary for Anglia Ruskin. That is not because Anglia Ruskin is mean-fisted, it is because they are more successful at widening participation. So you can have institutions with exactly the same sized cake but are having to chop it into much more thinly distributed slices because of their success at widening participation. I think there are two things in this: institutions which are most successful at widening participation, which is the stated Government objective, are punished financially, and secondly students who are in hardship are also punished financially depending on the choices of institutions. I think we need a system which is based truly on need, so you get a bursary that is based on what you need, not where you studied. To me, that is about increasingly support available through the National Student Support System. It makes it more effective, gets money where it is needed, is less

bureaucratic and actually the big drive behind institutional bursaries, as we remember back in 2004, was that there are these great carrots to incentivise access to universities that are poor and widening participation. The evidence so far suggests that bursaries have no impact or very little impact whatsoever on applicants' choices, so they are not widening participation.

**Q150 Ian Stewart:** Let us just move on a bit then to, I suppose, addressing political realities. We are in a very severe financial global situation and in those circumstances there are some hard choices to be made by Government and universities. What is the least bad option between keeping student numbers down—and I suppose therefore denying some people who are qualified to go to university from getting a university education—and keeping fees down and reducing the quality by requiring universities to do more with reduced cash? What is the least bad option?

**Mr Streeting:** I certainly don't think in the face of a challenging economic climate we should be suppressing or reducing student numbers. Not only, I think, is it cruel to raise aspirations and then close the door to people who have just finally reached that point where they are going to make the leap, I think also it does the economy in the longer term a disservice by having less well-qualified graduates. There are plenty of other routes available. We welcome the expansion of apprenticeships and the determination to reduce the academic/vocational divide, but certainly I don't think we should be suppressing student numbers. In terms of the graduate contribution to the cost of higher education, I would welcome in the 2009 review a fundamental debate about the current system of higher education funding and how it could be done better. I don't think the question for the 2009 review should be, "The cap—how high?" it should be, "How do we see the expansion of our higher education system continuing for the next 20 or 30 years? What's the best way of funding it so that institutions are funded fairly and students are funded fairly?"

**Chairman:** We know all the questions.

**Q151 Ian Stewart:** You have not mentioned the Government once.

**Mr Streeting:** In answer to the question, let's absolutely look at the graduate contribution. I think it could be collected fairly, but let's also look at increased public expenditure but also making sure the employers pay their fair way as well. The Deering compact identified three beneficiaries and it seems two are paying more than the other.

**Q152 Chairman:** You are in favour as a student union of actually increasing, if necessary, the fees?

**Mr Streeting:** No, we are certainly not in favour of increasing the fees under this current system. We are up for a debate on alternative ways of funding higher education. In fact, what I would propose is a situation where—

**Q153 Chairman:** So the state would pay more?

**Mr Streeting:** The investment needs to come from three sources. The Deering analysis—

**Q154 Chairman:** We know the three sources.

**Mr Streeting:** Well, the Deering analysis is still relevant and I think that –

**Chairman:** I do not think you are listening to Ian Stewart's questions. Ian made it very, very clear that there are very hard political choices to be made in a depression—sorry, in a recession!

**Dr Gibson:** A Freudian slip! Was that on behalf of the Liberal Party?

**Q155 Chairman:** No, no. So therefore the issue is, where do those funds come from? You are saying that in a recession we are going to ask employers for more?

**Mr Streeting:** Look, for me the issue is this: there is a better way –

**Chairman:** Please will you answer the question.

**Q156 Ian Stewart:** You seem to be reluctant to mention the Government. Why is that?

**Mr Streeting:** I am happy to see the Government putting more into higher education. I think I did say there are beneficiaries, the state, employers and graduates, and I am happy to see a debate about the graduate contributions open up, which is where you started, and would in fact advocate a system where those who earn more pay more. So, yes, some people might end up paying more and others would pay less depending on their earnings, but our position has always been consistent: higher education is worth every penny in terms of the taxpayers' contribution, in terms of what it delivers for the economy and what it delivers for society. Employers still are not paying their fair share, even in a recession.

**Q157 Ian Stewart:** Can I just press you on that, Wes, because we have read the Government's papers as well and policy, but the latest research is appearing to show that employers are actually contributing less and that the Government is contributing, as a society, more. What do you have to say about that?

**Mr Streeting:** Employers were clearly set out as a major beneficiary of higher education. It seems to me the only time employers are happy to put their hands in their pockets at the moment is when they tie all sorts of strings to programmes and institutions and want to meddle much more in the curriculum and the direction of our institutions to the extent that some universities have become business-facing institutions and I think there is a real balance to be struck here. I think employers benefit enormously from well-qualified graduates in this country and should be prepared to pay more, but if we're serious about taking the higher education system forward, it is in need of more investment. We are pragmatic and open to a debate about the sources of the contribution but, yes, our higher education system does need more money. We absolutely concur with that.

**Q158 Chairman:** I just want to ask you, Rob, you will notice that Wes never mentioned part-time students once in his answer. They are ruled out! It is still a full-time student debate. I am just being facetious! Do we actually need to address this issue of part-time students?

**Mr Park:** Yes.

**Q159 Chairman:** At the expense of full-time students?

**Mr Park:** Well, I think it would be unfair either for this Committee or ourselves to pit one group of students against another. The part-time sector clearly has set its mission from the 1950s onwards in getting people who are building families, in work, or those who are changing jobs, setting their aspirations higher and up-skilling and re-training –

**Q160 Chairman:** Who is going to pay for it, Rob?

**Mr Park:** I am just going to come on to that, actually.

**Q161 Chairman:** No, just tell us who is going to pay for it.

**Mr Park:** Well, ultimately in the short-term the students are going to have to pay more.

**Q162 Chairman:** The students?

**Mr Park:** Yes. That's not my opinion, it's what is going to happen.

**Chairman:** It is what is going to happen. I will move on to Gordon.

**Q163 Mr Marsden:** Thank you, Chairman. I am going to talk about part-time students. Although it is a matter of historic rather than current interest in terms of declaration, I will say that I was a part-time course tutor at the Open University for nearly 20 years. Therefore, when I read in your written evidence, Lisa, what you said about the overwhelming majority of Open University students not receiving support from their employers that was something which struck a chord in terms of my experience. The problem is, both in terms of the absolute debate about funding and the specific debate on part-timers and ELQ the Government has consistently produced statistics which have suggested that a significant number of part-time students, mature students, do get funding from their employers. That is because lots of them tend to have professional degrees. How do we get across the fact that that is not the case for the majority and what sort of funding regime would you like to see in the future?

**Ms Carson:** On part-time students, I think the figure which came out when we were looking at ELQ was that of those students who are paying their own fees, as it were, only 17 per cent were supported by employers. That leaves a hell of a lot of students who are not supported by their employers. Particularly when students are mature and part-time they are looking at expanding their horizons and actually moving on from where they are. Therefore, an employer is not particularly disposed to actually supporting them in furthering

that development. If they are actually wanting to better themselves and actually get that education which the Government has clearly stated there is a need for, they are having to do it off their own bat.

**Q164 Mr Marsden:** That is helpful. I want to ask you, Rob, if I may, just picking up on that and on the current situation which my colleague Ian Stewart talked about, these are hard political decision times and they are hard economic decision times. We have heard a number of calls, and in fact we touched on this subject in our own last report, for there to be an equalisation of funding criteria between part-time and full-time students. But if we are to do that, would it be reasonable, in your view, in a downturn that more attention should be given to the skills outcome of part-time study as opposed to the purely academic?

**Mr Park:** Yes. I think the skills outcome actually benefits the economy, the students and our future employers and is a worthwhile test.

**Q165 Mr Marsden:** Can I, because time is tight, press both of you on a second question? Again, there is much debate about the so-called gold standard impact of A-levels and everything, but we know that a large number of not just part-time students but mature students, whether they are part or full-time, come either with few A-levels or with a mixture of A-levels which are not appropriate. In your experience, Lisa, in terms of OUSA, obviously the situation in the Open University is different but many of your students also go on and do courses at other universities. Are you satisfied that in general the HE system recognises non-A-level qualifications, not just vocational ones but diplomas, and where are we going to be in terms of getting them to recognise some of the new apprenticeship qualifications which come forward?

**Ms Carson:** I have concerns about higher education in general accepting those from the point of view that it is seen more that their catchment is the younger student who is straight out of school and basically hasn't left the system. When it comes to the mature student, it is a different set of issues and they are coming from all different backgrounds, so you have got students who have life experience which isn't a paper qualification but it is equally valid as experience towards setting them up to be able to cope with higher education.

**Q166 Mr Marsden:** Rob, what is your take on this? Birkbeck, as I think most people will know, has got a fairly broad policy in terms of accepting people's backgrounds but that is not true, I would suggest, of the majority of Russell Group universities?

**Mr Park:** Yes, that's correct. We do support PQAs, the post-qualification admission, also based on a case by case basis for the students as well and individual faculties and courses will set their own admissions targets within a quality assurance framework. One thing I just wanted to talk about was the entrance tests, which we have talked about in the original questions the Committee set down. Our feeling is that if there was a move to introduce

entrance tests in either some institutions or across the board, then we would oppose it on the principle of, "What are we testing for?" Are we testing people's ability to take tests or are we testing people's ability to be able to develop into a good student and therefore be one of the success stories which our economy needs for the future?

**Q167 Dr Harris:** If it is the latter, you would welcome that? If there was academic research which showed that the test actually was quite good at identifying the people who do well in their degree and was actually quite hard to tutor for, then you would accept their extension in order to make it fairer, or would you be opposed to it anyway?

**Mr Park:** If it was the traditional written examination, then we would oppose it because I think you are testing someone on how to take a test.

**Q168 Dr Harris:** No, no, let us say it was shown in academic research that the test, written, oral or visual for all I care, showed that it actually did not select those people who could be tutored for tests and were good at exams but actually very well judge those people who are able to benefit, then would you support the rolling out regardless of the format? The format is a secondary issue, is it not?

**Mr Park:** Yes.

**Chairman:** I think there was a misunderstanding there on that.

**Dr Iddon:** I think I will address this one to Alex as he has been very quiet up to now!

**Chairman:** Can I say, Brian, that Lisa has to leave at ten past and I want to finish this line of questioning by ten past.

**Q169 Dr Iddon:** We have created a football-like league of universities, have we not, where the standards in the premier division are much higher than the standards in the lower divisions? Would you agree with that?

**Mr Bols:** No. I think the important thing to recognise in terms of different institutions is that actually different institutions offer very different student experiences and offer actually quite different qualifications. They are broadly comparable but just because they are different doesn't mean that they are worse and I think the fact that we have such a diverse HE system is actually one of the benefits of it, the fact that a student from a research intensive course comes out with a set of skills based on the fact that it is a very research intensive course, the skills that go along with that. But actually then coming out of the student experience report which NUS produced a significantly higher proportion of students at Russell Group institutions are likely to go on to further academic study, so actually that is a relevant set of skills for those students, and actually looking at, for example, Liverpool John Moores, their "World of Work" scheme, working very closely with employers to provide highly equipped, highly skilled graduates for the workplace. Different institutions provide different skills within a broad

framework. I think the key point is that students, when they are applying to institutions, are not clearly advised through that process of what a different qualification from a different institution means.

**Q170 Dr Iddon:** I am a chemist, Alex, and that is not the perception employers have of chemistry students across the spectrum. Why have employers got a different perception to the one you have got?

**Mr Bols:** As I say, I think the key point is to recognise that different institutions offer different experiences.

**Q171 Dr Iddon:** But a chemistry degree is a chemistry degree. It is a factual course. It is teaching basic knowledge in chemistry and whether it is applicable in different circumstances.

**Mr Streeting:** But our employers use grounded in evidence and factor their perceptions based on the market and prestige which exists between different institutions.

**Q172 Dr Iddon:** I am just asking you the question, why have employers got a different perception than you have got as the NUS?

**Mr Streeting:** I think that is actually more to do with snobbery and misunderstanding on the part of employers and the discourse that takes place in the national media rather than an evidenced assessment of what's taking place at different institutions up and down the country.

**Q173 Dr Iddon:** Okay. Let me pitch this one at all of you. The Quality Assurance Agency, that is supposed to maintain quality across the universities in the same course and they should be roughly comparable with the proviso you have made. Do you think the Quality Assurance Agency has the teeth to do that? Is it doing the job it was set out to do or is it failing in its mission?

**Mr Bols:** I think the key point about the Quality Assurance Agency is that it is doing a very good job at what it is being asked to do. In terms of actually going in and ensuring that institutions manage the quality assurance procedures, they do a good job at that, but the key point you are asking is actually about standards. Each individual institution as the awarding body is obviously responsible for the standards of that award, but that needs to be within a broadly comparable system, and actually I think one of the key areas we would want to highlight is the external examiner system because it is actually the external examiner system which provides the comparability of qualifications across the sector. Actually, in terms of the external examiner system, it is a system which is certainly poorly understood by students let alone the general public.

**Q174 Dr Iddon:** Does it work, do you think?

**Mr Bols:** I think there is a lot of investment which would need to be put into the external examiner system, I think having a national body or national network whereby they are able to get different

experiences of standards in different institutions, additional training and actually the fact that people don't want to go and apply to the external examiners under the current system, partly because of the lack of recognition, partly because it doesn't support in terms of the career development, but also the fact that they get a nominal salary for that. But actually if you look at the salary, for example, which those members of staff who do institutional audits receive it is not comparable. So if the external examiner system is the system by which standards are comparable across the sector, then I think we need to put more investment into that, in short.

**Q175 Dr Iddon:** Does the QAA ever ask the consumer, namely the students, about the quality of universities? Are you consulted by the QAA?

**Mr Streeting:** Certainly there is a student written submission. The auditor will go in and actually meet the student panel from the Union. QAA is actually actively consulted and pressed ahead with introducing student auditors, which I think is a really welcome development. I have to say in terms of representing the user interest in the quality assurance process I think the QAA ought to be commended for the way in which they have driven this agenda forward and actually pressed harder than most other sector agencies on actually engaging students in the learning experience. At a time when 23 per cent of our members tell us that they are currently directly involved in shaping their learning experience, the assessment curriculum, content, design, and so on, but 57 per cent actually want to be, that disconnect exists and I think the QAA really has pressed ahead on that agenda.

**Chairman:** I know that Lisa has to go because she has a plane to catch.

**Q176 Dr Iddon:** I am just turning to Lisa now, and Rob indeed, but Lisa first. First, second, upper twos, lower twos, it is a nonsense now, is it not? The degree classification system is a nonsense, is it not?

**Ms Carson:** It is not something I particularly understand in that what I have in my university is a different system. So I do not fully understand it, having not studied in the traditional university, as it were.<sup>3</sup>

**Q177 Dr Iddon:** What would you replace it with, Lisa?

**Ms Carson:** I think the qualifications need to be recognised, what the standards are. I think the content of the qualification, some sort of summary and some sort of record, is very important.

**Q178 Dr Iddon:** So you think the student record from a different module should follow the student not just the degree classification, is that what you are saying?

<sup>3</sup> Note from witness: I misinterpreted this question. For the record, my university does of course operate within the current system of degree classification.

*Ms Carson:* Yes.

**Q179 Dr Iddon:** A percentage award would be more meaningful than a first or a second?

*Ms Carson:* I believe so.

**Q180 Dr Iddon:** What about you, Rob?

*Mr Park:* If it were to be replaced, personally I'd replace it with a distinction, merit and a pass system, as currently happens with Master's degrees. There would be a transcript with it as well and that wouldn't just detail academic achievements but it would also talk about other projects and activities which that student had managed to achieve in their time, particularly in a part-time environment.

**Q181 Mr Marsden:** Wes, you said in your evidence you thought the current credit accumulation award system was not fit for purpose and you have served on the Burgess Group. Would it be fair to say then—and I will ask Rob also for his view on this—that the progress we have made in terms of credit accumulation and credit transfer has been fairly glacial?

*Mr Streeting:* I think that's fair. At the moment we've got the trial taking place of the new Higher Education Achievement Record but will what comes out of the Burgess review actually match the ambition of the report or tackle the actual problem we set out? No, it won't, and once again I think this is an area where a clear analysis has been set out with mass stakeholder involvement across the

higher education sector, a common sense solution is proposed and then the institutions drag their heels. I think that is a big problem.

**Q182 Mr Marsden:** Rob, just on that point, one of the other things we know is that more and more higher education is being delivered by further education and the links between HE and FE are much stronger. You said in your evidence—and I was really interested in this—that FE qualifications “should be designed to become a stepping stone to Level 4 qualifications.” Would you like to elaborate on that at all?

*Mr Park:* Well, there certainly shouldn't be a barrier. They should be welcomed within the higher education system so that people can start at Level 1 and progress through to whatever level they desire, or their workplace or their circumstances desire them to be.

**Q183 Mr Marsden:** So it is a circulation route rather than just sort of saying, “You've always got to come into HE,” because we know that more people are probably going to want to do FE qualifications subsequent to HE qualifications?

*Mr Park:* Yes.

**Chairman:** I am very, very sorry but we have come to an end of this first part and we have overrun by nine minutes. You said you had to be away by ten past, Lisa, so we have made that. Can we thank you very much indeed Bob Park, Lisa Carson, Wes Streeting and Alex Bols, for your session. Thank you very much indeed.

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*Witnesses:* **Carrie Donaghy**, student, Northumbria University; **Ricky Chotai**, student, University of Salford; **Lucy Hopkins**, student, University of Loughborough; **Arnold Sarfo-Kantanka**, student, Brunel University; and **James Williamson**, student, University of Sheffield, gave evidence.

**Q184 Chairman:** Can I welcome the first of our afternoon panels, the second panel of the day but the first of our self-appointed student panels, and could I thank you enormously for taking the time and trouble to come down to Westminster today. If I could just introduce for the record Ricky Chotai from the University of Salford, Carrie Donaghy from Northumbria University, Lucy Hopkins from the University of Loughborough, Arnold Sarfo-Kantanka from Brunel University and last but by no means least James Williamson from the University of Sheffield. Welcome to you. What I want to do is to give you two minutes—and my colleague is going to time you with his new watch—to basically say, starting with you, Carrie, what is a good university experience and what is one significant thing you would change?

*Ms Donaghy:* Okay. Well, university life I think is an amazing experience and I would not have chosen any other path. I believe that choosing the right course for you and having a relationship with lecturers is fundamentally important. Effective communication between staff and students means that learning will be more pleasurable. Furthermore, I believe it is important to have an advice centre where students can access independent advice on

different issues with their lives and courses. I feel that to feel more at ease whilst studying the university has to prepare their students for real life jobs. At Northumbria I have wholly enjoyed my course because it is the only university with a fully functional student law office—law is what I do—which means I am able to meet real clients and run real cases. That fact that I have been able to see how a real firm works has helped me to prepare for working in a real law firm. Within the current job market it is important that universities do prepare their students for jobs as not only are students now competing for jobs but many experienced people are losing their jobs, meaning that graduates are up against those who have a lot more experience. Even though I myself have had a very positive experience within university because of the excellent teaching and support that I have received from Northumbria, I believe there are some factors which do hinder university life. It is clear that student debt is progressively rising. Recent reports show that student debt is rocketing with the average student having around £6,000 of debt every year, leaving them owing well over £18,000 by the time they leave. It is a very worrying issue for students, especially with today's economic climate and it puts a huge

burden on them being able to cope with this debt. Also, students are constantly trying to struggle with part-time jobs on top of this.

**Q185 Chairman:** You did brilliantly there! James?

**Mr Williamson:** What I think makes a university a good experience is a good students' union. Of course that means good sports facilities, bars, a cinema, various political, charitable, national and departmental societies. However, the students' union should not primarily be a leisure centre but a support for students. To me that means a well-funded union supported by a university campaigning against discrimination and higher fees but also provides students with expert advice on financial, educational or even legal matters like my union does. Student representation—and this is the main point—within the university is extremely valuable. Allowing course reps to participate in such student committees can lead to a more flexible approach to types of assessment feedback and can alert problems to departments which they were not aware of like a lack of pastoral support. A union aiding this through union links is a real benefit. The part that I would like to change is the amount of debt endured by students. This has come about as a result of rising fees and the privatisation of student halls among other reasons. Students now leave university with over £15,000 of debt and no longer have the promise of a well-paid job afterwards. Working during the course, which is necessary for some, lowers students' chances of gaining a good two on a first degree. I hope you appreciate the effect of this. Where parents can afford to meet the cost of living students gain better degrees; where parents can't afford it, their children's job prospects are damaged. When debts are so high and repayment takes so long many poorer students may decide to avoid university due to its cost, especially at the moment. University is too expensive and there are not enough grants offered to poorer students.

**Q186 Chairman:** Okay. I will have to stop you there. Thank you very much indeed. Lucy?

**Ms Hopkins:** My three years at Loughborough so far have been exceptional and it is very difficult for me to pinpoint what exactly has made my experience so rich and fulfilling. My student experience is not just my own, it is the vast amount of people at Loughborough who work hard to enhance not only the academic but also the social wellbeing of all its students. The students' union prides itself on making sure that any activity it undertakes is for the sole purpose of bettering student life. So what makes the student experience? Well, for me the experience is more than just the degree you achieve at the end of your time at university. If I were to use one phrase to encapsulate which makes or breaks a student experience it would be getting involved. The endless opportunities available at university are wasted if students are not properly encouraged to embrace them and push themselves. Loughborough's commitment to excellence encourages its students to get involved, to try things and embrace change. As a result, students not only develop academically but

are equipped for every aspect of their lives and careers. What I have found at my university is that there really is something for everyone. You will meet people from all over the world. You will be able to join one or more of over 100 clubs and societies, perhaps learn a new sport, fundraise for charity and learn that helping the community can be really fun. The universities which offer more, which proactively encourage and show their students how many opportunities they have, these are the ones where the students are happiest. In terms of my own personal journey, I came from a very small girls' school and came to Loughborough to complete an art degree. I ended up running a campus of 6,000 people and my time as a full-time student doing this alongside is not uncommon at Loughborough. These extra opportunities have given me invaluable skills and experiences that I never would have had had it not been for my university and our fantastically committed union. Loughborough gives you the opportunity to push yourself and it is because of the confidence and experiences which my university experience has given me that I feel able to sit in front of you all today. There is a huge devotion and loyalty that students show to Loughborough and we are always talking about "giving back what Loughborough has given to you." Students take an enormous pride in getting as involved as possible, whereas at some universities that may be deemed unfashionable.

**Q187 Chairman:** Thank you very much indeed. No faults for Loughborough! Ricky?

**Mr Chotai:** In regards to the question asked about one factor which makes a good university experience, in my opinion it is a really extremely difficult question to answer. I don't think you'll find two students at all who will tell you the same answer, but personally for me the main one would have to be the high standard of teaching, which is good value for the tuition fees we are paying for our course. There's nothing more frustrating when you go to a lecture and you have a lecturer just reading Powerpoint slides, especially when they are available at other sources like on the internet and the virtual learning environments we have as well. On the other hand, we have some lecturers who give out more information during our lectures and manage to make them much more interesting and interactive. These are lecturers who are improving standards of teaching and make the course more enjoyable and exciting and that ultimately leads to a fantastic university experience. If there is one thing I wanted to change—again, it is another difficult question, but for me it is understanding about students as well. I think universities have gone away from understanding their students and the support they need to offer, as mentioned throughout the panel. A lot of students need to work part-time or they've got childcare commitments. This is especially so at Salford and I feel that the university is struggling to understand the needs of those. One example I can use from my own experience is timetabling. Last year the timetable was released two days before semester started. That had serious implications for students.

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9 February 2009 Carrie Donaghy, Ricky Chotai, Lucy Hopkins, Arnold Sarfo-Kantanka and James Williamson

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As a result of that some people had to leave their part-time jobs because they couldn't give information about availability. Childcare issues were a real nightmare to sort out as well. Even lecturers weren't turning up because they didn't know they were scheduled to teach because of that issue. In any other organisation it wouldn't be acceptable so there's no reason why in a university it is acceptable. My university is forever telling me we're the "customers" and yet although this is true we are more than customers, we are here to educate, fulfil and expand our horizons.

**Q188 Chairman:** I will leave that there, thank you. We will come back to all these issues, so do not worry. Arnold?

**Mr Sarfo-Kantanka:** Good afternoon. I personally feel that a good university experience is two-fold. You've got an academia side and you've got a social side. The two combined are powerful. The academia side: a lot of universities provide lectures, they provide seminars, *et cetera*, but I think what makes a good university experience is the ability to engage students more with the clubs and societies on campus because if you look at today's working environment a lot of graduate recruiters are looking not just for your degree, they are looking for the social skills and by getting involved in these clubs and societies you are able to build up your interpersonal skills, your time management and your team work and when you go to interviews, *et cetera*, you are able to give tangible examples. So that's the main thing, apart from everything else that's been covered, which I believe produces a good university experience. One factor I look to improve, number one, is student debt, but I think two or three people have covered that.

**Q189 Chairman:** That is right, yes, but you would echo that?

**Mr Sarfo-Kantanka:** I will echo that, agreed. Another factor which I believe can be improved is employability, career aspirations. A lot of people want to be a consultant, they want to be a lawyer, they want to be a politician, but what does that involve? I don't think the nail is really hit on the head when it comes to universities. It is so broad, the different areas that the university can get into, but I don't think that issue is really touched upon between the academia and other organisations such as Elevation Networks, who aim to provide that networking platform for young people to interact with these different employers at the forefront of industries so that they can get more tangible knowledge rather than the generic information available online and in publications.

**Chairman:** Thank you very much indeed. You have finished perfectly on time, so Brunel must teach you time management! First of all, thank you all very, very much indeed for that. What we will do—and we have got a whole series of different things we want to throw at you—we are not going down the panel, I just want an indication that you want to respond and then we will move on, but will you keep your answers

as brief as possible. We are going to start at looking at why you actually applied to go to university and what are the problems.

**Q190 Mr Marsden:** Actually, if I could get literally a quick "Yes" or "No" from everybody I think it would be quite useful because one of the issues which constantly is being talked about these days is the importance of the courses in the universities as opposed to whether a particular university is a good university or not so good. Could I just ask all of you in turn, when you applied was it the course or was it the university you went for above all?

**Ms Donaghy:** Course.

**Mr Williamson:** University.

**Ms Hopkins:** Course.

**Mr Chotai:** A combination!

**Mr Sarfo-Kantanka:** It was definitely a combination of the two.

**Q191 Mr Marsden:** An interesting mix. One of the other things, of course, which people say compared with students 20 or 30 years ago is, "Oh, you have so much more information because you can go on the internet and you can do this, that and the other." How much information did you have about the sort of contact hours you would have, the sorts of numbers of people you would have in your class, on your course, and if you had known about those things beforehand would it have made any difference to where you went for? James, do you want to start?

**Mr Williamson:** I didn't know very much about all of the things you've just mentioned. I only knew about what would be covered in the course and that was the main reason—in fact I did choose my course and that was probably, as they said, a combination.

**Q192 Mr Marsden:** You are doing a joint course, are you not?

**Mr Williamson:** Yes, I am. It was about the content.

**Mr Chotai:** Before I applied again it was mainly content. However, at the open day we were given information regarding hours of expected studying and although I'd already applied and had an offer, that was then backed by the decision as to whether that would be my first or second choice. All that information was given.

**Q193 Mr Marsden:** Lucy, can I ask you because according to your c.v. here you said you started off at Loughborough with a diploma and then decided to stay on, so you are probably quite a good person to ask the question of. There is a lot of discussion now. As you know, the diploma is beginning to start in schools and we have got much more emphasis put on apprenticeships. Do you think there is enough emphasis given in universities to the potential for students coming in with non-traditional qualifications like A-levels?

**Ms Hopkins:** Well, on my course I do graphic design and there is a lot of people who didn't do, say, foundation art. They might have done a foundation in engineering or lots of different types of art. So there is a lot of different types of people on our course. They didn't all do the same foundation art at all and they

came from colleges or from different universities. I don't quite understand the question. Is that what you meant?

**Q194 Mr Marsden:** Sort of. It is about what qualifications you had to get into the university. The majority of the people here on the panel, for example, have done A-levels.

**Ms Hopkins:** Well, at Loughborough all I had to do to get onto the foundation is you had to show obviously your art work, but you just had to pass you're A-levels and it didn't matter which ones they were.

**Mr Marsden:** So it was just jumping through a hoop.

**Q195 Mr Boswell:** Can I talk a bit about time, and I would like to get a handle a little more precisely on contact time, how much you actually get and the footnote, is it what you thought you would get or it is enough? Secondly, if any of you want to say how much time you spend on either paid or unpaid activities as part of your university week. Are you being taught more or studying more than you are working, for example? Just one other thing on this: do you think that the taxi meter clocks to about the same result at your university as anywhere else? If you are going to have a degree, this is the effect of your own effort and the process of time. When you have been through the process at your own institution, do you get the impression that students you talk to from other places are working as hard, putting in as much effort and their degree will be the same as yours? So that is really what are you doing around your studies, what are you finding time to do outwith your studies—and I am not suggesting it is a waste of time—are you really putting in as much effort as counterparts, more or less? I do not know if anyone would like to offer on that? Carrie, you are smiling there.

**Ms Donaghy:** I am. With regards teaching time, I would say I get round about 14 hours a week –

**Q196 Mr Boswell:** In different formats? I do not want the detail, but some seminars and some lectures?

**Ms Donaghy:** Yes. I would say private study about at least 30 hours a week, which is quite a lot.

**Q197 Mr Boswell:** That is high. No time for working then?

**Ms Donaghy:** I don't have a part-time job because I'm in my third year law degree and I wouldn't have time to do it.

**Mr Williamson:** I started with 14 to 18 hours and that stayed about the same for the first and second year. I spent a year abroad in my third year so that doesn't really count, but in my fourth year recently I've probably done eight to nine hours work in the university. That's the first question. The second question, now I only do four but that's because I'm going to do a sort of extended essay, so I spend more time on that. Outside, I probably spend 15 to 20 hours working a week.

**Q198 Chairman:** Ricky, is your degree worth the same as if you had gone to Cambridge?

**Mr Chotai:** Not at all. I think there's a lot of impressions amongst employers about—earlier it was mentioned about the football league of universities. In my opinion, in my degree, yes, there is. My degree isn't just as worthy as a business management degree from the University of Manchester. Employers, I think, immediately pick up on that and if I managed to get a first class 2:1 against one of those students I think my application would be further down the list. I think that's my honest opinion.

**Mr Sarfo-Kantanka:** I agree with Ricky. With the universities in the top 10, top 20 in the Times 100, let's say, there's more of a support network there and you will notice that with a lot of these corporates there's a lack of resource and capabilities if you look at it from that perspective, so there's only so much resource they can allocate to going to universities and trying to sell them the vision of, you know, "Come to work for us," *et cetera, et cetera*. To basically follow on from what Ricky is saying, my degree, yes, I can come out with a first 2:1 but I feel I have to work that little bit harder external to the university to bolster up my c.v. because I've got to stand out in some sort of way, if that makes sense.

**Q199 Chairman:** Okay. The same with you, Lucy?

**Ms Hopkins:** Yes. I think what university you go to make a huge difference and I really don't actually think that's fair. If every course is meant to be the same, then it's meant to be the same. Obviously with my course it's quite specialist, but I'm meant to be in 9.00 to 5.00 every single day. They have a tutor available every single day and a different type of tutor every single day, and then we have four hours of lectures. Obviously it's a very different subject with it being art.

**Q200 Mr Boswell:** So other people are not doing as much as you are probably?

**Ms Hopkins:** Well, for the law obviously it's a different type of learning than it is with graphics. We've got 9.00 to 5.00, obviously a lot of research and that kind of thing, but obviously I've got no time for a job with that as well.

**Q201 Mr Boswell:** Just a final point because you have referred to the fact that you manager of the campus. How much time can you spend on that as well and does it actually improve your personal development as well as the work you do as a student?

**Ms Hopkins:** I think the work I do as a student—the work I do outside of being a student—is probably far much more important than what I can get with my degree because so many people—there's about 40 people doing my degree, graphic design, and there are so many people wanting to be a graphic designer and the fact that I've done this stuff as well adds so much more to my c.v. than anything else.



**Q202 Mr Boswell:** So it gives you an edge, does it?

**Ms Hopkins:** Definitely.

**Q203 Dr Iddon:** How important do you think it is for a lecturer also to be involved in research, or if not research certainly scholarship? Can I start with Arnold? Do you think if one of your lecturers is closely involved in research, runs a research group, it betters their teaching?

**Mr Sarfo-Kantanka:** I would like to think so, but I still would like to have that relationship with the lecturers. I tell a lot of students who are in the year below me that you've got to build up a relationship. They're not professors and doctors for no reason. They've got a wealth of knowledge that you need to leech off to an extent because really and truly I'm in my final year now and if a lecturer is off doing research all of the time but they're not engaging with the student, then that puts me at a bit of a disadvantage because I need to read around the topics, I need to read around the modules –

**Q204 Dr Iddon:** Does that happen a lot, Arnold, the lecturers going AWOL when they should be teaching you?

**Mr Sarfo-Kantanka:** I cannot speak for everyone, but I've seen it in cases—not in my university but in other universities where that has happened and I think that's an issue which might need to be addressed.

**Q205 Dr Iddon:** Okay. Ricky, how about Salford, where I used to teach incidentally, so be careful?

**Mr Chotai:** I think if you posed that question regarding research to a lot of students in Salford University they obviously wouldn't have a clue what you're talking about. I think telling people about research—it just isn't out there in Salford. I think the only reason I know personally about research in university is that my Dad's a lecturer at Lancaster! I know also there's a lot of student liaison work within the schools, within the faculties. I think that's why I know about it. I think if you asked one of my colleagues on business and management they wouldn't be aware of anything about the research going on in the business school, they wouldn't have an idea of figures or anything like that. I think it's important, to go back to your original question.

**Q206 Dr Iddon:** I am sorry for rushing you. Lucy?

**Ms Hopkins:** I think it's very important. I like to think that when I'm having a lecture it's not the same lecture that he or she has been teaching for the last ten years. I like to know that it's updated, that they're taking an interest in what they're teaching us, carrying on, and that I'm learning something that's up to date and that I can quote my lectures in my essays. I think that's very important.

**Mr Williamson:** I agree with what you've just said, but it depends on the subjects as well to an extent. I mean, I do German and there is very little point in reading and talking with the sort of linguistics and really deep research into the linguistics. All one really needs to learn is how to speak German. That's important, too, having content, but in my own department, politics,

it's incredibly valuable to learn the things that specific lecturers have interests in and you get such a broad knowledge.

**Q207 Dr Iddon:** Carrie, you are a lawyer. It must be important in your area?

**Ms Donaghy:** I think it's vital that they do. I think it obviously changes all the time so they constantly need to be updating and constantly need to be researching, and that does happen. I see it happening.

**Q208 Dr Iddon:** Let me switch the questioning now to whether first class degrees from different universities are the same. I was disappointed with the NUS answer, I will tell you. They were giving a perception that I did not think the NUS would give. Do you agree with it? I think you all heard the NUS guys tell us about the quality of degrees from different universities and two of you at least at this end of the table have said there is a difference in degrees between universities. Let me start, therefore, with Carrie. Do you have a different opinion?

**Ms Donaghy:** I think if you compare my degree with somewhere like Cambridge, I think if someone looked a lot deeper into the actual degree they would see that—I'm going to make a political point here, but they would see that my course is just as good. I don't think employers see that. I think if they looked at my course, if they saw the work that we actually do, then I think –

**Q209 Dr Iddon:** I appreciate your course is good, but do you think it is comparable right across the university spectrum, or do we have this football league I described earlier?

**Ms Donaghy:** No, I don't think it's the same. I don't think it's a level playing field at all.

**Mr Williamson:** I think it's impossible for it to be the same, just on the basis that it's not centrally marked. It's not like the A-levels where it's supposed to be pretty much on the same level. But as to whether it's a straight football league, of course it can't be like that because it's sort of individual departments are much better than other individual departments. But whether it should be the same, I'm not sure.

**Ms Hopkins:** Just so that I don't repeat everybody else, I find it very annoying that in terms of art, if I say that I'm doing art at Loughborough people say, "Well, do you play sport?" It's almost like you're getting judged by—like, say, Brighton is actually fantastic for art but people might not know that and people might have already an opinion about Brighton University than they do about art at university and it is unfair that they should be taking it department by department at the different universities rather than taking Loughborough as a university, because that's unfair. People have this false impression that Loughborough is just about sport. Obviously it's got a fantastic engineering department, a fantastic art department and people just think about Loughborough as sport. I think it's unfair that employers think like that.

**Q210 Dr Harris:** Just a couple of quick questions. If you wanted to, would it be possible for you to copy someone else's work from the internet, for example, in your course work or in your essays for those of you for whom it is relevant? If you did, do you feel that would be detected? I know you would never do it.

**Ms Donaghy:** I think it would definitely be detected. I mean, this year I've just submitted a piece of course work and it had to be submitted with a disk so they can check for plagiarism and things like that. So you could definitely not copy it all. Definitely not.

**Mr Williamson:** The only way I could think of copying it is if I actually paid someone else directly to write it for me. That's the only way I could think of doing it.

**Q211 Dr Harris:** Have you thought of doing that?

**Mr Williamson:** No!

**Q212 Dr Harris:** Anyone with any different views?

**Mr Sarfo-Kantanka:** I know the university has a system now where you hand in your assignment or your dissertation online. They have a system which checks. They've got like a database of different journals from way back, so if they pick up any sentences or anything that's directly quoted, you haven't cited it or you haven't referenced it appropriately, then they'll be able to pick up on plagiarism.

**Q213 Dr Harris:** Let me ask you a different question.

If it was decided that we needed to have more people doing science subjects, subjects where we were sort, and they said, "Right, we're going to convert some courses that were not so useful to the country—I am not saying that they are not academic courses, media studies is often quoted, do you think your student body generally would be happy with that or do you feel that people should be entitled to study what they want and as long as they meet the qualifications the university should lay on the places if they can?"

**Mr Chotai:** I think that students should be allowed to study what they feel they want to at university, whether that's media studies or television or radio, or whether it's business and management. I think if the Government was looking to do something like that, it could maybe look at financial incentives for the degrees they were wanting to push that they felt were more relevant, just as in the case where teacher training is done. The specific courses where teachers are needed the extra money is pumped into it.

**Q214 Dr Harris:** So the Government could say, "Right, we'll give you free education for the courses we think are useful but we're going to charge you, so poor people can't do media studies because we're going to have a means test on the courses we don't think are that useful? Is that what you're proposing?"

**Mr Chotai:** I'm not proposing in that sort of way, but I just think everyone should have the option to study what they want to, but if there us a demand for pharmacists, *et cetera*, and that's vital for the country there's got to be encouragement along there. I would say financial, in my opinion, is the best way to

encourage students but I wouldn't say you should discriminate against anyone who wants to do media studies.

**Q215 Dr Harris:** Does anyone disagree with that?

**Mr Williamson:** Only in respect that you should put more money into both departments. I can't see why that's not possible.

**Q216 Dr Harris:** So it's wrong?

**Mr Williamson:** Well, I'm not a government minister. I don't decide that.

**Q217 Dr Harris:** I am asking you. Say you can only afford a certain number of places. In order to have more engineers, say, or maths graduates for maths teaching, or—perhaps not accountants these days but other useful things, people with Chinese, for example, or who speak Indian and if there is a set amount and they have to cut something, do you feel that is fair, because that would mean certain people would not be able to go to do the things they wanted to do?

**Mr Williamson:** I think it depends on who you're offering it to. If you're opening it up to anybody who wants to study that I wouldn't think that's a good idea, but if you're opening it to people who can't afford the subject they want to, like science, then that makes sense.

**Ms Hopkins:** I don't know whether it would have a bad effect, say, if people at my school pushed and they didn't want you to do art, they wanted you to do architecture, and say they wanted you to do architecture instead of doing art because it made the school look better, or whatever, I think then I would have done architecture and I would have dropped out, and that's just costing me money, it's costing you guys money, it's costing everybody money. So if you're pushing people to do courses that aren't right for them, not because they wanted to, it could actually have a bad effect and I just don't think it would work.

**Q218 Dr Harris:** Yes, it could. My last question, which leads into financial matters but does not deal with some of the other questions is, do you feel that you or any of your colleagues with the level of debt you are likely to have means that that is going to impact on your career choice? Is it conceivable to you that you might not go into a doctorate or research if you had a bigger debt because you want to get a job that pays more money straight away, or is that not a factor for most students because they love what they want to do and they are prepared to have more debt?

**Mr Sarfo-Kantanka:** I think it depends on the students themselves.

**Q219 Dr Harris:** It does, but I am asking what is your view?

**Mr Sarfo-Kantanka:** My view is that the debt is lingering over me. Whether I like it or not, I have to pay it back. I want to pursue my passions. I want to pursue what I'm interested in and I would see that as an issue, the debt hanging over me, but I'm speaking for myself.

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9 February 2009 Carrie Donaghy, Ricky Chotai, Lucy Hopkins, Arnold Sarfo-Kantanka and James Williamson

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**Mr Chotai:** I think wholeheartedly that people would definitely consider looking at whether they wanted to study maths or something like that because of the cost implications. I think people are much more likely today to take a year out to work to earn the money or, you know, secure a strong work offer or some way to ensure they can pay the fees they want to carry on to and I think it is a major issue.

**Mr Williamson:** I only want to say that I personally wouldn't be able to because I have too much debt.

**Ms Hopkins:** There's a lot of people at my university who aren't doing masters because of the money implications.

**Q220 Ian Stewart:** In those terms, is it still worthwhile going to university in the current economic climate?

**Ms Donaghy:** Yes.

**Ms Hopkins:** Yes.

**Q221 Ian Stewart:** All of you. Start at that end.

**Mr Sarfo-Kantanka:** I think that's a very good question because if you look at it nowadays, the graduate recruiters, they're not just looking at your degree, or if you've got a Master's they're looking at your soft skills, as I keep reiterating, then one has to think, "Why should I do a Master's? How much more will that benefit me getting the job I desire?" I guess it's a question to put out there.

**Mr Chotai:** We're talking about undergraduates as well? Yes, in that respect I think of course it's worth going to university. I think the skills that you learn alongside, as we mentioned all the way through, as part of my role I was treasurer of the radio station at Salford and I'm the student liaison officer for the business school and I've learnt how to conduct myself in meetings. I've learnt so many skills through my student representation work than I ever would have in the classroom in regards to accounting and finance and sales for the radio station. Again, they're skills that I've learnt and I would never have done that if I'd

just looked at it—if you're looking at it academically, I think once you get to university circumstances change and you change and you develop and grow, and I think that's part of the whole process.

**Q222 Ian Stewart:** Are you all in favour of a national bursary scheme and should it be targeted towards poorer students?

**Mr Williamson:** What does that entail?

**Q223 Ian Stewart:** Should a national bursary scheme be set up, and if it is set up should it be targeted towards assisting poorer students?

**Mr Chotai:** Could you just clarify?

**Q224 Chairman:** Rather than having an individual university with this bursary scheme, at the moment it is ten per cent of the fees, so that you know in advance when you apply what the rules were rather than wait until you got to university and seeing what they offered.

**Mr Chotai:** If it encourages more people to go to university, encourages people from poorer backgrounds and gives them the opportunity to go to university and have the experience I've had, wholeheartedly, yes. I think if it's put to people in the category that are not going to university because they feel financially they won't be able to do that—I mean, in the case of Salford we have a lot of students who commute in from the Greater Manchester area and I think if you asked that question of them they'd agree that the university has changed them even though they're living at home and commuting in. As a live-in student on campus, I agree that everyone should have that opportunity.

**Chairman:** On that note, than you very much. Can I just say you have been an absolute splendid panel and we have really very much enjoyed talking to you and I am sorry we have not got a great deal more time, but I am anxious to get our final panel on for our grilling. Thank you all very much indeed.

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**Witnesses:** **Lucy Davidson**, student, Anglia Ruskin; **Ken Harris**, student, University of Wolverhampton; **Gemma Jerome**, student, University of Liverpool; **Luke Pollard**, student, Manchester Metropolitan University; **Anand Raja**, student, University of Birmingham; and **Steve Topazio**, student, University of Portsmouth, gave evidence.

**Q225 Chairman:** We welcome our final panel for today and just to warn you that we are likely to have a division on the Political Parties and Electoral Report Stage, new clause 3. I do not know, but the minister is winding up at the moment, and if we are can I assure you that we will be back. We will not just leave you here in limbo! Welcome our final panel, Lucy Davidson from Anglia Ruskin University, Ken Harris from Wolverhampton University, Gemma Jerome from Liverpool University, Luke Pollard from Manchester Metropolitan University, Anand Raja from Birmingham and Steve Topazio from Portsmouth University. Welcome to all of you and if I have mispronounced your names, I apologise. You have two minutes, Lucy, to tell us what is great about your university and what significant change you would make.

**Ms Davidson:** Good evening. Basically, I would be classed as a mature student. I don't have a string of A-levels or pre-courses, I have just got basic GCSEs and a lot of life experience and four children. What I consider to be a good university experience is a place where you can go to learn, where you feel supported by the staff within it. So it doesn't matter if you've got all the modern facilities and all the best teachers. If they don't care about the people within it, you might as well not have any of it. I personally have experienced this. I'm in the first year of my nursing diploma course. My daughter was diagnosed with a very serious illness and that was when I discovered what a good university I am at. My facilitator gave me her mobile phone number, was phoning me at the hospital and I had all the support of the university, support for placement, and it has enabled me to stay

on my course. Nursing is something I've wanted to do for ten years. I love it because it's rewarding, it's different every day and you're part of a team. So basically Anglia Ruskin has proved itself to me. We have this thing called the IBL, inquiry-based learning where basically you learn as you go as part of a group. So we are told how many hours we are going to have contact with our tutors. We do have access to our tutors, be it online, or I can phone my facilitator. I am a student rep and I do, I email her regularly and I also speak to her on the phone. So I think it all comes down to the support of the staff within it and the quality of those staff. So that for me is what a good university is all about.

**Q226 Chairman:** Okay, you have run out of time so you cannot tell us how it could be improved, but that is a very, very powerful statement. Gemma?

**Ms Jerome:** It should be about two minutes and twenty seconds for me –

**Q227 Chairman:** No, you have two minutes!

**Ms Jerome:** Okay. In light of the recent Burgess report debating the potential to more broadly reward students' achievements in a whole range of activities whilst at university, I would like to highlight the role of the students' union in creating a good student experience. A strongly innovative students' union offers inclusive, supportive and meaningful opportunities for all students to participate in a decision-making process that shapes not only their academic experiences but the environment within they make relationships, live, work and play. In my time at the University of Liverpool I volunteered extensively both in the capacity of student representative and student trustee as well as in various community-based projects. The Liverpool Guild of Students actively encourages their members to engage with each other and the wider community in full awareness that student volunteering is an important asset to the local economy and that volunteering can improve a student's prospects and employability whilst fulfilling an altruistic benevolence and the desire to feel part of a community. The Liverpool Guild of Students is also seeking to more effectively accredit student volunteering and is exploring the opportunity to develop volunteer support and enhance the role of extra-curricula activity in the curriculum. Personally, my decision to spend two months of my summer holiday between first and second year at university as a volunteer in a local authority planning office brought real and tangible relevance to subsequent theoretical study. My experience fully exemplifies the notion of capturing student potential versus simply focusing on academic achievement as inspired by our new declaration. Although I present a strong case for seeing extra-curricula and curricula complementary activities, as a student from a wide participation background, I am fully aware of the boundaries to participation. Primarily the concern is growing amongst undergraduates to seek paid employment to alleviate the rising cost of living and consequently how to balance the trade-off between mounting

student debt and academic attainment. Debates surrounding a national bursary scheme may raise questions about the validity of an institutional lottery of sorts for bursary schemes but does little to address the mounting body of evidence exemplified currently by the NUS Broke and Broken Campaign, but the student fee system in this country is essentially in need of a robust evidence-based review.

**Q228 Chairman:** Okay. I am going to have to stop you there. Thank you very much indeed. You got most of it in. Luke?

**Mr Pollard:** Mine is going to be slightly more short and sweet really. I think what contributes to a successful university experience is an institution which actively seeks values and acts on student feedback. It should be more than a tool to just attain statistic to put out to prospective students. Universities need to address issues. They need to improve delivery content and support based upon that feedback. I think this can be aided by a strong collaboration with the student union, their course or faculty reps and creating a structured process which allows students to easily feedback to their universities. Particularly myself in Manchester Metropolitan I get three meetings a year to meet with the entire faculty. It makes it very difficult if I have an issue presented by a group of students in October to wait until February to raise that issue across the whole board. In the future, I would personally like to see more integration between private and public organisations and universities through their degree programmes. I would like to see students having more opportunity to apply their theory in real settings. This morning I managed to obtain a placement this summer at Defra. That was done off my own bat, not through my university. The only option I had presented to me is a year long sandwich placement. I took an extra year at college and I would also like to run in the student union at some point, which then would already place me two years behind the standard level. I then don't feel I want to fall three years behind by doing a full year, so I think more can be done to integrate shorter placements onto the actual course.

**Q229 Chairman:** Thank you very much indeed. Steve?

**Mr Topazio:** I think the main factor which makes a good university experience is the provision of support and advice and mainly how a university provides that. It is also a home away from home. Students get dropped off on the first day of term and for me it was the first time I had ever spent more than about 24 hours away from my parents, so it is important how they provide that. I think an integral part of that is the students' union provisions they make. For me the students' union were the good guys at the university. They kept me going. They showed me the extra-curricula activities I could do. I didn't enjoy my course in the first year. I really wanted to leave, but it was the extra-curricula activities. I did course work, playing sport and they were the things that kept me going. Extra-curricula activities are important. Sport societies are there to

help students. They give you much more of an experience and I think that students don't go to university any more just to get a degree. You get students who look at the sports facilities and look at the provisions that are available, which brings me on to what I would actually change about the university. I feel students need to be offered much more than just the degree classifications there are now. The system of a first, the 2:1s and the 2:2s for me didn't show what I'd gained from university and the fact that I was a course rep with the school for a year was nowhere to be seen on my degree classification. I got a 2:1 and I averaged 60.08, which meant I just scraped a C. My housemate got 69.4. There is a gap of about ten per cent there, but on the transcript we had exactly the same marks. They didn't take into account the extra things we did, the fact that I was a course rep, the fact that I now work within the students' union, none of those things are actually shown on the piece of paper that I got given and I think that's something that needs to be addressed so that all the stuff we do is out there because I don't think currently a 2:1 to me just says I went to university, it doesn't tell me what I did there or the employers.

**Q230 Chairman:** Thank you very much indeed, Steve, for now.

**Mr Raja:** Dear Members of the Committee and House, I am delighted about speaking here. The best thing a university can offer you is an excellent course because it is learning that a university stands for and must. I will only refer to personal experience in taking my psychology course at Birmingham as an example. We are taught by very good teachers and the lecturers are fairly well organised! I have found that if one follows the lectures with regular reading and understanding one begins to enjoy one's time. Approachable staff also enhances the quality of the course and my teachers are usually up for a chat. Last year, a few days before the exams, I took a full hour of a lecturer I cannot name. I asked very silly questions, sometimes twice. Still he answered with a lot of sympathy and I left feeling almost guilty about his kindness. So I have talked about learning and enjoyment, but does enjoyable learning mean easy learning? A lot of students may think so, I included at times. "What do you guys want, an easy ride, cheap beer and high grades?" a rather cynical lecturer told me! But a part of me and a part of the rest of us can enjoy and do enjoy learning for its own sake. Last week, braving terrible snow around all of us came to an informal non-assessed psychology workshop. My little friend Julie is always rattling on about a smashing two page note she wrote about what she calls the problem primarily in cognitive science, again non-assessed work. Against all this, we all know that our courses are organised around remembering information for exams and with our guide books and text books and timetables that is how we approached it. How many of us have tucked sheets of paper in our socks to exam halls and how many of us are going to pop memory boosting pills in the twenty-first century? But talking of social sciences at least can the university harbour, even

encourage this idle, uncommitted romantic, almost illegal interest in learning that is alive and thriving in the Julies and Michaels of this world?

**Q231 Chairman:** We are going to leave that question hanging there at that particular point. Thank you very much indeed. Ken?

**Mr Harris:** What I think makes a good university experience is a clear and defined career path. Myself personally, I've been working for many years. I come from a single parent background and it's a career change, so my reason for going to university is because I just want a whole new changing career. So while at university I like to know that as well as getting my degree after the highest possible standard of teaching, I want that to be enriched with other activities that are going to obviously help me in my future career, whether that be social, getting involved in activities within university, but more importantly it's interaction with different people. Wolverhampton University is very culturally diverse and it is all those elements within the university that make the experience so much better. It's not just about learning, it's about also finding the balance between your personal life, home life and family life. Unfortunately, I was able to work the first year on leaving my job without working. This second year, yes, I've got a few debts that I'm accumulating quite a lot. I'd like to be able to work but my work will just suffer for it, so I'm just not able to work. I'm going to leave university with £25,000 worth of debt and that's after leaving a job where I was earning £25,000 a year. So that's the one thing that I would like to change at university, the amount of debt. It hasn't put me off studying because when I graduate I'm going to be falling into a job at that figure and higher, but it does make me question whether I want to carry on with further education after I've got my degree, purely because of how much it's going to cost.

**Chairman:** Okay. That is a good point to end on there. Gordon, can we just try and zip through these, please?

**Q232 Mr Marsden:** Yes. Thank you, Chairman. I am going to ask you all the questions I asked the previous group. Did you go for the course or the university?

**Ms Davidson:** I went for the course.

**Ms Jerome:** Both.

**Mr Pollard:** The course, then university.

**Mr Topazio:** University, location.

**Mr Raja:** The course.

**Mr Harris:** I am doing a joint history and deaf studies, so I only really had two choices, which was Bristol and Wolverhampton. So living at home—I live in Birmingham, so it's easier to commute to Wolverhampton than it is to Bristol.

**Q233 Mr Marsden:** That is interesting. With the group we have got here, unlike the previous group, you have actually got more experience coming from non-A level backgrounds into university, to perhaps I could ask the same sort of questions I asked the previous group about the extent perhaps to which you personally found you had problems or did not

have problems given that most of you did not have straight A-level qualifications, but perhaps more importantly whether in fact your peers have found that. Who wants to have a go on that one?

**Ms Davidson:** I will have a go. Basically, I may probably be one of the least qualified on my course, but I do have a nursing background in that I've been a healthcare assistant as well as having children and on my course most of us are mums so we have come from different backgrounds. But what was lovely was that when I was interviewed they took into consideration my experience. When the staff nurse who was helping to interview me with the other gentleman said, "Oh, but she hasn't done any academia since she's been at school. How's she going to cope with all the essays and all the rest of it?" and he said, "She'll get there," and I have to say that I got the top mark in that first paper, because it's what you put into it. If you work hard you can get anywhere.

**Mr Raja:** I have an unconventional background in the sense that I don't have A-levels. I have an international degree. I think having an A-level here especially in the subjects you are studying at the university is quite beneficial because there is a significant amount of overlap between what is taught at the A-levels and what is taught at the university level. That certainly helps people who have done A-levels in that subject prior, yes.

**Q234 Mr Marsden:** Gemma, can I just come to you because I know that you started a course at Edinburgh and then had to drop out. At Liverpool did they take that into account? Did it exempt you from any of the work you would otherwise have had to do in the first year at Liverpool or not?

**Ms Jerome:** No. They did take into account as far as they wanted a copy of my certificate of education, because you do receive a kind of acknowledgement for one year of the degree, but in terms of the amount of work that I do it's just the same.

**Q235 Mr Marsden:** So there is no credit transfer, if I can put it that way?

**Ms Jerome:** Maybe in the overall—at the end of my degree, but not outright, no.

**Q236 Mr Marsden:** So you were not exempted from the first bit of the course?

**Ms Jerome:** No.

**Q237 Mr Boswell:** Just quickly some fairly short responses, if I may. Contact time, how much do you get and is it enough? Time spent outside the classroom, part-time work, is that getting in the way of your studies, and a little bit of a handle, if you have got it, on whether or not you had to work as hard to qualify for a degree as counterparts in other universities? Who would like to start on that?

**Mr Harris:** My total contact time is 12 hours based on four modules of a three hour lecture/seminar and the rest of the time is obviously self-study. So on the selfish side, they say if I am happy to have my head not buried in a book every night and do my extra research then that's going to benefit me and that's going to get me a first. If my fellow students are

going to be in the pub drinking or not working then that's going to be reflected in their grades, but we are adult learners and we don't want to be treated like children. From speaking to my fellow students, a lot of the feedback that I'm getting is that we don't want to be told what we have to do, "You have to do this and you have to do that." It should be around studies, I'd agree.

**Q238 Mr Boswell:** You are in charge?

**Mr Harris:** Yes.

**Q239 Mr Boswell:** Okay. Does anyone else want to come in on that? Luke?

**Mr Pollard:** I get approximately 15 hours a week contact time. At the moment it's getting particularly frustrating when I make the time to go to lectures and it's simply a lecturer reading a Powerpoint which, as was mentioned earlier on, I could effectively get from a virtual learning environment.

**Q240 Chairman:** Does that happen a lot?

**Mr Pollard:** Yes. To be honest, yes. Outside of that, I do 15 hours paid employment in the students' union on the reception. I do 15 and 20 hours a week on my own business and societies and then around 20 hours a week personal study.

**Q241 Chairman:** You are busy! Steve?

**Mr Topazio:** I have four hours of contact time with my son Ian, which I didn't even have to turn up to those four hours when I was there and, similar to Luke, it was lots of stuff that I could have got off a virtual learning environment. It was Powerpoint being regurgitated to me. So as such I spend around 20 hours a week in paid employment during my final year and around the same amount of time working in the students' union and voluntary work, so I spend a lot more time not doing the university work than I did doing it and that's because I could sit at home and read it off at home.

**Q242 Mr Boswell:** So the actual formal set up is four hours contact time and 20 hours part-time employment?

**Mr Topazio:** Yes. I was at university basically not doing the course a lot of the time.

**Q243 Mr Boswell:** Do you think that is the same book in other places, Gemma, Liverpool?

**Ms Jerome:** It's quite a small time that I studied. I have eight hours contact time at the moment. I would just like to bring up a point Luke mentioned about the culture of Powerpoint presentations at lectures. We discussed this a lot in student consultative committees and there is a concern that students aren't coming to lectures because there's a lot of networks that we have –

**Q244 Mr Boswell:** Slides?

**Ms Jerome:** Yes, they get them beforehand. But I really think that's a falsehood. I think the value of being part of a lecture environment where questions can be asked and lecturers can respond, that is invaluable.

**Q245 Dr Harris:** Do you not get a chance to ask questions about what you are complaining or commenting on?

**Mr Topazio:** Yes. To be honest, the material covered is quite basic in the general terms of it. The problem is that we do have some lectures where there is no more value added than what is on the Powerpoint. It is literally a lecturer standing up at the front. Personally, I feel anything that I'm not getting there, I can see the lecturer one on one or get out the textbook.

**Dr Harris:** Because you cannot ask questions.

**Q246 Mr Boswell:** Can I just ask Lucy about her experience coming from the non-conventional background? Have you found you have needed more contact time? Do you use the tutors more than people who have come through a conventional route?

**Ms Davidson:** I ask the most questions, but then I get the answers, so I think you get out of it what you put into it. I suppose I will keep continuing asking questions because that's how you learn. We have three days a week where we're in either lessons or on placement on a ward. We have two days which is self-directed study and I do feel that I probably spend double the amount of time everyone else does. It probably takes me a lot longer to get there, but I get there in the end and I am hoping that by the end of the four years I'll get there a lot faster.

**Q247 Chairman:** Splendid! Anand, very briefly.

**Mr Raja:** I would say what seems to be really coming across from all the comments that we are getting on the table is that one contact time seems to be sometimes sufficient, sometimes insufficient and, as I spoke about in my submission, you supplement it by a lot of informal interaction and informal help, but I think it is also, as the speaker pointed out, if all that a lecturer does is simply put up a Powerpoint presentation and put up a lot of information from a text book, then that isn't really very uplifting and that's really not something that will bring you to the lecture hall and that is something that maybe needs to be corrected.

**Mr Harris:** I just want to make the point that my university would have lecture times and a lot of people look at it it is a short amount of contact time, but if you need extra help, such as our university has got systems in place such as study skills where you can get extra help if needed and you can always arrange to have personal one-to-one time with your own tutor, but it is more about getting the lecturers to engage with the pupils, students.

**Q248 Chairman:** Could I just move on to you, Clive, and could I just very quickly run along the panel. I asked the first panel whether in fact all lecturers ought to be qualified in teaching in order to be able to lecture at universities. Do you feel that that should be a statutory requirement?

**Ms Davidson:** No, I think they should be passionate about their subject and want to teach you it, and as long as they are passionate they don't need the qualification.

**Q249 Chairman:** So that is a no. Gemma?

**Ms Jerome:** I would say no.

**Mr Pollard:** I would say no as well because of the time spent getting that formal qualification.

**Mr Topazio:** No.

**Mr Raja:** No.

**Mr Harris:** It depends on the subject.

**Q250 Dr Iddon:** It is the same question I asked the other group. How important is it to you that your lecturers are engaged in research if not scholarship, starting with Lucy, please?

**Ms Davidson:** It's the same as I said before. Your lecturer needs to actually be interested in their subject because otherwise it's going to come across to you and you're not going to learn. If they're bored before they start you are not going to learn anything from that experience and you need to be able to challenge them and say, "But what if? What if?" and just keep asking the questions because that's how you broaden yourself and you learn.

**Ms Jerome:** Well, the University of Liverpool prides itself on knowledge exchanges and being like a research intensive university, but from the students' point of view I don't think there's any tension between being a research strong institution and a teaching strong institution. I would say maybe from a subjective point of view strong research does impact on teaching positively because there will be a more relevant knowledge base delivered in lectures. So I would say that there is a degree of importance but it's not essential.

**Q251 Dr Iddon:** Could I just ask what the disadvantage is, because you mentioned the tension. What is the tension?

**Ms Jerome:** No, I said from the students' point of view there's no tension.

**Mr Pollard:** I would say yes, it's nice to know that the material being delivered is up to day. However, it shouldn't be at the detriment of students being able to contact lecturers. I have some lecturers I am only available to get them maybe two hours a week, which if I can't make that session, I then can't contact them. That's no good really.

**Mr Topazio:** I'm on the fence because I found my lecturers supplemented their lecture style very well with their research and their experiences and it helped me a great deal with my dissertation, the fact that we went to Iceland and helped with their research to help with our research. It was a great learning curve. However, the downside was that when it came to the exams the lecturer and the tutor weren't available to me when I needed them because they were doing research, so I kind of had the good and the bad.

**Mr Raja:** I think it's good and bad with me, too, because if they're engaged with a person's scholarship, which many of the people in my department are, then obviously they are very clever and very involved and they know where to take you, basically. But as it happens, as people get cleverer and smarter they dislike talking to undergraduates! I think that's a disadvantage.

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9 February 2009 Lucy Davidson, Ken Harris, Gemma Jerome Luke Pollard, Anand Raja and Steve Topazio

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**Mr Harris:** Yes, I have to say that it's certainly an advantage because I expect my lecturers to be experts in their fields. For example, in my deaf studies subject my lecturers are engaged in research, which obviously helps me because it means that I'm getting current information.

**Q252 Dr Iddon:** My second question is about the classification of degrees. Is it time for a change or are you happy to be classed as first class, upper second, lower second, and so on?

**Mr Harris:** I think the system's fine. I'm aiming for a first. I'm on target for a first, so I don't want it to change because that's what I'm aiming for, but I do think that as well as the first you should have something attached to the degree that's going to detail exactly why it's a first and what was involved in my achieving a first.

**Q253 Dr Iddon:** A bit more detail. Good luck with your first, by the way.

**Mr Raja:** No, I think the current classification is all right.

**Mr Topazio:** I think it needs to be changed. Whilst the system does show what kind of level you're in, there's a wide range within those levels on where you can be, as I pointed out with what I got and what my housemate got. There is a very big variation in our skill base.

**Q254 Dr Iddon:** How are you suggesting changing it, by giving percentages?

**Mr Topazio:** I like the idea, though whilst in my case it meant that my percentage would have been lower it would have shown a fairer reflection of my learning outcomes and experiences. But also on top of that you need to include a record of learning as to what other activities –

**Q255 Dr Iddon:** So you are agreeing with Ken really?

**Mr Topazio:** Almost, yes.

**Mr Pollard:** I second that. I would like to see a percentage system. I don't see why someone who does get 60.2 per cent and 69.7 per cent are classed in the same band.

**Q256 Dr Iddon:** So you are sticking to your previous statement. Gemma?

**Ms Jerome:** I think the proposed record of achievement is potentially really progressive because I think it could look at students' performance more holistically. I think to focus too much on the fact of whether it be a percentage mark—personally I would like to take the opportunity to say that it's potential is broader in that it could describe each student's performance in their time at university more personally, so you could pick out whether people are particularly good at leadership or representation, participation and the kind of more personalised skills.

**Ms Davidson:** Basically, I'm doing the diploma so I'm not going to get a first or a second, I'm going to get a diploma, hopefully, and at the end of it I will

also get a report and it is dependent on that report whether or not I will get work, so it is different for me.

**Dr Iddon:** Thank you very much all of you.

**Q257 Dr Harris:** Just following on that question, Ken, good luck with getting your first. Do you think it would be fair if you went for a job and the job was given to someone instead with a first class degree from Cambridge? Do you think that would be justified if you are otherwise equal?

**Mr Harris:** Of course it's not justified. It happens, obviously not as much as it used to. That's when you need to look at the difference between a polytechnic and a university. It's always going to be there. It is a fact. I mean, if I had the choice I'd go to Cambridge and if they were offering the same course then I suppose in honesty I probably would. No, actually, I wouldn't. No.

**Q258 Dr Harris:** My point is, can you justify that because some people would say that a degree from Cambridge is worth more for the same classification than one from a university that is not so selective of the students. Now, that may sound harsh, but I am asking you and the rest of the panel whether you think that's fair or unjustified because if you get a first from whatever institution it should be considered to be of the same value?

**Mr Harris:** What I think is that all degrees should be exactly the same, whether one goes to Cambridge, whether one goes to Wolverhampton, whether they go to Birmingham University. So it shouldn't matter whether I've gone to Cambridge or not, it should all count equally.

**Q259 Dr Harris:** If the corollary of that was that while 20 per cent of Cambridge students, only three per cent of University of Wolverhampton students got a first and therefore there would be less firsts going, if that was the way to equalise it, as it were, would that be reasonable or do you think the top 20 per cent from whichever institution, or ten, whatever it is, should get the first class degree?

**Mr Harris:** Personally, if I achieve a first at Wolverhampton then I'd say it's worth more than a first from Cambridge because I know that I've worked really hard for it, which is exactly what I do. I don't just sort of throw some words down in an essay. I do put a lot of effort into it.

**Q260 Dr Harris:** I am not saying you are not working hard for it. Do the rest want to comment on that line of questioning?

**Mr Pollard:** I think it's hard to say a degree from Cambridge compared with, say, a degree from Manchester Metropolitan would be viewed in the same light by an employer, but I think it is right to say that the top ten per cent, or whatever per cent across all degrees should be given that top classification and it shouldn't vary across institutions.

**Q261 Dr Harris:** In respect of the quality of the student?



*Mr Pollard:* No.

**Q262 Dr Harris:** In other words, does that not undermine your previous answer, because let us say in Cambridge the top ten per cent get over 90 per cent but in Manchester Metropolitan the top ten per cent get over 65 per cent on a like for like basis—I know they have different exams, but let us say—then that would contradict your previous answer, which would be that the percentage result should be what determines your classification, not whether you are in the quintile or ten percentile or whatever?

*Mr Pollard:* The second answer was based on the current system, not what I would like to see introduced.

**Q263 Dr Harris:** My question was, what would you like to see.

*Ms Jerome:* I have just two quick points. I think in the context of wider participation, it really is more important that students are getting into higher education and putting less emphasis on—which is of secondary importance—which university they get into. Secondly, I think I would question an employer if they were looking at my degree based on where I went to university. I probably wouldn't actually choose that employer. I would flip the question round.

**Q264 Dr Harris:** I asked the previous panel, I do not know whether you heard, whether they had any evidence that you could cheat, that your company-students could cheat and copy and do just as well, apparently, by using stuff downloaded or just having someone else's work. Are you aware of this? Is it an issue for you at all? Is it not, I will move on.

*Ms Davidson:* There has been some plagiarism at our university and what it was was that people didn't quite understand that if something is not yours you need to reference it and admit to it. So there's been some people who've done it quite innocently and some people who've just done it because they're trying to cheat.

**Q265 Dr Harris:** We only know about it because it has been found out. I am asking you, because you are closer to it than I am, whether you think it is more widespread than the tip of the iceberg argument?

*Ms Jerome:* I think it's a problem with referencing. I think that's what I've experienced as a student and a student representative, it is just the case that people aren't fully aware of how to properly reference their work.

*Mr Topazio:* I have a great friend who is sitting on the University's disciplinary committee, which is quite good fun with some things, but plagiarism isn't a big thing that's out there. In the year there have been about two or three cases of outright copying. I know personally as a student there are cases of mis-referencing and little bits of copying, but I don't think it's very easy to just lift an entire essay and get away with it. I think the lecturers are experienced enough to know what is a good piece of work that you've written yourself.

**Q266 Dr Harris:** Do you in your institute use a software system to run all your work through?

*Mr Topazio:* As of next year. It is in a trial period at the moment.

*Mr Harris:* Personally, I don't know how it is possible to copy work and just insert it into your text book because everyone's got their own unique style of essay writing and surely that's picked up by the lecturers, but at my university they've got facilities in place to obviously spot plagiarism. One thing they're bringing in is electronic submission to obviously make it a lot easier.

**Q267 Dr Harris:** My last question. Clearly, you are a selected sample because you were not put off by debt, becoming mature students. So I am not going to ask you did debt put you off because you are a selected sample for a research issue, but do you think there were contemporaries of yours who did not have your drive or perhaps your exact circumstances who might have been put off going and taking the path you have because of the prospect of emerging with debt?

*Mr Topazio:* Yes, one of my friends from school with exactly the same qualifications at A-level, he went straight into a workplace job instead of coming to university because he didn't want the debt that would be there at the end of the road and he's just as qualified to go to university as I am. His family background was worse off than mine, so he didn't want the debt on his shoulders.

*Ms Jerome:* I think it's a broader problem than just debt and financial implications. I think we could move into a debate about social capital. It's more about for some people there might be a problem of debt, but it's really they just have no history of people going to university, and that might be mature students as well. They maybe feel it's not appropriate to go to university.

**Chairman:** I am going to move on to Ian Stewart. You have got the last word.

**Q268 Ian Stewart:** In those circumstances, in the current economic climate is it still worthwhile going to university?

*Ms Davidson:* Yes, you've got to because you have to make the best of yourself and why should you sit back and not push yourself and go for your ambitions and dreams just because of things around you? Surely by going to university and making something of it you are going to make your life better and make the climate better?

*Ms Jerome:* I would say for myself personally, absolutely, I would still go to university. There's evidence that a graduate job creates a job somewhere else, but I would also like to emphasise that I don't advocate that higher education is the only path for everyone. I think sometimes it's not the appropriate path and the Government push to raise the levels of their graduates isn't necessarily wise for all demographics and just for all individuals. So there are alternative paths that are equally valuable.

*Mr Pollard:* Yes, I think in the current climate and what's upcoming perhaps education is the best place to be rather than in full-time employment! Also, I'd

like to echo what was mentioned in the earlier session about soft skills. I personally chose to go to Manchester Metropolitan because they were flexible enough that they would give me the time to do my extra-curricula activities and improve my soft skills, something which my peers haven't experienced at perhaps a leading university.

**Mr Topazio:** For me, yes, definitely going to university. I wouldn't have done it any other way. What I come out of it with, if I become a teacher, if I do into a job that doesn't require a degree I think is irrelevant. The experience I gain from being there and the life skills I don't think you can get from just leaving school at 18 and going into a job. However, there is the flip side, which is if you go to university and you spend three years, you build up the debt and then you go into a job where you could have gone into it four years ago. Was it worthwhile? It's an question I can't answer because I plan to become a teacher, which you can't do if you haven't got a degree. But I think it's definitely an experience.

**Mr Raja:** I don't know much about the financial aspect, but for me personally I would still come to a university. I was always interested in doing the subject that I am doing, which is what brought me into my university and which will bring me into universities whatever the employment climate.

**Mr Harris:** It is definitely worth it as a mature student and I believe in my university mature students make up 60 per cent, so most of us are actually doing it because we've got a career path that we're following. Affordable? I'm struggling this year but that's mainly because the cost of living is so high. So out of £117 that I get for my student finance, £85 of that goes on my rent and I'm left with the rest to pay the rest of my bills, that's the heating and transport, books.

**Q269 Ian Stewart:** You were here before and you will have heard me ask the question about bursaries. Currently your institutions have bursary systems, but would you be in favour of a national bursary system, and if there was a national bursary system should it be geared towards assisting those who need the most financially?

**Ms Davidson:** It depends because if your partner has a good job you would be penalised but that doesn't make your situation any better. So you could be penalised and, to be honest, there's a lot of girls on my course where if you were to take the bursary away you would lose all the nurses. We would all walk because we have children, childcare and petrol

to pay for and my bursary pays my childcare and my petrol. I don't see it, it goes on that, and without it I couldn't do the course.

**Ms Jerome:** I would say, yes, I will be in favour of a national bursary scheme but alongside that amount of extra funding. I think we need more focus on further education as well and even schools who are preparing students for higher education, and the schools that are necessary.

**Q270 Ian Stewart:** When you say "preparing" do you mean the financial skills, economic skills?

**Ms Jerome:** No, I mean the wider—not to have too much emphasis on finance. I think it is the broader picture.

**Mr Pollard:** I think a national scheme would be best, personally, I think on the incremental scale as is the maintenance grant at the moment, would be most preferable.

**Mr Topazio:** For me, yes. On a local scale at Portsmouth, I didn't know about the bursaries until my final year when the NUS told me they existed and that we'd under-spent our university by a few hundred thousand pounds, so obviously it wasn't a big issue for the university, they were quite happy—well, not happy but they can get it out there to the students and we didn't know about it. I don't know whether a national scheme would work any better, but I think it would and I think it would be fairer to widen the participation of more students out there.

**Mr Raja:** I think the national bursary scheme will be a good thing.

**Mr Harris:** Yes, again, a national bursary scheme but we should look at the individual rather than the family background. An example is a friend of mine whose dad and brother worked at the same address. It meant that he was known to the bursary, so he had to move out in order to –

**Q271 Ian Stewart:** So it is splitting families up?

**Mr Harris:** Yes. It was like his dad's income, his brother's income had no effect on what he was having, yet he was still judged by that. So as long as it's judged on an individual basis rather than families or the household, it should be looked at that way.

**Ian Stewart:** Thanks for that.

**Chairman:** On that note, can I thank our second panel and to say that we agonised as to how we could involve students more in this inquiry and you have all demonstrated that we were absolutely right to do so. Thank you very, very much indeed for all your efforts this afternoon and could I also put on record my thanks to the Committee for staying much later than normal in the afternoon.

Monday 9 March 2009

Members present:

Mr Phil Willis (in the Chair)

Dr Evan Harris  
Dr Brian Iddon

Mr Gordon Marsden  
Graham Stringer

*Witnesses:* **Professor Bob Burgess**, Chair of the HEAR<sup>1</sup> Implementation Group and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Leicester, **Professor Gina Wisker**, Chair, Heads of Education and Development Group (HEDG), **Professor James Wisdom**, Vice-Chair, Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) and **Professor Geoffrey Alderman**, as a commentator on the quality of and management in higher education, gave evidence.

**Q272 Chairman:** Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to our panel of expert witnesses, and they are a very impressive panel of expert witnesses, Professor Bob Burgess, the Chair of HEAR Implementation Group and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Leicester, and congratulations on your RAE assessment and the settlement you got last week. No wonder you are smiling! Professor Gina Wisker, the Chair of the Heads of Education and Development Group, welcome to you. Professor James Wisdom, the Vice-Chair of the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA), welcome James, and last but by no means least Professor Geoffrey Alderman, whom we have classed as “a commentator on the quality of and management in higher education” and I hope that perhaps gives you a generic feel to why you are here and why we wanted to invite you. Can I just start with you, Professor Burgess? We are very frustrated as a Committee about this inquiry in that we had a number of representatives of the major university groups before us a few weeks ago and the impression was that there was very little wrong with our higher education system, that teaching was excellent, the research was excellent, that teaching and research went together brilliantly, and yet the evidence we are getting certainly from our e-consultation, the individual pieces of evidence we are getting, is that there is a real issue about the quality of teaching in higher education. You have been there a long time. Has it improved over the last 30 years and what evidence have you to say it has or it has not?

**Professor Burgess:** I think it has certainly improved over the last 30 years and certainly part of the evidence comes from the National Student Survey, the largest independent survey conducted on behalf of Government, and indeed there is a clear indication that the students are well-satisfied with what they have received. Similarly, the NUS say that, but of course you do not get 100 per cent of them satisfied, and I think that is quite understandable. If you take two million students and substitute them for 2 million washing machines, would you not expect some of the washing machine owners to complain about quality, about the standard, and indeed any other product? So from that point of view, I think it is understandable that we do not get 100 per cent of individuals who are satisfied, but we do get over 80 per cent.

**Q273 Chairman:** Professor Burgess, that was not the question I asked you, with due respect. As a leading academic, I was asking you why over 30 years—of course you can take a snapshot at any time and say that the teaching is good, bad or indifferent, but is there any evidence at all that over a period—and you use whatever period you like and use any evidence—that the teaching is better, that the quality which the students get now is better than it was 30 years ago?

**Professor Burgess:** In order to answer that you would have to have done longitudinal studies and, sadly, the academic study of higher education is relatively recent, barring one or two major exceptions, of people who have sustained a career over 30 years focused on that. So in that sense I could not say to you, if you compared the evidence in 1979 with 2009, whether that is possible; indeed, even Government statistics do not use the same categories, so it is very difficult to do the kind of study you are saying. Anecdotally, and experientially, I can say that I think the quality of teaching has improved, the care which people give to students, the support students receive and the fact that during that period we have moved from an elite to a mass higher education system, but what I am not saying to you is that nothing is wrong, everything is perfect, because in any walk of life we would say that that was an inappropriate statement, hence my analogy with manufacturing a particular product. You would expect some owners to raise questions. Students have done in the past and they do at this point in time. That is understandable.

**Q274 Chairman:** All right. Professor Wisdom, you do not agree, do you?

**Professor Wisdom:** I do not. How did you know?

**Q275 Chairman:** From your evidence, which suggests that you take a contrary position?

**Professor Wisdom:** I do, yes.

**Q276 Chairman:** You feel that the quality of teaching over years is not as good?

**Professor Wisdom:** No, I do not think the quality of teaching—forgive me for suggesting that your question is a very, very difficult one to answer, because I think other things have been happening which changed the picture. We have had one massive success. The massive success is that we have expanded British higher education and maintained a

<sup>1</sup> Higher Education Assessment Report

level of quality that is extremely satisfactory. That has been astonishing and I think we need to recognise that. The thing that you are experiencing and your difficulty—and some of the memoranda of evidence show this—is that at the same time the processes of education are going through a severe transition. They are changing enormously and the models we were using 15 or 20 years ago are no longer strong enough to carry the sort of education we need today and it is the change in those processes which is giving us difficulty. We have a modern system, we have an elite system, and they are both together in the same system, and where they rub together you can see fractures and difficulties. Some of the things you are inquiring into like student satisfaction, plagiarism, standards of degrees, are partly to do with the fact that we are talking of old language to describe a new world.

**Q277 Chairman:** So when then, Professor Wisker, is there this sort of semblance of self-satisfaction within the system?

**Professor Wisker:** I do not think there is a semblance –

**Q278 Chairman:** Are we misreading that?

**Professor Wisdom:** Yes. I think partly the problem is that we do not have, as Bob Burgess was saying, specific evidence to prove that what is happening is totally successful, so we do not like to say, “I can see this is good,” or, “It is bad.” I do not think there is self-satisfaction. My own view and the view of HEDG would be that development for all people who are related to the learning of students would help the quality of the students learning. So if we turned it around and looked at where we might move in the future as opposed to trying to come up with statistics and data that we do not have about the current situation or the past, I think we would be moving forward in the right direction.

**Q279 Chairman:** Professor Alderman, if you went to our schools sector, or indeed to our further education sector, indeed to any other sector of education and looked at the quality of teaching the Government has put in place measures to ensure that a certain standard is adhered to. Why is that not possible within the higher education system? Why is this suddenly so special that we should not demand world-class teaching standards?

**Professor Alderman:** It is because there is a great fear in the higher education sector about an Ofsted-style inspectorate being imposed by Government upon higher education. This is regarded very widely within the sector as an intrusion into the academic autonomy of institutions. By and large they do not want an Ofsted-style inspectorate, which very reluctantly, Chairman, I am coming round to, as one of the major planks of the new strategy, which would underpin standards. Can I just say, Chairman, students are the last people who are qualified to judge academic standards. They would say that the quality of education is good, would they not? They do not want to go out into the world with a degree

certification from an institution that had been slagged off as being substandard. So I would not put too much faith, Chairman, in the National Student Satisfaction Survey.

**Q280 Chairman:** Okay. Can I come back to you, Professor Burgess? We have heard a great deal, and indeed had a lot of written evidence, about this connection between offering high-quality research and that underpinning high-quality teaching. Do you buy into that, that you cannot get high-quality teaching unless you are doing high-quality research? Where is the evidence to support that?

**Professor Burgess:** If you care to look at the mission statement of the University of Leicester you would find that we go further than that. We say that there is a synergy between research and teaching and I think it is that if you construct university curricula you need to put the student in contact with those people who are engaged in the research enterprise. They will talk enthusiastically, they will talk about their work, they will introduce new elements into the curriculum, and I think that is very important. From that point of view, I do think that this research/teaching nexus is very important. I also think that you can say the same with regard to scholarship, and a clear example would be those people who write leading text books in the field, and that, too, is important because each university determines its own curriculum and the curriculum is shaped by the academic colleagues you have working within the institution. That seems to me to be a very important hallmark of higher education and a very important hallmark of higher education to preserve. If you think about why you personally are interested in particular subjects, the chances are you were introduced to them by a very good teacher, no matter whether that is primary, secondary or higher, and from that point of view I think it is absolutely splendid if senior colleagues are put on the schedule to teach first year students in higher education.

**Q281 Chairman:** The great teachers whom I have met were researchers. They were great teachers who understood the pedagogy, who understood a body of knowledge which they wanted to transfer and transmit to excite young people. Are you saying to us, as a Committee, that unless you have got high-quality research going alongside high-quality teaching one or other suffers?

**Professor Burgess:** I think one of the hallmarks of the university is that it should deliver both high-quality research and high-quality teaching. It would be hopeless to have a high-quality researcher who did not understand how you could transmit and communicate effectively with first year students, and that is clearly very important, but it is also very important to be taught by someone who is a leader in their particular field. It is terrifically exciting to engage with those kinds of people who can in fact enthuse you and who can talk first-hand about the work in which they are engaged. That seems to me to be what marks a higher education experience from an experience in school, and I say that as someone

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9 March 2009 Professor Bob Burgess, Professor Gina Wisker, Professor James Wisdom  
and Professor Geoffrey Alderman

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who qualified as a schoolteacher and indeed who has done research in schools over the years. I think it is one of the hallmarks and it is a very important hallmark of a university, but you have also got to have people who care about teaching and I think we are at a period in the higher education community where people do care about research and teaching and we as institutions need to do the same.

**Q282 Mr Marsden:** If I could just take you up on that, Professor Burgess, but also ask if any of your other colleagues want to add to that? As a statement of Utopian principle, what you have just said is absolutely fine, but in the real, cruel world of careers and research assessment exercises is it not the case that what we now have is a situation where—Denis Healey famously said, “All politicians should have a hinterland,” but is not the problem now for academics that they are not allowed to have the sort of teaching hinterland or the involvement in the community, or the outreach to schools, particularly if they are younger academics, because their whole careers live or die by the research assessment exercise?

**Professor Burgess:** I think that is not strictly true.

**Q283 Mr Marsden:** Is it true or not?

**Professor Burgess:** I do not think it is true.

**Q284 Mr Marsden:** Right, so it is not “strictly true” it is just simply wrong?

**Professor Burgess:** I do not think it is true because if I look at my own university, I have many examples of people who teach as well as engage in research. If I take Professor Sir Alec Jeffreys, who discovered DNA fingerprinting, Alec Jeffreys can be found on the bench in his lab and he can also be found working with students.

**Q285 Mr Marsden:** With respect, you are not quite engaging with the point I made and I did talk particularly about younger and up-and-coming academics. Is it not the case that if you are an academic in your thirties and forties the whole emphasis, in terms of what you actually do to get credit on research, is not on teaching and it is not on outreach work?

**Professor Burgess:** I would say in respect of many higher education institutions that would not be true. If I look at my own institution, you can become a full professor on the basis of your teaching activity as well as on your research activity, but the research must be satisfactory.

**Q286 Mr Marsden:** I wonder if any other colleagues on the panel want to offer a view?

**Professor Wisker:** Yes. I think what we have seen, perhaps, recently with the RAE being uppermost in people’s minds, is a focus on research and possibly at the expense of teaching. If within universities you could have a proper promotional and developmental system which supported people to develop as teachers—and I am very pleased to hear that you can become a professor for learning and teaching in

Leicester, and indeed it has been the case also in my previous university, Anglia Ruskin—if more universities followed that model, which I believe is quite common in Australia, then young people making the decisions about research and teaching could have that kind of synergy in their roles and know that should they prioritise their teaching over their research at any one point they would not be casting themselves into a pitch of promotional improbability. But I would also like to just link research and teaching again. I think the exciting and inquiry you were talking about with some of your colleagues is one of the things we need to ensure our students also enjoy and that they are co-learners and co-researchers in our learning and teaching project. So developing students as early researchers is one of the things we can do as teachers and researchers.

**Professor Alderman:** Chairman, the link between research and teaching is an ideal and I come to this Committee as a research academic who, if I may say so, has published quite a substantial body of blue skies research in my own field, but I think it is about time the sector started to realise that there is no inexorable connection between good research and good teaching. As Pro-Vice-Chancellor of London University, I managed to persuade the senate of London University to confer the title of Professor on excellent teachers as well as excellent researchers, but it took two years of my life to do that and I still bear the scars! We must remember that most universities in the USA are not research universities, they are teaching only universities, and all that is required of most of these universities is that the faculty, the academics, keep up with scholarship. Scholarship means, Chairman, keeping up with the research in your field, it does not mean actually doing the research. The fact of the matter is that many great researchers are wonderful teachers, but other great researchers are awful teachers whom I personally would never put in front of a class.

**Professor Wisdom:** I have to concur with Gina Wisker and partly with Professor Alderman. I think we need to separate two words, one is the word “university” and the other is the word “higher education”. There are types of universities—and Professor Burgess has described the type of university where research and teaching was, in the early nineteenth century, an essential part. It is essential that the people who teach students know about the limits of knowledge. It is essential that they have been researchers, there is no doubt about that. It is essential that they keep up to date with their subject, and you can get some fabulously exciting teachers who are researching, but the central fact about most of our teachers is that most of the time they are teaching beyond their research zone. They are teaching things they themselves did not research. It is their academic experience they are teaching and that is what the students are learning, and that is why it is important to pick up on Gina’s point about the notion that students need to engage in research while they are studying. I started working in the polytechnic sector in the early 1970s. None of the people there were paid to research, yet they were

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9 March 2009 Professor Bob Burgess, Professor Gina Wisker, Professor James Wisdom  
and Professor Geoffrey Alderman

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all researchers. They were all studying their subject. You could have called it a hobby because the state was not paying for it, but they were all doing consultancy, they were doing critical engagement with their subject, they were doing a whole range of things. So the life of the polytechnic was not a dull, non-academic, non-researching life. It has been a real sadness in higher education that this split has occurred and I think, I am afraid, that it is down to the research selectivity exercise.

**Professor Alderman:** Hear, hear!

**Professor Wisdom:** It is not the central thread in British universities, but once the RSE came in, in 1986, with the glorious Peter Swinnerton-Dyer, then in a way we were doomed because it is the chasing of the money that has done the damage.

**Chairman:** That is the point.

**Q287 Graham Stringer:** Just very briefly in response to what you have just said now, Professor Wisdom, the value of that answer accords with common sense, but is there an evidence base you can point to about there being no correlation between research and good teaching or poor teaching?

**Professor Wisdom:** I cannot find one, I am afraid. There is evidence that well-organised researchers are very often well-organised teachers, and that makes a difference. So some of our best researchers are just pretty spectacular people.

**Q288 Graham Stringer:** I was going to say some of them are spectacularly bad at communicating outside their own specialisms, in my experience, but perhaps I should not have said that. Professor Alderman, you said in answer to a previous question you were very concerned not to have an Ofsted regime imposed on the universities, but is that not confusing academic freedom and freedom of universities to determine their own curricula with the right of the taxpayer to know at the end of the day where the particular standards are being reached?

**Professor Alderman:** Chairman, what I said was ideally I personally would not like an Ofsted-style regime but reluctantly I was coming round to the view that you could have an Ofsted-style regime and still preserve academic autonomy, and I do agree with the implication underlying Mr Stringer's question.

**Q289 Graham Stringer:** While we are talking about teaching and research, do any members of the panel believe that researchers should get a post-graduate qualification in teaching in higher education institutions? Are there any benefits to that, or is it just another qualification for the sake of a qualification?

**Professor Wisker:** Yes, we talked about this this morning at HEDG. We had a meeting and we talked about qualifications being a necessity for anybody who was working directly in student learning. If your researchers never engage with students and their learning then perhaps they do not need a post-graduate qualification, but if they are going to be engaged with student learning at all, even with

students online or emailing, then anyone who is going to be doing that work with a student we think must have some form of development so that they can do this. It is a professional activity. I would not want to employ a plumber, just to go back to washing machines, who had absolutely no professional qualifications to do my plumbing and I would hope the same would be accorded to higher education.

**Q290 Chairman:** But they all do that, do they not?

**Professor Wisker:** Yes, exactly—the plumbers.

**Mr Marsden:** But they do not!

**Q291 Chairman:** They do not. Sorry, we will not go into plumbing. I had a bad experience recently.

**Professor Wisdom:** Bob Burgess will correct me if I am wrong, but I think it was decided that if you wanted to be a research supervisor you had to be trained, and that has gone in without any opposition at all.

**Q292 Graham Stringer:** So that is now standard?

**Professor Wisdom:** Am I right? Yes.

**Q293 Chairman:** With respect, it is not standard practice, is it, because it is not a mandatory requirement? It is entirely up to you as a vice-chancellor, whether you wish to impose that? Am I right or wrong?

**Professor Burgess:** I think you are right, but I also would say that the practice is that many colleagues now go through courses, and courses that are –

**Q294 Chairman:** I am not debating that, but the reality is that this was supposed to be a requirement that everybody signed up to, and it is not happening, is it?

**Professor Burgess:** I think one would need systematic evidence that it is not happening. Certainly colleagues go through courses of this kind, and indeed they comment on going through courses of this kind. I read external examiners' reports that come from courses of this kind.

**Q295 Chairman:** The point I am making is that it is not a requirement, is it?

**Professor Burgess:** It is not a requirement that you hold a qualification in teaching in higher education to supervise research students.

**Professor Alderman:** Chairman, it is not a requirement.

**Professor Wisdom:** I said I thought it was a requirement that if you were going to supervise research you had to be qualified to do so and that is where I was looking to you for support in that.

**Q296 Chairman:** I do not think that is either, is it?

**Professor Burgess:** I think it has become common practice that research—certainly a huge amount of training has gone into research supervisors.

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9 March 2009 Professor Bob Burgess, Professor Gina Wisker, Professor James Wisdom  
and Professor Geoffrey Alderman

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**Q297 Graham Stringer:** Do you have any statistics on this, and if you do not have them at your fingertips could you point the Committee to where we can find the evidence and the statistics?

**Professor Burgess:** I could think about it over the next few days, but I cannot recall anything immediately.

**Q298 Graham Stringer:** My final question is, is it common for researchers who receive new large grants in research to try and buy themselves out of their teaching commitments, and if that is a common practice what are the implications of that for teaching within universities? Is it a practice that is deplored?

**Professor Alderman:** Chairman, if I could answer that as someone who in the past did get large research grants, part of which were—on the record, obviously—used to buy in my replacement teaching. This is, I think, absolutely routine. It is so that the researcher can get on with the research and it also gives younger aspiring academics perhaps the chance to get on the first rungs on the ladder, to teach a class. Of course, the concomitant of that is that if your son or daughter goes to university thinking they will be taught by a great research professor, they may in fact end up by being taught in that way by a post-graduate research student.

**Q299 Dr Harris:** Should they have a contract? Do they always a contract, those post-graduate research students who are “asked” by their supervisor, who is going off on sabbatical, if they could take a class a week? Even if they get a bit of money, should they have a contract to do that?

**Professor Alderman:** Of course they should have a contract.

**Q300 Dr Harris:** Do they always have a contract?

**Professor Alderman:** In my own personal experience, Chairman, they always have a contract, but I cannot speak for the sector as a whole.

**Q301 Dr Harris:** Can anyone?

**Professor Wisdom:** It does not quite work like this. When somebody wins a large research grant they have often got subject areas that they enjoy teaching and nobody can replace them, and they actively enjoy doing that. What happens is that it brings money to the department and that then brings the post-grads, and then the post-grads go into a training programme so that they will be able to act as tutors on those courses and other courses. It is not quite a hard transaction.

**Q302 Chairman:** I am anxious to get on to standards, but can I just have a very brief response to this question from all of you: do you think it is reasonable that in a prospectus advertising their wares—because we are in a market in higher education now—students who are applying to a particular university should in fact have available

to them who will teach them, which academic staff, and whether those people are actually qualified to do the job?

**Professor Wisdom:** You are looking at me, so I will answer first. I am afraid I do not, despite everything you would expect us to want, because I think it focuses too heavily on what we call the input model. What the prospectus needs to say is what the student will leave with, what are the intended learning outcomes of the programme, what are the skills, knowledge, attributes, values they will develop during that course. How the department gets to it I think is their own business.

**Q303 Chairman:** It is your own business?

**Professor Wisdom:** I am afraid so.

**Q304 Chairman:** It would be nice if schools had that freedom, would it not? Professor Wisker?

**Professor Wisker:** I do not quite agree. James and I do not necessarily agree about everything, but I think students need to know that the learning that takes place is their own and that a lot of that will be independent, depending on what subject you are doing because there are different class contact hours related to different subjects, but I would hope, having just sent one of my sons to university and the other one has just finished, that it would be possible to look on the website to find out who is likely to be teaching him. I would look then for what they had published as well as what qualifications they had and what kind of vision they expressed, so that you would get a flavour of where you were going. I think you would do the same if you were going on holiday. You would want to know about that kind of quality. So I do not have a problem with finding out who would be doing the teaching and what they had published, but I would also like to agree with James and that is that the learning takes place in the student interaction.

**Professor Burgess:** Given electronic developments, it should be possible to update that year on year in terms of what courses are on offer and who is teaching them. Indeed, over ten years ago when I was regularly teaching in the department I belonged to a booklet which was regularly produced every year which said what the course was and who was teaching it. It was routine.

**Q305 Chairman:** You do not do that at Leicester?

**Professor Burgess:** As far as I know, we do. I would expect departments to issue material which demonstrated who was teaching the course and what the courses were, and certainly when students are choosing options. Indeed, if people are poor teachers you can watch courses be denuded of students over a matter of a couple of years.

**Q306 Chairman:** Very briefly, Professor Alderman, do you think it is a good suggestion?

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9 March 2009 Professor Bob Burgess, Professor Gina Wisker, Professor James Wisdom  
and Professor Geoffrey Alderman

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**Professor Alderman:** I think it is a very good suggestion. My own son at the moment, Chairman, is having major problems with his institution where he is doing a post-graduate MA, partly for these reasons, and he is complaining bitterly about it.

**Q307 Chairman:** Which institution is that?

**Professor Alderman:** The Royal Academy of Music. Of course it should be part of the contract, but of course my son is paying full fees. He is not being subsidised by the state. He is being subsidised by me, Chairman, but not by the state. As the higher education sector moves into a true market situation where students at bachelor level come to pay more of their fees, we will see the customer knocking at the door, even at the vice-chancellor's door.

**Q308 Dr Iddon:** Let us come to standards now and I just want to read a quote we have in the evidence, "the degree classification system is no longer fit for purpose for a modern, complex and diverse higher education system". Professor Burgess, you must recognise that because it is yours! Why has the current degree classification system broken down and is in need of repair, in your estimation?

**Professor Burgess:** I think you have got to look at the movement from an elite to a mass higher education system. The standard of UK degrees is not the question here. The issue we have addressed is the classification system. The classification system was devised over 200 years ago in the University of Oxford when student numbers were relatively small. When you get a massive increase in numbers, a diverse student population, changes in curriculum with pedagogy, it is very appropriate that you should think about the very principles by which you classify and what the meaning is that lies behind the classification. Hence, moving on from there, our recommendations to augment the degree classification.

**Q309 Dr Iddon:** What would you replace it with?

**Professor Burgess:** Personally, the recommendation as contained in the report from which you quoted, namely the Higher Education Achievement Report which puts together the diploma supplement together with detailed evidence drawn from student achievements, where you give more information about those aspects of work the students have achieved during their higher education careers. I think that overcomes the over-concentration of students thinking, "Well, I've got to get a first or a 2.1 or my time has not been used effectively." There are students who get other classes of degree who emerge from our universities with many skills they have acquired through other things they have done and I think it is a matter of including in a Higher Education Achievement Report anything which can be verified by the higher education institution. That way you get a more rounded picture, it fits with current higher education policy with regard to widening access, and indeed raising opportunity.

**Q310 Dr Iddon:** Let me widen this out to the rest of the panel: there is evidence to suggest that you can get a first in some universities by exceeding a mark of 70 per cent, yet in perhaps a more top flight university where they get the cream of the pick you would be looking at 85 per cent for a first-class mark. How are employers to judge degree classes when it is not consistent across the higher education system—and I am looking at the three other panellists now.

**Professor Alderman:** Chairman, you cannot judge across institutions. The idea of comparability is a fiction, it is as simple as that.

**Professor Wisdom:** I think we are dealing with some really important issues in the middle of this. Most of the staff who are applying those processes, making those awards and writing down those numbers, are people who have been working in what I described as the earlier system. There are ways, much better ways, of structuring student experiences than relying on very old-fashioned gut assumption processes about good quality and poor quality work and the sooner we change from the sort of, what we call in our trade "norm" referenced processes to criteria referenced processes and the sooner we get away from the clumsy inappropriateness of the honours degree classification the better it will be for all of us. So I am wholly in favour of the work Professor Burgess has been doing, but simultaneously it is going to put a severe burden on the staff, who are going to have to start assessing very well indeed.

**Q311 Chairman:** Could I just add a supplement here, Professor Wisker? Professor Burgess made a very important statement that whilst he criticised the degree classification system by saying it is 200 years old and needs changing, he actually made the point that despite the arrival of a "mass higher education system"—I hope I have got that right here—the actual quality of what the students were producing in order to get their degrees had remained consistently high. That was the point. Yet we have seen since the early 1980s a doubling of the number of students who get a first, mainly in the Russell Group universities. We have seen a massive increase where now two-thirds of students, approximately, get a 2.1. It is not just a maintaining of standards, it has been a dramatic increase beyond the wildest dreams. Are your students getting better? Are universities getting more fantastic? What has happened over this period?

**Professor Wisker:** You are talking about two quite different systems, so I concur with him there, but I can only give you anecdotal evidence on this. There are several things. One is that people will mark using different percentages across different subject areas, so you might get 85 in maths or chemistry but you will never get 85 in English Literature, which is the subject I was teaching. However, I have just finished marking some undergraduate essays and I feel that where I gave a 65, I would have given that 65 twenty years ago. I am looking for them being worse and I do not think they are any worse,



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9 March 2009 Professor Bob Burgess, Professor Gina Wisker, Professor James Wisdom  
and Professor Geoffrey Alderman

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so I do not know. I am in a quandary with this. I am merely speaking anecdotally and I think one would have to do a longitudinal survey of work from the seventies and work now and match them and get people to mark them to see what they give.

**Q312 Dr Harris:** The question was about the explosion in the number of firsts, not the percentage you need for it but the fact that the number of students has gone up by about 50 per cent, but the number of firsts has gone up by 100 per cent. Are we just cleverer now, or is there some other factor at random that has occurred like league tables? I just pluck that at random.

**Professor Wisker:** No, I do not think that is it really.

**Q313 Dr Harris:** That is not a factor?

**Professor Wisdom:** There was a step change of at least two percentage points when the research committees announced that they were only going to be considering first-class students for post-graduate research. I remember it clearly. I was working on exactly those numbers at Kingston at the time in the mid 1980s and I think we went from 4 to 6 per cent of firsts in one year.

**Q314 Dr Iddon:** Has the inclusion of the course work and the modular nature of examination systems in some universities, not all, made that difference, do you think, or made a difference?

**Professor Wisdom:** No –

**Professor Alderman:** Of course, Chairman, it has made a difference because with course work has come the plague of plagiarism and with modularisation has come the disempowerment of the external examiner. The modular degrees, which have their own particular strengths, have eviscerated the power of external examiners. In the days when I was an undergraduate student the external examiner could boast that she or he owned a particular degree, and that is no longer the case. The external examiner is now more or less peripheral to the assessment exercise.

**Q315 Chairman:** Professor Burgess, you were anxious to come in here.

**Professor Burgess:** Two or three things. Firstly, I think we need to be very clear on the statistical evidence. If you look at the statistical evidence through HESA data what you find is relative to the increased proportion of students there are now six per cent more students gaining firsts and upper seconds than there were 14 years ago. If you take it over a decade, it is about eight per cent, and that is based on HESA data.

**Q316 Dr Harris:** Where you would expect it to drop it has expanded?

**Professor Burgess:** Not necessarily.

**Professor Wisker:** No.

**Professor Burgess:** I would not have said that. In answer to the question about course work and modularity, I think that as you get changes in the

higher education sector with regard to pedagogic development, not only have we introduced course work, we know it is relatively rare to find people taking ten papers against the clock at the end of a three year period and people take them year on year and they also engage in being tested module by module. First of all, I think I should say that to the best of my knowledge there is not a plague of plagiarism in higher education, in fact plagiarism software is routinely used in institutions. Students are taught essay writing skills and the way to use sources, and so from that point of view I think there is a check. Furthermore, with regard to modularity, I am not aware of the situation where an external examiner would not be given access to the work students had performed on individual modules. Clearly, it is not the case that an external examiner sees the work of every student. It is traditional that you see a sample of student work from, in our current categorisation, firsts, 2.1, 2.2, third, pass and fail. You would definitely see all borderline candidates. You are likely to see all the firsts and all the fails, and I have to say that is something I have been accustomed to over the years.

**Q317 Mr Marsden:** Professor Alderman, you have made a number of criticisms of the QAA as it operates at the moment. What do you think the most important change could or should be in the QAA to address the criticisms you have made?

**Professor Alderman:** I think the QAA, as I have said, Chairman, in my written evidence, should be refocused to concentrate squarely on standards. At the moment it concentrates on process. It is possible to come out of the QAA with a glowing report but in fact have poor standards.

**Q318 Mr Marsden:** Professor Burgess, I want to ask you initially quickly if you agree with that, and if not why. Can I also ask you, on the issue of your Higher Education Achievement Report—and we have seen a sample of this in the papers we have been sent—how confident are you that that is going to address some of the big issues over the next few years where more and more people are doing part-time degrees, more and more people are going to have to or want to take time out and transfer, perhaps, to courses elsewhere? Is it actually going to address the issues of portability and lack of flexibility in the system? But can I ask you about the QAA firstly very briefly?

**Professor Burgess:** First of all, I would say that the QAA is a robust organisation which comes in and does a very intensive piece of work in institutions. My own institution is to receive a QAA visit two weeks from now. We have prepared the self-assessment document. I personally have read the self-assessment on two occasions, as have all the senior management team and other groups of people. We are held to account, which is exactly what should happen in higher education, or indeed any part of the public sector.

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9 March 2009 Professor Bob Burgess, Professor Gina Wisker, Professor James Wisdom  
and Professor Geoffrey Alderman

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**Q319 Mr Marsden:** Including on standards?

**Professor Burgess:** Including on standards where those standards are being looked at as to how the standards are achieved.

**Q320 Mr Marsden:** Can I ask you about the Higher Education Achievement Report?

**Professor Burgess:** The Higher Education Achievement Report as referred to in our final report—I think we had in mind a paper version. We have now moved in the implementation process to say, “How could we develop it electronically? How could the Higher Education Achievement Report be used cumulatively, particularly across second and third year work done at undergraduate level?” I think in that sense it meets the requirements of portability and flexibility. It would suit part-time students because you would be able to have a running record of what you had achieved. It would also allow you to demonstrate how you had achieved different aspects of your work, so whether you were good in engaging in project work as opposed to timed examinations, and vice versa. I think in that sense we have looked at something which suits the contemporary university with the way in which students go along different routes, full-time, part-time, modular, and so on.

**Q321 Chairman:** Can we get a response on this issue, in terms of the Higher Education Achievement Report? What is your view on that?

**Professor Wisdom:** I think it is going to work. What I really want is something slightly different. I want the students to know how good they are, rather than to be told how good they are by universities. When you leave university I would like you to be in a position to be able to make a judgement of your own work, and that changes the terms of trade slightly. So I am not that bothered about how we describe students, but I am very bothered about how well they understand themselves.

**Q322 Dr Harris:** There is this question of league tables. There is some evidence that as soon as you have league tables people want to be high on them, it is a natural thing, that is why they have been introduced. It is a way for the Government to show with the Health Service that everything gets better and the problems are due to the people at the bottom, and there is always someone on the bottom. So if you have in this Higher Education Achievement Report a quantum, a measure, then it is going to be converted by people employed by the *Times* newspaper into a league table and so

there will be this incentive to score people higher on that as well. Will you not, Professor Burgess, just be repeating some of the same problems if there is a measure in there that you have with the degree classification system?

**Professor Burgess:** I do not think you will have the identical problem because you will have greater detail, greater depth, and I suspect it will mean that as long as the degree classification is kept in place then people will move to using the summative judgement to create league tables. Basically, as far as I can see whatever system we devise in whatever walk of life, a journalist will quickly convert it into a league table, no matter what you do in order to try and prevent it.

**Q323 Dr Harris:** Is not the flip side of the standards issue the desire in the market just to recruit as many, for example, international students as possible? Would we not be better off without such a market-driven approach? I am conscious that you are from the University of Buckinghamshire, but nevertheless you might still agree that the market does not always work so well on these issues?

**Professor Alderman:** I would look towards a regulated market, Chairman.

**Q324 Dr Harris:** Just one more question, very briefly, you said that you thought you were satisfied plagiarism was not a problem. I put that to Professor Alderman because he mentioned this in his evidence, whether he can be as confident as Professor Burgess that plagiarism is not a problem because these programmes exist?

**Professor Alderman:** Alas, Chairman, I cannot be as confident.

**Q325 Chairman:** The programmes do not work?

**Professor Alderman:** The software programmes are highly controversial, and secondly we have, of course, moved on from what I will call classic plagiarism to bespoke essay writing services, which is another problem altogether.

**Professor Wisdom:** I think good teachers design plagiarism out of their courses.

**Professor Alderman:** Chairman, that is true where you have good teachers.

**Chairman:** You are taking over my Committee, and I cannot allow that! You have been an absolutely splendid group of witnesses and I thank you very, very much indeed. We could have spent a great deal longer on this, but thank you very much indeed Professor Burgess, Professor Wisker, Professor Wisdom and Professor Alderman.

*Witnesses:* **Professor Paul Ramsden**, Chief Executive, Higher Education Academy (HEA), **Mr Peter Williams**, Chief Executive, Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), and **Mr Anthony McClaran**, Chief Executive, Universities & Colleges Admissions (UCAS), gave evidence.

**Q326 Chairman:** Thank you very much indeed and my apologies to the second group of witnesses, Professor Paul Ramsden, the Chief Executive of the Higher Education Academy. Welcome to you, Paul. Mr Peter Williams, the Chief Executive of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, the QAA, welcome again to you, Peter. It is nice to see you. Mr Anthony McClaran, the Chief Executive of the Universities & Colleges Admissions, welcome to you and thank you very much indeed for your patience this afternoon. I wonder if I could actually start with you, Peter Williams? Some schools are brilliant at preparing students for university, we know that. They are very, very good at it indeed. This is the starting point: how do you think universities could better actually see through that in order that they are able to bring in the raw talent from a broad section of schools and different organisations into their institutions?

*Mr Williams:* If you are asking me how institutions should be able to deal with the great diversity of students who are coming in from different types of schools, I think we have got a very serious difficulty. If students and graduates are all to pass the same winning post, then the route they have to take will be different. I think for some students this is going to take longer or require a more intense diet of formal study than for others. For example, the student who has done, let us say, a good A-level in a subject which is not a prerequisite for the subject they are doing at university and then turns up to find he is marking time for year one because others are catching up with him. I think there is a real serious difficulty and there is probably a necessity for institutions to undertake some kind of immediate baseline assessment with the incoming cohort on a department or course by course basis so that they can then, as far as possible, tailor the first year learning to the needs of the individual student.

**Q327 Chairman:** If you look at Princeton or Harvard in the States, they have right at the front of their offer the proud belief that they go out to get a social mix in their universities, and that is something which they think is absolutely essential not only to driving high academic standards but actually driving a society which ultimately will profit and benefit from having people educated to that level from all social backgrounds. We have not achieved that in the UK.

*Mr Williams:* I am actually slightly surprised you are asking me this, because I would have thought this was one for Anthony.

**Chairman:** But you are an independent spokesperson and you are leaving soon, so you can be much more free in your comments!

**Mr Marsden:** And he is taking your job!

**Q328 Chairman:** Yes, before he gets it!

*Mr Williams:* Yes. One of the purposes of higher education is to ensure that all talent is well-used, that all talent is offered an opportunity. It is about opportunities and higher education is an

opportunity. I absolutely agree, but universities are actually now doing a lot to try and get out there and find the students, to try and encourage people, but that encouragement, I think, does depend on a reciprocal encouragement from the schools at a very early age. So I am one of these people—and there are quite a lot of us around now—who believe that actually the encouragement to take an interest in higher education should come very early on in the educational cycle.

**Q329 Chairman:** Okay. Professor Ramsden, what is your view, before we come to the expert?

*Professor Ramsden:* Students will come from all sorts of different backgrounds.

**Q330 Chairman:** But they are not coming into our universities in that way, are they? Actually the so-called top universities are still choosing very significant numbers of students with particular social backgrounds?

*Professor Ramsden:* My experience of those universities is that they are very, very concerned to have as wide a range of talent from different socioeconomic groups as possible.

**Q331 Chairman:** They say that, but they do not do it?

*Professor Ramsden:* Well, they try their hardest to do it, I believe. One of the reasons why it is difficult for them to do it is because students often do not achieve the right kind of qualifications to get into the universities, so the difficulty has been before university rather than the actual process of selection.

**Q332 Dr Harris:** There is an argument, is there not, that students from some schools with lower forecast scores at A-level will do as well in their degrees because they have had a poor educational background but are still getting nearly as good A-levels as those from top performing independent schools? If it is right that some universities recognise that and give a few new forecast scores less than that—I do not know who wants to answer this—is it right for one university to do that and probably get a bit of grief from the Independent Schools Council for social engineering when in fact they are getting rid of social engineering, should not all universities do that? In other words, universities which do not do that are discriminating, they are social engineering, because they are not recognising that fact?

*Mr McClaran:* I think the difficulty with that proposition might be that although there has been some admission on that basis, I think it has yet to be a clearly established predictable model whereby, by factoring in, for instance, school context, one can reliably predict those students who are going to achieve as well as, or in fact better than students who perhaps have higher qualifications. The framework which the Schwartz Report on fair admissions offered was that admission to university is a

judgement about merit and potential. The merit is relatively easy to judge according to the qualifications the student may have. There is yet to be established a reliable indicator for measuring potential.

**Q333 Dr Harris:** So what you are saying is you accept that it is absolutely true that treating someone from an inner city comprehensive where no one generally goes to university who is forecast to get three Bs the same as you treat someone at Eaton with three Bs must be wrong? It is not clear—and I understand what you are saying—exactly what the allowance should be. You have not worked out the figures for what the allowance should be, but the allowance must not be zero, you accept that, because you have already accepted that that is established? So any university that gives an allowance of zero is wrong, whereas the university that tries to give an allowance of two points, or four points in UCAS terms, is at least having a go and is more likely to be right than the wrong answer, which is zero? Would you say that is fair?

**Mr McClaran:** I think what the UCAS system embodies is the fact that for higher education institutions the process of considering who to admit is a holistic one, it is not simply according to exam results, and the very structure of the UCAS application (which certainly includes results where they are known, predicted achievement where they are not yet known, a reference, a statement) is that there has always been a collection of evidence.

**Q334 Dr Harris:** I understand, but let us say there is a university which says, “We are going to consider all sorts of things and basically you need three Bs, whether you come from an inner city school or not,” then if that is the perception of the schools which are not applying that is going to deter them because they know that they are not going to get the credit, as it were, for overcoming education disadvantage? I think you accept in my premise that an allowance of zero for that wide diversity of educational background must be wrong on that measure?

**Mr McClaran:** I think from my point of view the service we try to provide is to give universities the evidence they believe they need to make a rounded judgement about each applicant they receive.

**Q335 Dr Harris:** Can anyone else offer a view on the specific question I asked, or is it just impossible?

**Mr Williams:** It is not a question I have given much thought to.

**Chairman:** We will give you time to ponder.

**Q336 Mr Marsden:** Peter Williams, UCAS in their evidence to us have recommended a shared admission process for part-time students and I want to ask you two questions on the back of that. First of all, if you were to have that sort of system how would it affect the sort of work QAA does in terms of its assessment process, and do you actually think, given the range of part-time programmes for students, that this is going to work?

**Mr Williams:** I think part-time students need special care and attention by institutions and universities and I think on the work we do we would want to see how the universities address the particular needs of part-time students. The important thing for the part-time students is that they have experience equivalent to that of a full-time student; or, to put it another way, that when they have come to the end of their programme, however long it is, they feel (a) they have learnt something worth learning, and (b) they can translate that into evidence for the degree. So I think there are very particular challenges that institutions really do have to meet with part-time students and it is very difficult for universities, because with part-time students you cannot be sure if all the part-time students are actually going to be there at the same time. Part-time does not just mean one model, it means a huge variety of models, and that is the kind of thing where you cannot actually expect a lecturer to appear every hour on the hour every time a part-time student walks in. So I think what universities are doing there is they are looking at alternative pedagogies, to look at ways in which they can provide the opportunities for the students at the time the students need them, which will actually require rather less direct personal, physical, face to face engagement.

**Q337 Mr Marsden:** On UCAS’s specific proposal for a shared admissions process, do you think that is going to make life easier?

**Mr Williams:** Well, it is going to make life more difficult, but that is not a reason for not doing it. The idea that you distinguish individuals by virtue of the mode of teaching or the mode of attendance—I cannot honestly see the justification for it.

**Q338 Mr Marsden:** Mr McClaran, you might want to come in or expand briefly—and I express “briefly” because we are short of time—on your proposal. Can I also ask you a related question, particularly because these groups certainly come very much into the part-time students area? There has been a lot of discussion on the back of both the Government’s initiatives in terms of diplomas but also, of course, now apprenticeships, particularly high-level apprenticeships, as to how appropriate the UK HE<sup>2</sup> system is in terms of giving due weight in admitting students from those sorts of backgrounds into HE. I wonder if you would like to comment on that and—because this is something which has been proposed by a number of different groups—specifically what progress you are making towards a points-based system which would enable universities accurately to make judgements about students coming from apprenticeship or diploma backgrounds?

**Mr McClaran:** The principle of the UCAS tariff is to try and embrace the major significant routes of entry into higher education on that basis. We already have made significant moves in terms both of a tariff for the advanced diploma, a tariff for BTECH and OCR qualifications, which are already within the framework. We want to move on apprenticeships.

<sup>2</sup> Higher education

We also want to move on other forms of vocational qualifications. There have been challenges, given the very complex structure of many vocational qualifications. We will be proposing to our board in June this year a modification of the tariff methodology, which we hope will enable us to reduce the time and therefore the expense involved in assessing qualifications which are essentially determined by the individual choice of the learner making up a package of components. So the revised methodology and also we think we can develop a calculator, which would be an online facility, which would enable an institution to make a reasonable calculation based on the tariff about what is being offered by the individuals presenting themselves for admission.

**Q339 Mr Marsden:** Just two quick points on that then. First of all, the Open University, which of course has probably had the largest mass experience of students coming in from very diverse backgrounds needing no qualification at all, in some cases, both in terms of previous course work and life experience, in the modelling structure exempts students from the start of their courses. Is this exemption route again something you are looking at? Secondly, I suppose the much more difficult question is, assuming you achieve what you want to do in the timescale you want to achieve it, are you confident that all elements of the university sector—and I am talking particularly about those traditional universities (not all in the Russell Group) which have looked with, shall we say, less enthusiasm at the non A-level groups as a way of getting them to comply and sign up?

**Mr McClaran:** I think on the first point, in terms of exemption the UCAS system already embodies that within its structure and depending on the judgement made by an individual institution about the part of the course they wish to exempt, it is perfectly possible through UCAS for the student to apply for entry directly into the second year of the programme. So we embrace that. There is no technical or structural barrier to that. In terms of institutions themselves embracing qualifications, I think it has been encouraging that we are already in a situation where something like 90 per cent of the over 300 institutions with membership of UCASA have already published statements on their position towards the advanced diploma. I accept that is not strictly a vocational qualification, but I think there are analogies in terms of its acceptance. I would agree that in some other cases there is still work to be done in terms of encouraging a wide range of institutions to make sure that vocational routes are fully visible to the potential student, but I would point to the work we have done with institutions in terms of developing entry profiles which are comprehensive statements, deliberately designed to cover a plethora of routes so that the students, regardless of the qualification route they follow, can identify their qualification and recognise that progression to higher education is something which is going to be possible for them.

**Q340 Mr Marsden:** A very quick final point. I think you said 90 per cent, or just about 90 per cent of students. Are you going to wait until you get 100 per cent compliance on this, or are you prepared to move when you have got 90 or 95 per cent?

**Mr McClaran:** No, I think we are moving actively and our website already has those statements on it. We have a special advance diploma section of the website and we moved very rapidly in terms of making sure that it was brought within the tariff framework, so we have been extremely active in terms of ensuring that member institutions had a good understanding of that qualification and what it might mean in terms of making offers to potential students.

**Q341 Chairman:** Thank you very much indeed. Mr Williams, you are soon leaving the QAA, so you are totally free this afternoon to reveal all! We have heard a significant amount of evidence, and indeed you heard some from Professor Alderman earlier, that the QAA, which is supposed to be the Quality Assurance Agency with the word “Quality” within it, is not doing its job about ensuring quality at all, that you have mainly presided over a process-led organisation and that provided the process is carried out accurately then you give a tick of good health. You have no teeth and you do not look at standards. Is it time really that not only do you move on to a new job but that in fact we have a new agency altogether?

**Mr Williams:** Thank you for asking that question! It gives me an opportunity not only to rebut, if not refute, what Professor Alderman has just said but to in fact try and establish in your minds the link between process and outcome, that is to say that any system which does not look at the way in which the outcomes are achieved, that is the process, is going to lay itself open to the charge of a capricious and unsystematic attempt to ensure standards. The relationship between process and outcome is very important, especially in complex organisations like universities. Someone once said that quality is not an accident, it is always the result of intelligent effort, and I fear that Professor Alderman’s approach would lead us to a series of accidents, accidents where the absence of process, the absence of proper procedure, of a systematic, careful and conscious attempt to provide the kind of education that higher education, universities, should be providing will actually lead to—I have lost the thread of my sentence now.

**Q342 Chairman:** You were getting excited!

**Mr Williams:** I was. I feel passionate about this. Process and outcomes are very strongly linked. It is not an accident. It is because things are done that other things happen. Because teachers plan their teaching, then students will learn. Because students are guided in their learning, they will learn. It is that careful, systematic approach which is important and it is even more important given the size of the system there. If you are talking about one to one tutorials on a weekly basis, you can get away with a lot, but when you are talking about hundreds of students, all

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9 March 2009 Professor Paul Ramsden, Mr Peter Williams and Mr Anthony McClaran

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expecting, quite rightly, to be given a good learning experience then that does not happen by chance. But not happening by chance means good process, so we do expect to see good process. We are also interested in seeing the relationship which is established between that good process and a satisfactory outcome.

**Q343 Chairman:** Are not the universities simply giving you a run-around in reality? You are saying to us—and indeed you have written to me on the record so I presume I can refer to it, because you did write to me as the Chairman of the Committee—that following last summer’s concerns in the media about standards in our universities, about plagiarism, about, quite frankly, cheating by academics and by chancellors, you set up a causes for concern organisation, that you had investigated these elements effectively and basically there was nothing in them, and yet we continue to get literally a significant amount of evidence, some of which we cannot publish because it might be libellous but basically saying that this is still happening. So there is a divide, that is the point I am making. I am not suggesting that you do not investigate, but somehow people are prepared to say things to this Committee which they claim they have said to their universities, which you claim you have investigated and they do not meet up.

**Mr Williams:** We have looked at everything that has come in and we have done a fairly extensive analysis of the media stories of last year and I am coming to the conclusion that there are some areas where there is probably something which requires more systematic investigation than we have been able to give it so far. There are two or three areas which I think we ought to be looking at, probably, but we will wait to see the full outcome of our review. So far as the causes for concern are concerned, what we have found there is that the vast majority of them are in the first instance either personal complaints or grievances or, in the case of staff, post-dismissal or cases where they have been to an employment tribunal; in other words they are again personal cases. Now, some of those are still *sub judice* and have not gone through the standard procedures, so when they have worked through those we hope to see them back to see whether or not there is anything in them. I think it is also fair to say that it is sometimes quite difficult to discover whether the personal case is masking a systemic problem or is just a one-off administrative failure, and that is where we are needing to do more work on individual cases, some of which remain open because we are not satisfied that this thing is simply a personal grievance and we want to come back and look at them, but we cannot do that while the cases are open. We have not had the great avalanche which I feared last summer. We have made considerable efforts to publicise our process and to explain what the process is and what we can and cannot do, but we have not had the avalanche. When we looked at the media stories, what we found was that there are two or three stories which actually get snowballed and the same story gets repeated time and time and time again, sometimes with accretions

of anecdotes and sometimes without, but the whole thing adds up and it looks as if it is adding up to something which is much bigger than it is. If you have got evidence you can let us have, please let us have it.

**Q344 Chairman:** Okay. Let us see if you will agree with this first: the universities, not the QAA, are responsible for setting standards. Do you agree?

**Mr Williams:** Yes.

**Q345 Chairman:** How can you have a situation whereby an organisation itself sets the standards and judges those standards? Of course it will always come out right.

**Mr Williams:** That is the nature of this beast.

**Q346 Chairman:** It is like Manchester United saying, “We are going to win the Football League,” so they only play Accrington Stanley!

**Mr Williams:** Yes, but that is the nature of higher education around the world. It is how it works around the world. Harvard does not have external examiners. Yale does not have external examiners. Princeton does not have external examiners.

**Q347 Dr Harris:** No, but there are processes, are there not, where they are have to be reappraised every ten years?

**Mr Williams:** There will be an accreditation process, which is a rather different thing than an evaluation of their standards. It is a quite separate process. The only area in America, to the best of my understanding, where the standards themselves are looked at are in the area of specialist accreditation, that is to say vocational courses, where we have in this country a cognate process, that is to say the accreditation by professional statutory and regulatory bodies.

**Q348 Chairman:** Can I ask you another question, and then I will pass you on to Dr Harris. Is there any university at all that you have looked at where you have said that their process is clearly inadequate, in other words that the standards they set, which they then meet, you think requires some organisation (whether yours or somebody else’s) to actually intervene and say, “This is not acceptable”?

**Mr Williams:** Sorry, the process is good and the standards are bad, or the standards are good and the process is bad? You can have either.

**Q349 Chairman:** In either case, where would you intervene, because you do not have any powers to intervene in that process of them setting the standards and judging the standards?

**Mr Williams:** We do it by proxy.

**Q350 Chairman:** It is a bit like Mystic Meg this!

**Mr Williams:** No, it is not quite as exciting as that! There are two structures that deal with this. Given that there is no national examination—there is one country that does run a national examination and that is Brazil, where they have everybody come and they all sit down and write the same paper so that

they can check the national standard, which may be of interest to you. I do not know how much that costs or indeed whether it is any use or not, but in this country we have two structures. The first is the way in which standards are established individually by institutions but by reference to national expectations. In other words, we are squaring the circle and this is through our circle of academic infrastructure, the subject benchmarks, the qualifications framework. I should just report to you that the qualifications framework for England, Wales and Northern Ireland has just recently successfully been certified as being compliant with the European Bologna framework as well, so we are now Euro-compliant.

**Q351 Chairman:** Who did that compliance, by the way?

**Mr Williams:** That is run through a process called Self Certification, which has been –

**Q352 Chairman:** This is fantastic!

**Mr Williams:** This is a European thing and the Self Certification involves a large number of external reviewers from all over Europe. It is not just us doing it to ourselves, and indeed that report is on our website and it tells you how it is done. It is a perfectly reasonable process and quite an extended one. So we have the framework, which actually talks about the level of requirement of different degrees, what the different degrees mean, Bachelors, Masters and Doctorates. We then have the benchmark statements, which give the subject community's view on what are the expectations of an Honours degree in a particular subject area and that allows for the diversity of different types of universities, different types of programmes for different types of student, and those together provide an external reference point which the universities themselves use in order to establish the standard, to compare what they are offering against the standard, the national expectation.

**Q353 Chairman:** The short answer is that you have never had to intervene? You have never felt the need to intervene?

**Mr Williams:** Not in higher education institutions. We have in further education institutions offering higher education.

**Q354 Dr Harris:** We have established, as you have accepted, that the QAA does not control or directly monitor the standard of individual degrees?

**Mr Williams:** Yes.

**Q355 Dr Harris:** Let us say you shortly retired and the Secretary of State or potential Secretary of State came along to you and said, let us say, "We are going to have a radical look at this to bring even more confidence to the system," would you say that there was an argument for giving you, as the QAA, a role in checking more directly the standards, or do you feel that peer review, the external examiner system, would give you more assurance on that?

**Mr Williams:** It is interesting you should ask this, because we have actually been thinking about this ourselves within QAA, exactly what we should do. Quality assurance is an evolutionary process. You do not do the same thing again and again, you must move on.

**Q356 Dr Harris:** You are limiting it to the current framework but I want to look outside your current legal powers. If you were improving the system, looking at it from the outside, what would you suggest?

**Mr Williams:** What I would suggest, and what we are thinking through, is first of all to retain the peer review process because that, I think, is a strength, to look more at what I would call primary evidence instead of secondary evidence. At the moment we look at secondary evidence. The third is to negotiate with the better regulation setters the right to be more intensive in our work. At the moment we are very constrained in what we can do through various constraints placed upon us. We would look at primary evidence. We would look at external examiners to a greater extent. In other words, we would go to the institutions and say, "We want to see the same things that you see when you are setting and monitoring your standards."

**Q357 Dr Harris:** Could you send us a note about primary evidence and secondary evidence, because I do not think we have time to explore it now?

**Mr Williams:** Yes.

**Q358 Dr Harris:** On peer review and external examiners, do you think the system is good, do you think it is good but maybe it needs to be looked at, do you think it could be improved, or do you think it is flawed? What is your view on it?

**Mr Williams:** I think it is a good system. It is creaking. There needs to be better understanding of what it can and cannot do. I think the claims for it to provide the kind of nationwide or whole cross-sector guarantee of consistency of standards cannot be sustained, and we have said that in a number of places. But to have the external check, however that is formulated, is an extremely valuable element within the whole process.

**Q359 Dr Harris:** Do you have a view on peer review and external examiners, because you heard in the previous session some concern raised about whether they could do the job, even if it was not, "You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours"?

**Professor Ramsden:** My view concurs very largely with Peter Williams's. I think it is a good system at heart, peer review, because it goes along with fundamental ideas about academic culture and it tends to look effectively. As you will be aware, the RAE is done right throughout that too. I think it does need work on it to make it better. The suggestions I made in my report to the Secretary of State include the possibility of more training, better development for external examiners, the possibility of a register and the development of colleges of peers

to go beyond the external examining system and complement it. So I think it needs work on it to make it better.

**Q360 Dr Harris:** Mr Williams, we are a science committee, partly, as well as innovation, universities and skills. Do you share the feelings we might have about science degrees being awarded for homeopathy, for example, or would you accept it for astrology next?

**Mr Williams:** This is one of the questions about standards, is it not? I have said somewhere else that we do not want the standards of yesterday, we want the standards that are relevant today and I think that communities are going to have to decide whether homeopathy is an appropriate subject to be studied in higher education. I do not myself think it is QAA's role to determine which subjects are or are not appropriate.

**Q361 Dr Harris:** What about higher education, because clearly you could look at the history of it, for example, and theology is studied and there is a lot of scientific matter there, and I am asking whether a BSc should involve reference to the scientific method and experiment, at least as a core principle and not the rejection of that as the core of the subject?

**Mr Williams:** I think it is for the higher education and scientific community itself to determine the process it is prepared to accept as being genuine for its own purposes. If that scientific community collectively says that a particular subject area like, as you rightly say, astrology, is not appropriate, then it should not support it.

**Q362 Dr Harris:** But if the university is desperate to get students in—we have just discussed this, Parliament has never voted for this but there is a market in higher education—and they just want to attract students and they find it easier and cheaper, i.e. more profitable, to attract students to a BSc in alternative medicine rather than experimental chemistry, then they will do it and the fact that there is some professor of the Royal Society huffing and puffing is not going to stop them. Are you going to stop them?

**Mr Williams:** This is not something for QAA. This is not QAA business. QAA does not exist to regulate the scientific method and its application. That is something for the academic community to do and I think if the academic community says that we should not have degrees in homeopathy—which presumably are legal, because homeopathy is legal, astronomy is legal, so it is not breaking any law –

**Dr Harris:** It is not the degree, it is the BSc. I thought the Quality Assurance system would say that a BSc leads someone through the process with an understanding of science and scientific methods. So we can have Bachelors of Art and we have theology degrees, but science is science. Surely there must be some way for you to interact with this question, otherwise it is meaningless?

**Q363 Chairman:** We are back to square one really, are we not, Peter, to the point where we started on this whole argument of what is this role, that if institutions can in fact do all this process themselves, what is your point? If you cannot intervene on such a fundamental issue, where can you intervene?

**Mr Williams:** What we can do, and our reviewers would do, would be to go and look at a programme in something like homeopathy, how that had been approved, why that had been approved and what the scientific rationale behind it had been. We cannot stop the universities offering degrees in subjects they want to offer. They are unfettered in what they can offer.

**Q364 Dr Harris:** They could call it a doctorate even if it is a three year Bachelor degree –

**Mr Williams:** No, because that falls foul of the framework. The framework requires a certain level of engagement over time.

**Q365 Dr Harris:** But you would expect the external examiner to pick this up –

**Mr Williams:** If I were the reviewer, if I were an auditor on this one, I would want to see the external examiner's report. I would want to see what the external examiner is saying about this and how the university had responded to it, but there is a limit to the powers which an organisation like ours, without legal powers to close things down, can exercise in these areas.

**Q366 Chairman:** But should you have them?

**Mr Williams:** Well, it would be an extremely powerful power, to close things down. Take higher education, or take our powers. It is well outside what has been allowed to us. I would be very wary about giving the power to close things down.

**Q367 Dr Harris:** Are you a mature enough organisation to handle that power, or do you think it is too much power for an organisation like yours?

**Mr Williams:** No, what of course we could do—it would be a nuclear option and so the danger is that we would not actually do it very often, we would not exercise the power.

**Q368 Dr Harris:** You are not doing anything very often at the moment, it is established?

**Mr Williams:** No, not at all. I think that is a very unfair analysis.

**Q369 Dr Harris:** You have done a couple of things in FE<sup>3</sup> that were powerful but nothing in HE?

**Mr Williams:** No, no, no. A lot of our power is the power of influence and fear. I think when I was here last time I pointed out some of the consequences of the work we have done. It is universities losing their credit rating, which is very serious for them, vice-chancellors resigning. These are things which we have to be very careful about. We are not in the

<sup>3</sup> Further education



business of destroying universities or higher education activities. It is not our objective to destroy them

**Chairman:** I am sorry, Dr Harris, I have got to stop you there. This is really exciting stuff and this is just the worst afternoon we have to be short of time, but I am very anxious to hear from Professor Ramsden before he leaves, so five minutes on each of these last two questions and I am going to reverse them, six and five.

**Q370 Mr Marsden:** I will not get into whether every Bachelor of Science is a good scientist any more than a Bachelor of Arts is a good artist. Professor Ramsden, if I can come to you, your Academy was set up in 2004 and you have joined it as its first Chief Executive. Not least if you were here for the earlier session and heard some of the discussions about the balance between research and teaching, does it not seem sometimes as if you are David throwing a few sling shots at Goliath?

**Professor Ramsden:** It could sometimes seem like that, but my view is that there is no natural divide between teaching and research and education. I think we heard Professor Alderman say earlier on that it was an ideal that there should be a link between the two things. I think it is an ideal and it is an ideal I very much respect. One of the things we have tried to do is to encourage the links between teaching and research. I am sure that good teaching is informed by research and that students have the experience of being taught by people who are scholarly or inspirational, who are keen, and I think that is very, very important in higher education. To continue to answer your question, I think it would be inappropriate to set up a natural divide between the research and the teaching function. Most people go into academia, I certainly did because I was interested in finding things out, on the one hand, and interested in sharing them with other people as well, and I think that is a very important part of the quality of the student experience to have that.

**Q371 Mr Marsden:** Again, as I said to an earlier witness, that is a very nice, slightly Utopian view, but what do you do at the hard edges? What do you do, assuming you agree with what Professor Alderman said earlier about the brilliant researcher who is a hopeless teacher? Do you just say that does not matter, or do you try and put him or her under more pressure to become a better teacher, or what?

**Professor Ramsden:** In my view, it matters very much because that researcher will probably agree with what I said, that he went into academia not just to do research but also to share his knowledge, his experience and his inspiration with other people. I believe that is a very important part of what all academics should do. It is obviously up to universities to encourage that. My view is—and it is anecdotal evidence—that they do encourage it, but we encourage it from the Higher Education Academy's point of view by working with the higher education sector to develop a national professional

standards framework for teaching which all academics are expected—and it is self-regulating—to rise up to.

**Q372 Mr Marsden:** So we have now got a bit of what you are doing, which is—how can I put it kindly?—focussed on recidivists, useless researchers who really ought to be good at teaching?

**Professor Ramsden:** No, I do not think a deficit model of teaching is really a very effective one. I am very concerned to ensure that most people in academia want to be good at teaching, they want to teach students and to encourage them and enable them to do that through the kinds of programmes we accredit and the support and the workshops that we provide through our subject centres..

**Q373 Mr Marsden:** Can I just move on and ask you, as I say, you are in your fifth year now and according to HEFCE, these latest accounts, you have got £21.9 million from them for 2007/2008. If I was a nasty person at the National Audit Office and I was doing an audit of you, how would you actually say the £24 million (or thereabouts) you received from the taxpayer is actually making a difference? Can we see a quantitative difference over the five years of your existence, between the quality of teaching and raising the status of it from what it was beforehand?

**Professor Ramsden:** That is a very good question because it is very difficult to make that connection, because what we can do with our £21 million is relatively small compared with what universities can do with their much larger pots of resources. I think there has been an improvement in that standard of teaching in higher education over the last five to ten years, or the thirty years the Chairman was talking about. The extent to which the Academy can say it has achieved that and encouraged that, I think is a difficult question to answer.

**Q374 Mr Marsden:** Do you see yourself as the grit in the oyster, and if you are the grit in the oyster who are the people who are producing the pearls?

**Professor Ramsden:** I think what we have done is to operate to produce an accreditation framework, and we accredit now over 200 programmes in higher education and continuing professional development things for universities, and that has undoubtedly had an effect on enhancing the standard of teaching in universities. The evidence is there in the students' views, in what people say, in the Quality Assurance Agency's reports.

**Q375 Mr Marsden:** Just coming to the end on this, you talk in your submission statements about bringing out the best learning experience and environment for students but I am right, am I not, in thinking that on a regular basis you do not actually engage directly with students? You take evidence and surveys, and all the rest of it. Is that a big weakness in what you are trying to do, or do you have plans to have a more regular engagement with students, or what?

**Professor Ramsden:** The short answer is, yes, we work at multiple levels, we work with higher education institutions, with universities and colleges, with individual academics and at policy level, but we also increasingly work closely with students. For example, in governance terms we have the President of NUS, who is a member of our board –

**Q376 Mr Marsden:** Is he or she a typical student?

**Professor Ramsden:** I think I will have to leave Wes Streeting to answer that for himself, but he certainly is representative of a very large group of students –

**Q377 Mr Marsden:** The point I am making is that any individual, however gifted, however representative, is no substitute, as we have discovered in our other sessions, for bringing together a clump of students from very diverse and different backgrounds and I am just suggesting to you that that might be a useful part of your useful agenda.

**Professor Ramsden:** I agree, and we try to do that through our subject centres in particular, and we work very, very closely with students in many different ways and we also work at different levels with the NUS and with other groups of students. As I said again in my submission to the Secretary of State, I think we need to engage more with students through not only the higher education academics but also institutions to do that because they have a very, very big part to play in enhancing quality and I think we need to use that resource.

**Chairman:** We will come back to Graham because degrees mean an awful lot to students.

**Q378 Graham Stringer:** They do. Mr Williams, in your evidence you say, “It would be a serious mistake to confuse a flawed classification system with falling academic standards,” and you also claim that all students reach a basic and appropriate standard. How can you be so sure if we are dealing with what you accept is a flawed system that basic standards are reached?

**Mr Williams:** I think we have to take away the red herring of degree classification because I do not think degree classifications tell us anything and I have gone on record to say that. I think they are misleading and not at all helpful for the reasons Professor Burgess was talking about and there is nothing new in that, nothing at all. I think the proxies for knowing that the standards are being achieved are largely because of the (up until now anyway) very high level of graduate employability.

**Q379 Graham Stringer:** That is a pretty odd sort of criterion, is it not?

**Mr Williams:** Well, it seems to me to be a very fashionable criterion.

**Q380 Graham Stringer:** If people see BA, BSc after somebody’s name they assume a level has been achieved. What I am asking is, how do you know that level has been achieved?

**Mr Williams:** Because the universities have assessment processes which are moderated by external examiners, which meet their own regulations and which have provided all the information the university needs to be able to say that the student has met the necessary standard, the internal processes, which themselves are verified externally and are related back to the qualifications framework I mentioned earlier.

**Q381 Graham Stringer:** Can you explain this to me then, that when you look at the time history students in Durham are expected to spend per week, not contact time just the time to get a degree, it is 28 hours at Durham and it is just over 18 hours at Reading. Does this mean that teaching is more efficient at Reading or that the students are brighter, or there is no equivalence between those degrees, or one set of students are not reaching a basic standard?

**Mr Williams:** I think one of the things one has to do is to be rather careful about the validity of the information you have got. There is a distinction to be drawn between learning hours and teaching hours and I am not sure which ones you are quoting.

**Q382 Graham Stringer:** Learning hours.

**Mr Williams:** Learning hours will vary from student to student over time and the students will change from year to year, so I think it is dangerous to try and put too much weight on that kind of information. However, having said that, I do think it is important that the universities can say why their learning hours are as they are. Why students are learning at the rate they are is part of the universities’ responsibility.

**Q383 Graham Stringer:** Can you explain two things, the degree inflation which is going on and what the meaning of that is, and secondly would you comment on what the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information has stated, that the educational experience of higher education students in the UK in some respects is less than world-class when compared with its counterparts elsewhere in Europe?

**Mr Williams:** Again, these are generalisations which I am not at all sure I would necessarily subscribe to.

**Q384 Graham Stringer:** The second one, I accept, is a general criticism or generalisation, but the first one is not. There has been a degree of inflation, there are more students getting firsts and 2.1s as a percentage than there were previously?

**Mr Williams:** I think that question was answered in the previous session.

**Q385 Graham Stringer:** I am asking for your answer. You might have a different answer.

**Mr Williams:** Okay, my answer is that I do not trust degree classifications. I have said that before and I will say it again, and I think they are locally valid but nationally when you aggregate them up they are not a useful tool and they are used as if they were a useful tool. So I think the individual universities or

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9 March 2009 Professor Paul Ramsden, Mr Peter Williams and Mr Anthony McClaran

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individual subjects within the universities are doing a reasonable job and I do believe that the change from norm-reference into criterion-reference and assessment has made quite a profound difference. In other words, if you are no longer constrained by the number of firsts you award on a distribution basis and you move to this position whereby if you demonstrate you have learnt the stuff you get the mark and you get the grade, then that will make the kind of difference which I think has been made. But I find these degree classes –

**Q386 Graham Stringer:** Let me return then, as a final point, to general classification. When asked to justify basic standards you talked about employment but what the Centre for Higher Education Research was really doing was making a more meaningful comparison with how this country earns its living, with other universities in other parts of the world. Do you believe that our degrees are keeping pace with standards in other countries?

**Mr Williams:** I have seen no evidence that they are not.

**Q387 Graham Stringer:** So you just reject the criticism. Have you seen evidence that they are?

**Mr Williams:** One of the pieces of evidence is how popular our universities and degrees are to international students. The international student market is buoyant. Our international student market is buoyant. We are the second most successful country in the world for international students. They do not have to come here, they can go anywhere, but they come here because they know that they get a much higher degree of personal engagement, which is not known in Europe to anything like the same extent. The European models are quite different from those here and the numbers of students from the EU, for example, who are coming here increases year on year, as Anthony will be able to confirm. Our education is a success. We are good. We provide good education, we provide diverse education, we provide education to fit the needs of a wide range of students, not just a particular stereotype. It is a success story.

**Chairman:** I think on that very positive note can we thank you very much indeed, Peter Williams, and can we also thank you for all the work you have done at the QAA, and do not take our questioning as in any way a criticism, even though it is, of your work! Thank you also, Anthony McClaran, Chief Executive of the Universities and Colleges Admissions, and thank you very much indeed, Professor Paul Ramsden, and we wish you all the very best with the Academy.

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## Wednesday 6 May 2009

Members present

Mr Phil Willis, in the Chair

Mr Tim Boswell  
Mr Ian Cawsey  
Dr Ian Gibson  
Dr Evan Harris

Dr Brian Iddon  
Mr Gordon Marsden  
Graham Stringer

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*Witnesses:* **Professor Michael Arthur**, Vice-Chancellor, University of Leeds, **Professor Michael Driscoll**, Vice-Chancellor, Middlesex University and **Professor Roger Brown**, Former Vice-Chancellor of Southampton Solent University, gave evidence.

**Chairman:** Could we welcome our first panel of witnesses this morning and may I apologise for starting the session slightly late this morning. We welcome you very much indeed to this, the Students and Universities inquiry, Professor Michael Arthur, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Leeds; you are very, very welcome and congratulations on achieving notoriety as the new boss of the Russell Group. We wish you well in that post. Professor Michael Driscoll, the Vice-Chancellor of Middlesex University; thank you very much indeed for being with us this morning. And Professor Roger Brown, the retired Vice-Chancellor of Southampton Solent, currently Professor of Higher Education Policy at Liverpool Hope University; a very warm welcome to you, Professor Brown. There is an interest to be declared.

**Dr Iddon:** Can I declare, Chairman—and this is for both panels this morning—that I am a member of the University and College Union, Visiting Professor at the University of Liverpool School of Chemistry, a member of the External Advisory Board, School of Chemistry, University of Manchester; and I am unpaid Parliamentary Adviser to the Royal Society of Chemistry.

**Q388 Chairman:** Can we start with you, Professor Arthur? We recently visited the US and we visited Georgetown University outside Washington, a leading private Jesuit University. We were told in great depth how the university prepares students from all backgrounds for entry into the university and the steps that they actually take to make sure that when the students arrive at quite prestigious universities they are able to actually fit in and take advantage of it, particularly students from less privileged backgrounds. What do you think is the balance of responsibility between the universities' role to make sure that all students, wherever they come from, can actually fit into the university effectively? And what is the balance between your role as a university and that of schools?

**Professor Arthur:** I think each university would take a significant responsibility for doing exactly that. At Leeds we would have a detailed induction programme which goes on for two weeks, which has academic and social aspects. But for students from particularly disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly students that come in on our Access to Leeds Programme, which I am more than happy to

explain to you, then we have a very detailed programme that starts as they apply to the university and then increased support when they first arrive and throughout their course.

**Q389 Chairman:** How are they flagged up to you?  
**Professor Arthur:** Those particular students?

**Q390 Chairman:** Yes.

**Professor Arthur:** We are in the process of changing it but hitherto it has been an arrangement with specific schools and the entry criteria for that course are on the basis of social or educational disadvantage; so things like receipt of Educational Maintenance Allowance, first timers into higher education coming from a school with less than 45 per cent A to C; students from a care background and those sorts of issues. Any other form of individualised personal, social or educational disadvantage they wish to declare is brought to our attention by the teaching staff and we offer a specific programme for entry, which includes a discount on A Level scores.

**Q391 Chairman:** What about the social aspects? Going back to Georgetown again, they made sure, for instance, that the rooming arrangements, with students coming from obviously challenging backgrounds, were carefully taken into consideration. Writing courses were prepared to make sure that they were able to start the courses running rather than having to catch up once they got there. Is all that in place?

**Professor Arthur:** Similar sorts of arrangements. It is run by a team called the Access and Community Engagement Team and there is a social programme for those students. I think there is a real balance to be struck between doing special things for those students and fully integrating them into the rest of the activities and programmes at the university, and there are certainly special skills courses to bring students up to speed rapidly if they lack writing or other skills.

**Q392 Chairman:** Professor Driscoll, all is well in the university world then and students, wherever they come from, have an easy transition into higher education.

**Professor Driscoll:** I would not say that at all, but the students that you describe are exceptional at my university and in fact we know nationally that 48 per cent of students come from colleges rather than schools. In my own university over half the students who come to initial higher education to undergraduate degrees are mature students. We work very closely with the schools because a lot of our recruitment is local and we have 80 or 90 partner schools that we work with, both helping to prepare students to come on and raising their aspirations and so on. The more difficult group to prepare in advance, of course, are the mature students who may be entering from work or from unemployment and we have to try to work with them when they arrive at the university to make sure that they are properly inducted and properly integrated. Although we cannot easily access them before they apply and they come to the university, nevertheless those students, of course, by the very nature are more mature; they are usually more sorted out; they have been in the labour force and they are coming into higher education to raise their future employment and career opportunities. So they are not difficult people to induct and to get integrated into the student body. But our students are very, very diverse, so it is difficult to have a programme that is one size fits all. We try to tailor our induction programmes for students, both domestic and internationally. I would say that our biggest challenge is a cultural one with international students rather than students from disadvantaged backgrounds. They are not untypical in my university, so we are experienced, if you like, in handling those issues and trying to make sure that we maximise their chances of success.

**Q393 Chairman:** Professor Brown, the question I am really trying to get at is you can understand—take Liverpool Hope, which we visited, which clearly has a lot of local students and the Liverpool students see that very much as their local university—there being a real link between schools and colleges and the university, but do you feel that that applies throughout, particularly to the more “prestigious universities”?

**Professor Brown:** It is very dangerous to generalise, Chairman. I think there is a wider issue, which is that the universities now have to cope with a much wider range of students from a much more diverse set of backgrounds and there are more students than there were, who are not well prepared for degree level entry, and this is true even for students with good A Level results. I think if one were redesigning the higher education curriculum now one might well think in terms of a foundation year, not just for international students or students with acknowledged learning difficulties but more generally really. I am sure other bodies would have given evidence in this, but I think there is a real issue about the extent to which the school and university curriculums are drifting apart rather than coming together. In the old days A levels were a good proxy for first year university entry; A

Levels do not fulfil that need now and therefore on the one hand you have a proliferation of rival qualifications like the pre-U, the A star, etcetera; but on the other hand of course those qualifications are being taken from pupils from a more differential range of schools. I think there is a serious issue about the mismatch between the school and the university curriculum, which individual universities—and most universities—that have similar arrangements as those that have been described, in themselves cannot necessarily cope with.

**Q394 Mr Marsden:** Professor Brown, I thought those remarks were very interesting. If I could just probe you on a couple of aspects of the changing student profile. We know from all the demographic statistics that the cohort of younger people coming in, in all areas, is going to decline significantly over the next 10 to 15 years. At the same time statistics show, as Professor Driscoll illustrated in his own university, the steady rise in the number of adult learners, and who knows what additional numbers to that there will be given the economic downturn. How do you think that this change in demographic profile is changing universities’ relationships with students and how do you think it should change them?

**Professor Brown:** Again, I think you must differentiate a bit because not all universities have the same entry profile. The short answer to your question is that there will be more demands on universities for more flexible learning programmes—that is already apparent in many of the big cities here. We may also see the American phenomenon where students study in more than one university at the same time; up to half American undergraduates are studying at more than one university—it is often known as “swirling”. This in itself raises big questions about who is responsible for the standards of the programmes, but we will put that on one side. So basically the demands of those kinds on universities will increase, and flexibility always costs more money. If you go down the credit based route, for example, if you have more teaching in the evenings and you have people working at weekends it all adds up to money and it increases the demands on the universities and it is not at all clear where that resource will come from.

**Q395 Mr Marsden:** You have mentioned flexibility but is it not the case, from evidence we have heard and what is generally argued, that despite good intentions we are very far from the form of the sort of credit accumulation framework that could actually deliver the sort of flexibility in the good way that you describe.

**Professor Brown:** Yes, but I spent a long time looking at credit frameworks in the 1990s and they are something of which everybody is in favour but nobody actually wants, and the test is whether people are prepared to pay for them. I do not think—except in some of the big cities where you have the kind of student demand that we have

described—that for many students there is that demand for a credit framework. Bear in mind that many of our programmes are already quite flexible—a modular course can give a student a huge amount of choice compared with what was the case 20 years ago. I think if you do go down the credit routes there are issues we need to look at; you would need to revise the whole funding system, you would need to fund on the basis of credits and you would have to look at the quality assurance as well all because the great beauty in the present funding system is basically it funds whole students for whole years and that provides a relatively cost effective method of funding. Once you go down the credit route where you are funding based on credits the risk is that you need a whole bureaucracy to make sure that the students have acquired the credits and the funding has to be divided and so on. One would need to be quite careful about going too far down that route as a general position across the whole of higher education.

**Q396 Mr Marsden:** Professor Arthur, can I come to you again to pick up on something that we saw during our US visit? I actually went on behalf of the Committee to a university called Howard University, which is an all black university in Washington DC. They have a very interesting initiative—it starts in middle grade school—which takes young, primarily black boys and girls from the five most deprived areas of Washington DC districts on a lottery basis. That school is actually attached to and supported by the university. You have described some of the things that you are doing at the moment to try and widen access and participation with local schools and elsewhere; is that route that I have described at Howard the pioneering, innovate sort of thing that Russell Group Universities such as you should be doing?

**Professor Arthur:** There are programmes like that which I have been involved in personally actually, through the University of Southampton when I was there, which was in compact with inner city FE<sup>1</sup> colleges in Southampton and with Lewisham College, which was a special pathways programme to bring students into medicine. They just simply had to get through the pre-designated hurdles and then they were automatically offered a place in medicine, and that did recruit a lot of black and ethnic minority students highly successfully.

**Q397 Mr Marsden:** I am sorry to interrupt you on that. I am talking about something where the actually university seeds, if you like, or plants—in this case a middle school—outside its window. There has not been anything like that done in English universities so far as I am aware.

**Professor Arthur:** I think that is right. Our equivalent of that would be working with the schools in the city in the region and some of them in depth, the 12 partner schools where we are working in every single year in that school. Also,

our participation jointly with Leeds Met, as it happens, in the developing of Academies in the city where we are contributing expertise to the development of those.

**Q398 Mr Marsden:** So that is how you work it.

**Professor Arthur:** That would be the closest equivalent. We also have a programme of medicine with Bradford University for coming into special routes of medicine in Leeds as well.

**Professor Driscoll:** Our ancient universities used to have arrangements between their colleges and established schools but those schools have tended to separate away from the pairing with a university. It seems to me that there probably is not the same need in the UK that you identified on your visit to the United States, for that particular community that Howard University cater for. I think all of us have articulation agreements with schools. We have them in the partnerships I described between our schools and colleges of precisely that nature to encourage widening participation and to provide guarantees subject to achievement of required standards for places within my university. I was in India last week and part of that trip visited a higher education institution in Chandigarh, which had done exactly this and there you could see the value of the purpose because they were offering free places to a school they established on their university campus for rural children, who otherwise would not even get into a school if they did not create the school; and they provide free tuition and a free pathway into their engineering programmes, and I hope that one day one of those children will come and take a scholarship with Middlesex University as a way of establishing a connection and contribution to the development of rural people in India.

**Q399 Dr Harris:** Professor Driscoll, do you think that the benchmark system is worth bothering with, given that a number of universities are well short of their benchmark and some people say that it is relatively meaningless. Oxford University, for example, thought a benchmark was unfair.

**Professor Driscoll:** This is benchmark on wider participation?

**Q400 Dr Harris:** Yes.

**Professor Driscoll:** It is there; it gives people something to think about. Because they are not achieving the benchmark I do not think it means that they are not trying. The colleagues I speak to at Oxford and Cambridge are doing somersaults, metaphorically speaking, to try to encourage applications from a broader spectrum and to achieve their benchmarks. If we did not have the benchmark then we cannot make progress. I guess that the essence of any system that is trying to progress is to set as clear a target as possible and then to ask people to produce the strategies that will achieve that. The strategies we use at the moment may be failing and we may need to rethink how we can get closer to those as targets.

<sup>1</sup> Further education

**Q401 Dr Harris:** I just want to deal with one of those strategies. Professor Arthur, you explained that at Leeds you offer a discount on A Level scores for certain cases from a poor educational background, you might say. What is the discount?

**Professor Arthur:** It is two grades on A Levels; so if the course is requesting three As then we would offer an A and two Bs. The student has to pass a 10 credit level zero module during a weekend at the University before the offer is made.

**Dr Harris:** So you have a relatively simple but transparent system where schools know—it is generally the schools—that if they qualify they know the broad categories you have explained. Do all the other universities in the Russell Group do the same thing?

**Professor Arthur:** I could not speak for the entire Russell Group. I am aware that we are partnering with 10 other institutions up and down the land, many of which are in the Russell Group that have a similar programme and we are arranging to swap students, as it were. So if a student does well in our 10 credit module and we make an offer and that student does not wish to come to Leeds and wishes to go to another university they can transfer that credit across.

**Q402 Dr Harris:** It is the discount I am talking about.

**Professor Arthur:** The discount would be the same or similar across the university institutions.

**Q403 Dr Harris:** Let us say that you are doing the right thing, by saying in advance so that people know; otherwise it is relatively pointless because you want to try to attract applicants knowing that they will have a fairer hearing by a few points, as it were. If you are doing the right thing—and let us say you are—should not every university that is particularly failing to get those students in, obviously, or according to their benchmark, do the same as you? In other words, if the university does not do that or does it on an *ad hoc* basis for a student after application, is it not by extension that they are not doing the best thing or the right thing? You cannot both be right.

**Professor Arthur:** I think other universities can do other different and equally fair and just systems. There are systems in other universities that will transparently offer points and discount A Levels; so they may use a different system to get there but they have schemes that do that.

**Q404 Dr Harris:** If your university offers a discount of two points for people from poor socioeconomic backgrounds—and let us say we assume that that is fair—then if the same student applies to another selective university that does not offer that discount, even though they may do other things, and essentially they are going to have to get three As then that cannot be fair on that measure at least. So should there not be a degree of uniformity, both in terms of saying in advance and doing the same thing and then evaluating it obviously?

**Professor Arthur:** It would be nice to see the scheme extend, of course. We have the advantage that we have interacted with the student and we have the security of having taken them through one of our own modules and we have seen the results; so we have evaluated their potential in a way that we are confident about the course. Whether other universities will be confident about our activities is up to them.

**Q405 Dr Harris:** You are doing the right thing by your terms, but other universities are not doing that. Professor Driscoll.

**Professor Driscoll:** I think the issue that Dr Harris is pressing here is one that has been given a very high profile within Parliament and outside, but I have to say that it is very much a second or third order of importance to the unfairness of people who do not get a place in any university. At this very moment we are faced with record applications and over the next three years, if there is no lifting in the numbers cap, 15,000 students, mostly—

**Q406 Dr Harris:** That is a different question—

**Professor Driscoll:** It is a very important point that students who could get a place in university will not get a place—

**Q407 Dr Harris:** Professor Driscoll, I actually agree with you.

**Professor Driscoll:** That is a scandal. And getting more working class kids into Russell Group universities is really absolutely irrelevant.

**Q408 Dr Harris:** That is not the question I asked and this is not a soap box for you; I actually happen to agree with you and I agreed with you when you made the point at the HEPI<sup>2</sup> breakfast. But I have to get through some questions and so this is not an opportunity—

**Chairman:** Let us go to the next question.

**Q409 Dr Harris:** The next question was about success rates. Would you be happy with the situation, Professor Arthur, in your universities where the success rate of students from state schools who were suitably qualified, who applied—because I know part of the problem is application and I know the biggest problem is achievement, but once you get over those hurdles would you be happy if the success rate was lower for state school applicants, or comprehensive school applicants than it was for independent school applicants after they have applied and on the same predictive scores?

**Professor Arthur:** Personally I would not be happy. I would like to see an evenness between the application rate and the offer rate and the admissions rate of students with the same level of qualifications from different parts of the sector. That would be my preference.

<sup>2</sup> Higher Education Policy Institute

**Q410 Dr Harris:** Is there data among the Russell Group for the success rates for students who finally get to apply but whether they are then successful in getting in?

**Professor Arthur:** I am not aware of any systematic collection of data.

**Professor Brown:** On this point, Chairman, a few years ago HEFCE did a study and they found that once pupils got to university, if anything some pupils from some state schools did better than some pupils from independent schools. That was quite a well written up study and I am sure the reference could be supplied. That was across the sector as a whole.

**Q411 Mr Boswell:** Can we whip through on to what might be called marketisation of standards and ask Professor Brown first. You comment in your memorandum on how little the impact of developments such as the expansion of student numbers on quality has been seriously studied and evaluated. First of all, confirm that that is the case. I cannot see any evidence that the Academy, QAA, UUK or HEFCE has done this work. It is not that many years ago since we were all talking about “more means so worse”. Why is this area so neglected?

**Professor Brown:** I think there are a number of reasons. I will be very brief. First of all, to be quite crude about it, it is not really in anyone’s interests to do so; it is not in the interests of individual Vice Chancellors because they are in competition with one another for students and income. It is not in the interests of the representative bodies because we all know the importance of overseas students in particular to the balance sheet of British higher education and the reputation; and it is not in the interests of government departments for various and all sorts of reasons. So first of all I think that without a genuinely independent voice that looks at these matters there is not a great market for it. Secondly, I think there is a specific reason. The former Higher Education Quality Council, of which I was Chief Executive, had both an accountability arm and an enhancement arm and we therefore did conduct inquiries into these matters in our Graduate Standards Programme, as you will recall, because you were the Minister at the time, I seem to recall, and actually was the foundation of a quality infrastructure which has now been adopted here, within Europe and even in America. But when HEQC came to an end the QAA picked up the accountability baton but no one, in my view, satisfactorily picked up the enhancement baton or put the two things together. Basically, until you have an independent agency which can report independently on the impact of funding and other matters on policy then that work will not be done. You need one agency which is responsible for the public funding of the sector and another which is responsible for reporting to Parliament on the use that is made of that funding and we do not have that at the moment.

**Q412 Mr Boswell:** That would be funding both at the institutional level, it would seem, and at the sectoral level and collectively across the sector?

**Professor Brown:** Yes that would operate essentially at the sectoral level.

**Professor Driscoll:** My institution has just undergone an institutional audit from the QAA and I am glad to say we came out of it very well, but enhancement was very much part of their review, so I have to correct Professor Brown about that; they do address that, and increasingly stress the importance of enhancement in this audit cycle, and one would expect to see that strengthened in the future. People can challenge the adequacy of that and suggest that it may be strengthened in certain ways, but to say that it does not exist is simply wrong.

**Professor Arthur:** My view would be that there is no wholesale problem with the standards in British Higher Education.

**Q413 Mr Boswell:** If I may interrupt, how would you know?

**Professor Arthur:** Because we have an internationally successful highly competitive higher education system that is the envy of the world that other people are copying and multiple international students wish to come here. I would not sit here and pretend it is perfect. It has been changing for 800 years and it will continue to change and improve. I rely on four different mechanisms to enhance quality and I think the key thing about any quality assurance system is that it must lead to enhancement. I have my own internal processes at the University of Leeds, our learning and teaching reviews and our annual health checks. I have the results of the national student survey; I have the institutional audit and I have the external examiner system. If you examine any individual part of that, it is not perfect but if you put all four things together you have a really significant programme of quality assurance that is aimed at enhancement rather than policing, and that is how we keep up the standards of the British higher education system.

**Q414 Mr Boswell:** You have listed four; what about the international aspect? Other than by a market test—we know students that come here, for example, from other countries—how can you be sure that you are delivering in contrast with institutions in other countries?

**Professor Arthur:** I think the short answer is that it is difficult to answer that question, except to look at the destinations and the activity and the impact for our graduates around the United Kingdom and around the world. So I think there is a really significant output issue that speaks for itself.

**Professor Driscoll:** Just very briefly, added to the list of the ways in which we can assure ourselves about quality and standards, I guess in both our institutions across the sector a large part of our curriculum is scrutinised by professional bodies, in addition to the overviews provided by our systems—quality assurance and so on. I think that the nature of our systems, the extent of the involvement of employers and so forth is unprecedented anywhere



else in the world. That is not to say that it cannot be improved and there are some things that I was chatting with Roger about earlier on that he might want to explore with you, which I think might be interesting ways of strengthening the system; how we can assure ourselves in my institution that the curriculum in a particular subject is up to date, and in another institution and so on. I think there are things that we could do that would help.

**Chairman:** I think we want to come on to that.

**Q415 Mr Boswell:** To put what might be a rather boring question out of the way—and I will ask Professor Driscoll and others if they must add—comparability of standards between your institution, for example, and one in the Russell Group, what does that mean? What do you understand by it and how is important is it formally? Is it something that needs moderating by a market test, or what?

**Professor Driscoll:** I think we get some assurance about that in terms of the content of the curriculum. I am an economist; I actually went to a polytechnic and then I went on to two Russell Group universities. I know that people share experiences, and we have an external examiner system. So there is a great deal of normalisation that takes place in terms of the curriculum content. Also, the information sources, whether at Oxford and Cambridge or at Middlesex, are of similar high quality because increasingly information sources are online and on the web, both in the formal library resource, and so on. So the difference is in information content. I have no evidence to suggest that teachers are better in some universities than others actually in performing as an inspiration in the classroom; and given that that is our bread and butter at a place like Middlesex we make sure that they are inspirational and are keeping the students interested. As regards standards, we do not give anything like as many firsts and two-ones as they do at Oxford and Cambridge and you would not expect us too. Oxford and Cambridge attract some of the brightest and hardworking students in the country, but we also have very bright and hardworking students who do get firsts and two-ones, but not in anything like the same proportion. If we were giving out the same number of firsts and two-ones I think you might ask the question: what is going on here? So I think there is strong evidence to say that degree standards, degree levels, awards in similar subjects across the sector because of the mechanisms that we have, the external examining system, and because of the way in which people are networked through the centres of subjects excellence bodies that we have in the country that you get a normalisation of standards across the sector and that is a great strength. And we can talk in this country about a British higher education system and British standards in a way that they cannot talk in the United States, where it is highly fragmented and where there are different systems and different accrediting bodies and it is difficult to know what you are getting. But here I think people do.

**Q416 Mr Boswell:** Can I advance another question on value added? Do you think that that is important and can we measure it? It slightly joins together with the issue about access and outcomes. Is that relevant to this?

**Professor Driscoll:** I think it is highly relevant and I think we need to measure it and I think there should be official measures. On the basis of peoples' past performance and social background you can make some sort of prediction about the likelihood of getting a particular classification. I think if an institution can raise that for a significant proportion of their student cohort then that is a measure of how they are succeeding with their students. I think it is something that has been neglected; it is neglected in league tables and I think undervalues the contribution that universities that have focused on widening participation, like Middlesex, make to raising skills and educational levels in this country.

**Professor Arthur:** I want to come back to the comment about the standards, if I may, and let me say that I agree with a lot of what Michael said in the first part of his answer about the way in which we can be sure across different institutions. To go any further, though, would need something that would potentially be quite damaging. So, for example, if you really wanted to know if the first in a subject was the same at Leeds and Middlesex then perhaps you would need a national curricula and national testing, and I suggest that that would be madness and it really would destroy the diversity and the creativity of our autonomous higher education system, a system that other European countries are now trying to emulate.

**Professor Brown:** I would like to make one or two comments in response to the questions that have been put and the remarks that have been made. First of all, I stand by my comment about not having the information and the evidence for that is in the HEPI surveys. Until the HEPI surveys were done it was not clear—and it still is not actually that clear—about the variability of the contact between institutions etcetera. Another of my points in my submission is that I believe that there has been a reduction in the overall volume of teaching on courses in British universities, but I do not know anyone has the interest in finding out whether that has happened or not or whether that matters very much. That is my first point. Secondly, I do not think that there is any evidence of a general decline of quality or standards but I think there are some longstanding difficulties, particularly in assessment, and there are some worrying cases that have come to light. I think given that we are now going into a pretty ferocious resource race in British higher education the market for international students is going to get tougher, etcetera and I think we have to strengthen our quality assurance framework. I think with the greatest respect, comparability is not the issue; the issue is minimum standards really.

**Q417 Mr Boswell:** Thresholds.

**Professor Brown:** Thresholds, yes. The issue is can we guarantee that anyone who takes a British degree is getting a worthwhile qualification with a

worthwhile curriculum and that traditionally was ensured by external examiners. In my view, external examiners were outmoded 10 years ago and they are even more outmoded now. They became outmoded first of all because of the basic weaknesses in the system and there will be evidence from other bodies before you about that in this inquiry. Secondly, because of the growth of multi-disciplinary and modular courses which means that the external examiner is not in close contact with the student on a piece of work, which was the original rationale for the system. But then on top of that you have these forces of competition which inevitably will make people cut corners. I have set out in my submission what I think should be done about it but the key point really is that the Quality Assurance Agency basically looks at the procedures by which institutions ensure standards and it does not actually look at standards. If we are going to look at standards we have to look at them at the programme qualification level and you have to look at all aspects affecting standards—everything from the admission of students through to the usual things about the design of programmes, etcetera, and you have to look at things like resource allocation and marketing and all those other things that affect standards. That cannot be done at an institutional level; we have to do that at the department and the programme level. It would be highly preferable if institutions did that themselves instead of which, I am afraid, they tend to rely upon external examiners and they are, I am afraid, incapable of doing that particular job in the very diverse system that we now have. What I would ideally like to see, which is what I did to some extent at my university, is that you get academics in a certain area of concern from an institution which has a broadly comparable mission to look at all aspects of the curriculum in subjects, as I say not just the teaching schemes and the assessment schemes but the whole picture, and then advise the Vice Chancellor about the currency of that particular curriculum in terms of their level of knowledge in the subject in relation to the research and that sort of thing, and they should report to the Vice Chancellor and if necessary those reports could be published—I would not favour that—and then the efficacy of that process is picked through an enhanced system of institutional review. Otherwise I do not think we are secure and we can be secure in making the statements that we make, with the greatest respect to my Vice Chancellor colleagues, about the standards of our degrees. I am sorry, but that is my view.

**Chairman:** I am sorry; I have to stop you there because we have to move on.

**Mr Boswell:** No, I think that is very helpful.

**Q418 Mr Cawsey:** As you know, our inquiry is looking at the student experience of universities and I know that every university would say that the student experience is caught in everything that you do. That seems an obvious thing to say. These are different times and students have to get into debt or pay fees and there is a drive to get more students into universities, and it is that dilemma, if you like, that makes us wonder how the experience of the student

is changing in recent times and in the future. My first question is quite a simple one really. How do you keep in touch with what happens in your own institutions to satisfy yourself of the student experience? It is a long way, is it not, from somebody comes to the university on the first day and is up in the hallowed office of the Vice Chancellor.

**Professor Arthur:** I personally visit every school in rotation constantly; I have been doing it for five years and during those meetings I meet with a selection of students of all different types—undergraduate, postgraduate, postgraduate research—without the senior members of staff present and I ask them to tell me what is going on and what it is like. I do a series of open meetings with the students—one a term—which are exciting and interesting and I can reassure you about the talent of our youth. I also work with our own internal audit systems of surveying our students and their views, as well as the results of the national student survey. So I think I get quite a good feel for what is going on in terms of student experience.

**Professor Driscoll:** Similar things and in addition—apart from things on a national student survey—internal surveys that focus directly on other aspects of their experience and so on. I chair various committees that deal with these things, including the university's academic board where reports come though. I talk to staff and I talk to students. So it is a variety of feedback mechanisms. Our students these days are not slow to complain, I have to say, if they are dissatisfied, and it does happen and it does get looked into and people get taken to task if their teaching is not up to scratch or there are concerns about slowness of feedback. In fact in the national student survey this seems to be a sector-wide endemic problem and I know my university and I know all of the universities are working very, very hard to address that and to try to improve the response we get from the students for the future. I know that is a number one target in the sector. So we do take these things seriously and we do try to act on them. There is one thing, Chairman, that I know this Committee has raised in terms of students, and it is an issue for students, and that is contact time and the HEPI surveys, because we all know—and certainly the feedback we get—is that students would like more contact; they would like smaller classes; they would like to be able to interact more casually and be able to knock on someone's door and get a bit of advice about the essay they are writing or on some assignment they have done, and so on. Professor Brown said that the volume of teaching has gone down. Certainly throughout the 1990s it did because the unit of funding was half; staff-student ratios more or less doubled across the sector and it was inevitable when we moved from smaller group teaching to larger group teaching. However, what I would say, given that we have managed to maintain the unit of funding over the recent years, is that I can point to no area of my university where hours are being cut or have been cut in the recent past. So I think there has been some stabilisation here, but clearly it is a threat for the future.

**Q419 Chairman:** The HEPI study was that there was a huge discrepancy between the number of hours of study in total and the outcome of degrees.

**Professor Driscoll:** I think it did not comment on the outcome, it commented really on the discrepancy, the similar subjects and so on. A couple of things to say about the HEPI studies. The ones that were carried out in 2006–07 surveyed 15,000 students. This latest update surveyed 2000 students; the report does not even say how many responded. It is a woefully small sample and I do not think that any statistician would stand by those results. The other thing that disturbs me more seriously about the conclusions of those HEPI reports is that they take one statistic—that is formal contact hours—and extrapolate some extraordinary statements about effort and the work that students do. I think it is quite unreasonable. Bahram himself will know that what is important is not just the contact hours, it is the quality of those hours, and it is everything else that goes into that. My institution—and I am sure this is true of most institutions across the sector—produces course handbooks and in those course handbooks it describes the contact, the nature of the contact, the number of assignments they will have to do and the nature of the assessment, and it provides all the other information around the reading lists.

**Q420 Chairman:** Should that be universal?

**Professor Driscoll:** All students should have a full view of how they are going to be taught, the quality of that interaction, whether it is a small group, large lectures and so on. I think that is perfectly reasonable. But Bahram in this HEPI report is saying nothing about that and what we are having to do in the university is to grapple a declining real unit of resource with a threat of further cuts in the future to put a package together that maintains quality, and I have to say to the Committee that I am extremely worried about the cuts that DIUS are now being asked to face because that will undoubtedly impact on the things that students are concerned about—that is contact hours, the quality of the facilities they have and the student support like careers advice and welfare advice and so on. So I think there is a really serious issue. So concern about students and the quality of their experience and standards in the end is money.

**Q421 Dr Gibson:** How do you decide on contact hours?

**Professor Driscoll:** I do not decide. The teaching teams take the resources they have and they work out a scheme for that programme that best uses those resources and best designed to support the learning for those students, and it varies across subjects.

**Q422 Mr Cawsey:** There were basically three points that I want to raise, which Professor Driscoll has largely covered. The first one was the one about the student experience. The second one was about contact time and the level of information that students get when they are making their choices and whether that should be extended. When we were in

America, for instance, we went to the Georgetown University and there were some American students who had had part of their academic experience in the UK and they were talking about plagiarism and they had a whole book on it—not just saying you should not do it but how can you avoid doing it and how you can write in a way that is sound. Then they were saying that in the UK they were just basically told not to do it. How supportive are we of students in terms of the information we give them? And my final point was that efficiency gains have been the mantra of all governments for a long time now and at which points do efficiency gains just become hard cuts in what is your sector. Professor Driscoll has given us his perspective and so I want to know if whether any other colleagues want to add to that?

**Professor Brown:** Can I just make one point about the HEPI surveys? I am not here to defend the HEPI surveys; they were done because of no other work being done. If the Vice Chancellors collectively are now going to commission work of that kind I would be delighted to see the outcome.

**Q423 Chairman:** I do not think they are, though, are they?

**Professor Brown:** I have no knowledge. But basically that is exactly the kind of thing that we should get a handle on really. The other thing I must say, in fairness, the finding in particular that British students who go to university seem to study less intensively than continental students has been validated by a number of independent surveys, so that aspect of the HEPI survey I think is right. But on a general point, which covers all of the contributions made, all of the emphasis has been upon what the students are saying about the quality of the course. When you ask the Vice Chancellors what they said it is, “Get in touch with the students.” That is fine and more could be done but there is no substitute for an independent, impartial expert view of the curriculum from professional academics who know their subject and that is the gap in our arrangements at the moment and that is what needs to be done. Go on having student surveys, go on asking the students, that is fine; but you have to do more than that if you are really going to get a handle on academic standards.

**Professor Driscoll:** I do not think there is any problem with that, Chairman.

**Professor Arthur:** I would just remind Professor Brown that I pointed at four things that I rely on, one of which also included exactly the detailed student academic experience review that he identified and it just so happens that we choose to do that internally and it is very high quality.

**Q424 Chairman:** Do you publish it?

**Professor Arthur:** Do we publish externally, no; it is used internally to enhance. The reports are available internally to other schools in the university.

**Q425 Dr Gibson:** Can we get to see it?

**Professor Arthur:** I am sure you can see it if you wish to see it. Comparisons with the United States and what the United States provide to their students,

please remember that unit resource for an American student is approximately double than that available in the United Kingdom and if you give us that level of funding we will provide that level of quality. And I would certainly add that if you want the United Kingdom and its higher educational system to remain internationally competitive and you want to have impact and you want graduates to have the sort of impact that they have had over the years and the sort of impact that you enjoyed as graduates as British universities then it takes significant funding. Please notice in all of that that I have barely mentioned the impact for research which is also important. But the impact of the quality of our learning and teaching and the graduates we produce is directly related to the unit of resource that we receive.

**Q426 Chairman:** So it is inadequate at the moment?

**Professor Arthur:** I think it is fast becoming inadequate.

**Q427 Chairman:** Why can you not just say that? To say, "At the moment it is so inadequate that we need to significantly increase the unit of resources to remain competitive"?

**Professor Arthur:** I personally have been saying that for a number of years; I think UUK has said it and it is in the Sustainability Report. I think the voice is quite loud about the fact that we need an improved unit of resource. If I look at the University of Leeds we went from 11,000 students in 1990 to 33,000 by 2003. Our student-staff ratio went from eight to 18 during that period; that was all related to reduction in resource.

**Q428 Dr Iddon:** I want to carry on in that theme and look at the tensions that might look apparent between the work that the research and the teaching universities do. Of course, universities compete from various sources for their funds within the dual funding system, from Europe, industry and even from the charities. Do you think that the competition that goes on for these funds within the universities takes focus away from teaching in any way?

**Professor Brown:** There is substantial international evidence that it does. I chaired for many years a research and teaching forum which consisted of experts from a number of different countries looking at this and the fact is that over time research and teaching had grown apart and research had become the more prestigious activity and of course the research assessment exercise has contributed to that. However, it is a complicated matter; the evidence is not clear-cut. There are ways in which you can have more links between research and teaching. The reform of the RAE itself provides an opportunity for that. It seems extraordinary to me that the impacts that have been considered are impacts on the economy, on society and on public policy but not student education, yet actually that is the key impact. If you are going to conduct a survey of universities there has to be a productive relationship between research and teaching. That is very patchy,

not just in Britain but in other countries involved because of the way in research and teaching have been pushed apart, partly through marketisation and because of the way in which research has come to assume greater prestige than teaching.

**Professor Arthur:** It will perhaps not surprise you if I take a completely different view to that of Professor Brown because I see a very close relationship between the research that universities do and the learning and teaching that is provided. In particular I think the key function of a university, particularly like the University of Leeds and the Russell Group Universities and other research intensive universities, is to create graduates who really are capable of thinking for themselves. One of the techniques that we have at our disposal to do that is to expose them to the research process so that they get involved in learning about what knowledge is, how it is created, what its boundaries are, how uncertain that can be, the teamwork that is necessary to deal with research and communication, problem solving and that sort of skill base growing. That absolutely is at the essence of the strategy of the University of Leeds and is very central to the strategy of most research intensive institutions. So enhancing the research enhances the learning and teaching. Also, you will find a number of people at universities like Leeds who would describe the teaching informing their research, so there is a complete circular relationship between those two activities. We have chosen to develop assessment systems that pull these things apart. Most of us became academics because we believe that they stick very closely together, and putting that at the heart of the strategy in the University of Leeds has fired up the students and fired up the staff in a way that you would not believe.

**Professor Driscoll:** I completely agree with Professor Arthur about what universities are about. This country signed up to the Bologna Declaration, but even if it had not been universally across this world people see universities not simply as degree factories but as engaging in both the development and the transfer of knowledge. Research can be undertaken outside a university and in it. The reason for having research in universities is precisely as Professor Arthur has described; in other words, to inform the teaching and to get that feedback loop. All universities in this country aspire to that, not just the Russell Group universities. The problem is the distribution of funding to do that. Dual support was really meant to ensure that all universities were well founded in terms of being able to provide a basic level of time for staff to engage in research, on which they would then compete for external grants. But that now has become a competitive process and a concentration has taken place on the research. What Professor Brown describes is also true. That has created a divergence in many institutions—it may not be true of Leeds—between teaching and research because we know now that many institutions appoint people simply to do research and cannot afford—because the stakes are so high—to let them do any teaching. So there is a divide taking place and staff are being appointed on teaching only contracts

in Russell Group Universities and in the 1994 Group universities, the ones that profess the model that Professor Arthur is saying, so the nature of the RAE is creating the adverse effects and moving the sector in this country away from that ideal model that I think Professor Arthur so eloquently described, and we need to get back to that as quickly as possible. We need, therefore, to have a better distribution because the last RAE has demonstrated that all institutions throughout the sector can produce excellent research, not just within the Russell Group.

**Q429 Dr Iddon:** Clearly, Professor Arthur, you believe that an academic doing research does enhance that person's teaching, so why have we focused research on just a few universities when we have so many other universities who are not getting a real share of the research cake? If we follow your argument through we ought to be spreading the research money across the whole university sector to enhance the teaching in all the universities.

**Professor Arthur:** Would that we could. We have a limited resource and you have a cadre of universities that are truly internationally competitive across a broad range of disciplines. That is what research selectivity has always been about; it is why the RAE was invented; and it basically puts the money in the universities that can do the greatest delivery. If we can afford to run 159 research intensive universities that would be great but we cannot apparently afford so to do. So there needs to be a degree of research scientivity in the system. Michael has described pockets of excellence—other people have called them islands of excellence—and they have done exceptionally well and they have been awarded in the RAE as appropriate. But if you carry on with that system you will dilute across 159 universities a resource that will be inadequate then even for our very best universities, and I personally think that that would be a long term mistake. So research selectivity is a crucial aspect of the international competitiveness of our top universities.

**Q430 Chairman:** Professor Brown?

**Professor Brown:** There is a simple solution to the problem, which is that if you save concentration and selectivity for the areas of research which are expensive to conduct, where it is not a good use of resources to have a spread of the resources widely, apart from that you simply fund pro rata to staff research and then pick up the outcomes through audit.

**Q431 Dr Iddon:** Can I put it to you that if we are short of resources, as we obviously are, and we cannot do what you would like to do, Professor Arthur, do we have too many institutes badged as universities and should we not adopt the American system of community colleges that rely solely on teaching and do not even try to compete for the research base?

**Professor Arthur:** I guess that would be for the Houses of Parliament to decide.

**Q432 Chairman:** What is your view?

**Professor Arthur:** I am quite a fan of the American community college system; I think it is a system that allows students to move into research intensive opportunity in their learning. It is a system; I think we should look at others. I have said it is important that students should be exposed to how knowledge is created as a part of their education.

**Professor Driscoll:** I think it would be a very backward step. We are where we are and I think we need to find ways of enhancing the support for research in the rest of the sector to get the direct benefits that Professor Arthur has described to all our students. We are currently below the OECD average in terms of what we spend as a proportion of GDP on research, so there is some capacity there; and indeed on higher education. So the idea that we are over funding our universities does not stand up on a proportionate basis, compared with other countries, and we have some scope for raising funding without taking it away from other institutions.

**Professor Brown:** The evidence is very clearly that research concentration has gone too far in Britain and what you actually need is a differentiated set of institutions—you need community colleges, you need basically teaching universities where staff conduct scholarship as an aid to their teaching and then you need a small number of—not very many—research intensive universities.

**Q433 Mr Marsden:** Professor Arthur, I do want to press you on the nirvana of the teaching methods that you have described to me because that is your justification for the concentration, as I understand it, of funding in research. In assuming we were to buy that argument on a philosophical basis where is the robust evidence as opposed to the assertions that you have given today that there is that direct relationship between research and teaching, and is it not the case, as we have heard from several of our witnesses, that in many cases research and teaching are in a ghetto, an increasing ghetto and apartheid in your own Russell Group universities?

**Professor Arthur:** I can only really speak for the university of which I am the Vice Chancellor.

**Q434 Mr Marsden:** Could you speak very specifically to how the assertions that you have made today about the link between teaching and research in universities, how those are independently asserted and verified as opposed to you just telling us that you believe it is so?

**Professor Arthur:** The quality of the outputs that we produce in our research and our graduates and eventual destinations; the notion that universities like ours will help create these for the future. Nine of the 12 Members of the Committee, who I presume regard themselves as leaders are graduates of Russell Group institutions. So there is evidence over a long time frame of the impact of that approach.

**Q435 Dr Gibson:** In the good old days people used to get promotion just for research. Has it changed because for academics, besides car parking charges, promotion is what it is all about for them and the recognition of their work; or is it just teaching?

**Professor Arthur:** Again, I can speak for the University of Leeds. We are currently in the process of redesigning all of our promotions criteria to give an equal weight to learning and teaching, enterprise and knowledge transfer, and research. We are in the final throes of how you do that at professorial level; we have already done and agreed it with the UCU for all of the other grades.

**Q436 Dr Gibson:** How do you become a professor in a Russell University without publishing in a high-flying journal?

**Professor Arthur:** I would need to show you all the criteria, Ian. You would need to have some research to go with your teaching profile; you would need to have some teaching to go with your research profile, at our institution.

**Dr Gibson:** That balance, in itself, adds to the pressure.

**Q437 Dr Harris:** We have just heard earlier from Professor Brown that a credit-based system would be administratively inconvenient.

**Professor Brown:** It might be expensive.

**Q438 Dr Harris:** Administratively inconvenient, financially and hassle-wise. However, do you see, in terms of fairness to students who, when they are marginal (if I can use that term) may well drop out—in America they have credits and they can come back in; here it is more of an all-or-nothing. Do you see advantages in terms of fairness to a credit-based system?

**Professor Driscoll:** Yes. Some people, when there is the prospect of an innovation, see problems. We have had a credit-based system in my Universities since 1992. The problem we have is that not all other institutions have credit-based systems, so it creates a problem for people wanting to transfer in or asking to transfer out.

**Q439 Dr Harris:** I understand that. Therefore, Professor Arthur, if you believe in community colleges, in America you transfer after two years with your credits. Do you accept you would have to have a transferable credit-based system in order to have, at least, some community-type scheme in this country where people could transfer to more research-intensive universities if they pass muster in their early credits?

**Professor Arthur:** If we are going to run that type of system then, clearly, we need to sort out that set of issues, yes.

**Q440 Dr Harris:** So you would be supportive of moving to a more credit-based system, at least, in order to facilitate that, or do you think that would be too radical for this country?

**Professor Arthur:** I think you would need to look at the whole picture and look at the impact of that on the cost of it—in other words, the cost of that on autonomy, and so on, and the diverse nature of the sector. So I do not think it is a simple set of issues that you can trap me into saying I definitely am a supporter of the community college system, therefore—

**Q441 Chairman:** We cannot trap you into anything, is the answer!

**Professor Arthur:** I think we should look seriously at the community college system and everything that goes with it, as part of the package.

**Q442 Dr Harris:** What do you mean by “autonomy”? Do you mean the ability of a publicly-funded university to do its own thing regardless of the needs of the sector as a whole, the needs of fairness and the needs of having a national system? Or do you mean something else by the “autonomy” argument against the credit system?

**Professor Arthur:** I am a very, very strong supporter of the autonomy of universities, but that does not mean that the autonomy disregards everything that surrounds it—city, region, government funding. I think we fully accept our responsibilities, but the thing about autonomy is the creativity that goes with it for people to develop new courses that are exciting and interesting.

**Professor Driscoll:** I think we need to grasp the nettle of a national credit-based system and national credit-based funding. You will find that the universities, like mine, that have very diverse student bodies (lots of part-timers, full-timers, people moving in and out—exactly what you describe) are closer to what you will find, typically, in the United States than those universities that are very monolithic, most of their undergraduates are recruited at 18 and they have comparatively few postgraduates and, also, comparatively lower levels of part-time. They do not want it because they see it is a hassle, but I think we have to take a national decision on this, and it is about time we caught up with the rest of the world, we introduced a national credit-based system and we fund students on credit as well, or institutions for their teaching.

**Chairman:** On that note, could I bring this to a close. I have to say, to all three of our witnesses, that has been one of the most interesting and lively sessions we have had in this inquiry. Thank you very much indeed for your evidence this morning.

*Witnesses:* **Sally Hunt**, General Secretary, University and College Union, **Dr Natalie Fenton**, Goldsmiths, University of London, **Veronica Killen**, Northumbria University, and **Dr Gavin Reid**, University of Leeds, gave evidence.

**Chairman:** We welcome very much our second panel this morning: Sally Hunt, the General Secretary for the University and College Union—welcome Sally—Dr Natalie Fenton, from Goldsmiths, the University of London, Veronica Killen from Northumbria University and Dr Gavin Reid from the University of Leeds. It will be interesting to see whether you agree with your Vice-Chancellor! Without further ado I will ask Ian Gibson to begin the questioning, and he is going to leave out car parking for this session.

**Q443 Dr Gibson:** Allegations have been made and are being made about grades being inflated to satisfy people from other countries, international development, and so on, and, also, plagiarism is rife and you must turn your back on it and not worry too much about it; at the end of the day, it is getting money in and making sure that the number of students is there. Discuss. Sally Hunt, please.

**Sally Hunt:** I think the first thing that I would like to start with, Ian, is that in talking about grade inflation, talking about plagiarism, actually, what you are really getting to the heart of is whether the people that we represent within UCU are able to carry out their professional duties in a manner that they know is right and proper. It will not surprise any of you on this Committee to hear me say that I have every confidence in the professional abilities and the professional commitment of academic and academic-related staff throughout the sector; what I do think we all have concerns about is their ability to deliver the standards that they know are necessary for students to get the experience that they absolutely deserve and need.

**Q444 Dr Gibson:** Sally, would they know plagiarism if they saw it?

**Sally Hunt:** Yes.

**Q445 Dr Gibson:** How would they know that? How would you detect it? I do not know—

**Sally Hunt:** Would you not?

**Q446 Dr Gibson:** I think Gordon Brown plagiarises everything some of us say.

**Sally Hunt:** I think he thinks the same of you sometimes, Ian, but what I would say is the reason that we have brought the group of people we have here is because what we wanted to make sure you had were academics who were actually doing the teaching, doing the research and actually doing an awful lot of the assessment that we know you need to talk about. I would like to bring Natalie and Gavin into this because this is something that they have a lot of experience of. I would say that I hear an awful lot of our members who, very clearly, are able to spot the difference between plagiarism and original work. I would also say that there is a huge range in what that word means, and I think that is the part that we do have to talk about. That is about the learning experience and what the students understand to be the type of work they have to

deliver. Sometimes that is a very blurred line, but with your permission, Ian, could I ask Natalie and Gavin to come in?

**Dr Fenton:** I am in charge of all plagiarism cases in our department. I reckon 10 to 20 per cent of all assignments are plagiarised. We do offer extensive advice on what plagiarism is and how to avoid it to all students at all levels through all course handbooks, and they have to sign bits of paper when they hand work in saying they understand those criteria and they have not plagiarised. We ask for electronic copies of all assessments handed in and they are put through plagiarism detection software. If, at the point of marking, they are suspected of plagiarism then they are put through the software and then we pick them up. We probably pick up about two per cent of what I imagine is 10 to 20 per cent.

**Q447 Dr Gibson:** What is that in round numbers? Is this Goldsmiths?

**Dr Fenton:** This is only my department, I have to say, but on each hand-in session there are 2,000 essays that come in and we have two hand-in sessions every year. So if you are dealing with 4,000 assessments I would spend my entire year doing nothing else but plagiarism hearings if we detected more. So there is one part of me that thinks: “Thank God we don’t detect more”, because we could not deal with it, possibly—we do not have the staffing to deal with it. The other part of me is, also, when I do the hearings—although I do not tolerate cheating remotely—I have some sympathy for the students who are working, often, full-time to cover the fees and just in desperate situations plagiarise. It is not a very pleasant exercise to go through days’ worth of hearings with students sobbing, and coming out with very real circumstances. Of course, we have a zero-tolerance approach where there is no excuse for cheating, I am sorry.

**Q448 Dr Gibson:** Is it increasing in numbers from, maybe, 10 years ago, with the pressures now on students to be successful and to gain something from the fees they have to pay, and so on? Has that encouraged plagiarism, in your opinion, numbers?

**Dr Fenton:** Undoubtedly, but there are other pressures as well. I say that unreservedly—those pressures have increased. We also deal now with a situation where it is much easier to plagiarise—cut-and-paste is very, very straight forward. That raises all sorts of problems and particularly for international students who come in with very little support, often, or support systems within universities that cannot deliver adequate infrastructure, really, for the levels of overseas students that we have.

**Q449 Chairman:** Could we extend this to the other witnesses?

**Dr Reid:** My experience is that certainly plagiarism levels have increased, but on the science side it is perhaps a slightly different problem than having a

big pile of essays; we are often in a situation where there are right answers and wrong answers and it is very easy to distinguish between the two, and it is sometimes difficult to understand how a student has arrived at the right solution and whether they have done that independently or in a group. I have had very nasty plagiarism cases in my department to deal with; I am Director of Learning and Teaching and I have overall responsibility for those issues. Almost invariably, the student's excuse was pressure of time, the deadline coming up and they had to work 17 hours that week to pay the rent, and really regretted doing it but in a moment of weakness took a piece of work from somebody else, and handed the same thing in. It is devastating.

**Q450 Dr Gibson:** What is it like being an academic that whistle-blow, if you like? How are you treated by the authorities in the university? You may remember Colwyn Williamson ran for years against the University of Swansea—it was a very famous case, and books have been written about it. What happens if you do blow the whistle? How do you do that? How would you do it if you suspected plagiarism?

**Dr Reid:** There are open, transparent policies in my institution and the university lays down precisely what happens at first-year, second-year and third-year level and the penalties that need to be imposed, whether it be a school-level offence or whether it needs to be referred up to the university for treatment. I do not think it is an issue of turning a blind eye or not acting properly. If colleagues have an issue in my department they bring it to me for advice.

**Q451 Dr Gibson:** If there is evidence that someone from Oman—the Sultan of Swing—who is building a building for you at the university, finds that one of the students from his part of the world is up to be looked at for plagiarism, is there pressure, any evidence for that, in your experience?

**Dr Reid:** I have never seen any, and I would not hesitate in exposing such a situation.

**Q452 Chairman:** What happens if the grades are dropping as a result of your intervention in terms of plagiarism, so that your marks drop and that affects the standing of the department?

**Dr Reid:** The number of cases is not such that that would have any overall bearing on the statistics. I do not feel under any pressure at all to bear that in mind.

**Q453 Dr Gibson:** What is the union's policy on this, Sally?

**Sally Hunt:** It is very straightforward; plagiarism is wrong because the standards of British universities are absolutely key to making sure that we maintain the future of our members' jobs. It is a very simple equation for us. What is more complicated for us, as my colleagues have pointed out, is actually rationalising why there is an increase. Some of it is about detection, definitely, as Natalie has said; some of it, though, is about the pressures that are on

students. What we are having to say, in the round, in terms of students' experience, which does impact on this, is as important, because it is about: do they have access to quality teaching? Do they have access to quality support? It is not a simple problem.

**Q454 Dr Gibson:** This last one: what about higher up the chain, as it were, and academics plagiarising each other's work? Is that on the increase as well, in your opinion? There have been famous cases there, but from your experience of protection of your membership.

**Sally Hunt:** From our experience, in terms of academics challenging who has been the originator of work (I put it that way), the union has always worked on the basis that we will make sure that there is representation for either party, and we do the same now. We have not, in terms of our case work, Ian, had any particular increase. What we do have pressure on is academics who are being put under a great deal of pressure from their employers to deliver more and more, and I think that is more of a concern to me as opposed to them stealing each other's work, because that is something that we deal with. It is about the type of pressure that they are under in order to deliver both research and teaching at the same time.

**Q455 Dr Gibson:** Who looks at it within the university? Suppose somebody does nick somebody's research results; say it is a PhD student and they are nicked by their professor and published in the professor's name (do we not all do it!). How do you stop that? What if a student comes to you and complains? What do you do about it? What happens in the university system? Or do you go to *The Times Higher* first?

**Sally Hunt:** Would I? The honest answer is that I think it varies, not only from the universities but it varies from department to department. A lot of that can be about governance that is or is not there within a particular university. It can be as simple as the standards that are set within a particular department, and it can be about the level of money—if I can be completely clear—that an individual is seen to bring into a particular university. That, in my trade union experience, has genuinely, I think, had an impact as to whether there has been a fair hearing on that. There are different systems in place. I think that, in the main, people are very respectful of each other's work, but what you have is a structure that actually supports those who bring in most into the university, and that worries me because the reporting systems are not there and, certainly, the governance issues in terms of academics having oversight, I think, are becoming less prevalent as the pressure on managerialism and privatisation comes into the sector. That is my honest view.

**Q456 Dr Harris:** Dr Fenton, you said 10 to 20 per cent but you only detect two per cent—so a fifth to a tenth of what there is. How do you know it is 10 to 20 per cent?



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6 May 2009 Sally Hunt, Dr Natalie Fenton, Veronica Killen and Dr Gavin Reid

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**Dr Fenton:** These are the calculations that other institutions have put on it, that say, actually, if you looked across the board, if we assessed that, if we did put absolutely every form of assessment that we have through this software, that is what we would suggest is likely to turn up.

**Q457 Dr Harris:** We have not had that evidence. Can you send us the references of what these other institutions are saying?

**Dr Fenton:** Yes, sure.

**Q458 Dr Harris:** Are you saying it is just for your course, as journalists? Perhaps that is unfair; you do media studies. There are not any here, I hope! You are confident that in every institution in every subject this is a real problem, even if it is not 10 per cent—it is five per cent?

**Dr Fenton:** I think it is a real problem, although I could not speak for the STEM subjects, really. It is to do with the pressures and it is to do with the form now of new media that allows you to do it.

**Q459 Dr Harris:** This is not out in the public sphere, at all, I think. Do you think that if people said that was the case, their institution would frown upon that because it might look as if, particularly if the press picked on them for being honest, that they had a particular problem, and that their standards were not everything they might be set up to be?

**Dr Fenton:** Everybody wants to brand their institution in a particular way, but I support what Gavin says, that actually systems within institutions are fairly robust. There is no way in which we are told that we should not be reporting this—in fact, precisely the opposite.

**Dr Harris:** I hope to come back to that issue.

**Q460 Chairman:** Can I pick that up with you, Veronica, at Northumbria. Have you had anything to do with the QAA?

**Veronica Killen:** Just before I start, can I say that I am not here as a representative from Northumbria University; I am here as a—

**Q461 Dr Gibson:** Who told you to say that?

**Veronica Killen:** It is just that we have a case on, at the moment, where a member of the union and an official branch officer may be going through a disciplinary case because they spoke in the press on a UCU matter. Back to the QAA.

**Chairman:** Can I just say to you that while you are in this room you have total privilege; you are giving evidence to a Select Committee and, therefore, you have total privilege under the law.

**Q462 Dr Harris:** Which means that you are not touchable, and they would be in contempt if they did try and—

**Veronica Killen:** Thank you.

**Q463 Chairman:** However, you cannot speak about the particular case because that is *sub judice*. Can I go back to my first question: have you had any involvement with the QAA?

**Veronica Killen:** Not personally. I think maybe one of the other panel members has.

**Q464 Chairman:** Can I move on, in that case. Gavin, have you?

**Dr Reid:** Indirectly, yes. We have just been through a QAA institutional audit in the last 18 months or so.

**Chairman:** Brian will pick up on this.

**Q465 Dr Iddon:** I think what we need to know is what you think of the current QAA and whether you think its powers ought to be extended to allow it to monitor in a more important way than it does now, if it does it at all, the safeguarding of standards and the quality of courses in the university. Who is going to start?

**Veronica Killen:** I think what is missing out of all the quality indicators is that there is no input from the academic staff themselves into this; what is the quality of the teachers' day-to-day workload and how is that calculated and put in? There was mention before about quality and the reduction of contact time, the reduction of income that is coming into the universities that is having a major impact upon the staff/student ratio, and the hours that staff work, but none of these indicators go into the quality mechanisms, as it were. Teaching staff and members come to us on a regular basis with work overload, bullying and harassment from the managers because of deadlines and trying to squeeze efficiency, as it were. It is the frontline staff that are at the pressure point of it all. It goes back to issues of plagiarism and pressures that students have because they are becoming more and more customers and they are expected to behave in that way, and we seeing staff being almost intimidated by students—

**Q466 Dr Iddon:** Veronica, I am sorry to halt you, but the question was what do you think of the QAA and should they be given greater powers to ensure the standards in your university and all universities should be as high as possible?

**Veronica Killen:** I do not know if the QAA is the place for that. Maybe one of my colleagues might be able to come in.

**Sally Hunt:** We are not particular fans of the QAA.

**Q467 Dr Iddon:** What is wrong with it, Sally?

**Sally Hunt:** I actually think that what we find is it does not actually deliver what it is meant to be delivering. What we think is necessary, actually, Brian, is a very robust system of assessment that allows us to be able to know that there is an independent way that any particular institution and/or course and/or method of teaching is going to be assessed. Frankly, we do not see that being the case here. One of the things that we think started that particular principle disappearing was the reduction of the visitor's powers, for example. One of the things that we think could really be looked at more intensively, I think, than it is at the moment—and I was interested in the comment earlier because I take an opposite view—is what is happening with the external examining system, because what you do have to have is a system that has that independent

ability to look at what is taking place, but it also has to have some ability for that to be transparent. I would also suggest that under the current regime there is a lack of transparency that means that it is not actually able to deliver the job, either for the academics within the institution that it is meant to be assessing or the people who are meant to be undertaking that work. Where commentaries are coming in, we are hearing about them informally but we are not able to talk about them publicly because it puts our members at risk. That is me being blunt. I know I am saying something that I cannot quantify to you but I have to tell you that is what we get. What we need is a system, as I said, that does reinforce that independence of assessment and the governance issues that have started trickling away since 2004, in our view.

**Q468 Dr Iddon:** Is that the QAA with different powers?

**Sally Hunt:** Yes, in many ways. What we actually believe is there needs to be a system that is underpinned with better core funding; you have to look at the quality there; you have to look at the ability to go in and make transparent your findings; you have to look at your ability to make sure that that network is one that is absolutely across the board. I would say, at the moment, we are not very comfortable with the system, but what we are not saying, at all, is that we do not think there should be some system like that—we do, because we think it is essential to standards and quality.

**Q469 Dr Iddon:** Can I ask Gavin to comment on the QAA and whether its powers should increase?

**Dr Reid:** It certainly plays a role. In my subject area the QAA specifies to the Royal Society of Chemistry what a chemistry degree ought to look like, not in terms of saying: “This is the curriculum and this should be the curriculum in every university in the land”, but it sets out common targets that students should achieve at each level, and that kind of function is very helpful. Where in my institution it falls down is that the QAA only sees what the university management puts in front of it. I will give you an example: my university runs what has been described as a very perverse model for classifying degree schemes, and it was my external examiner who called it perverse. What happens is that low marks between 0 and 20 are rounded up to 20 and high marks from 80 to 100 are rounded downwards, and then they are averaged together, so you have this non-linear average before making a classification. That comment about this being perverse was fed through the system up to what they call the Learning and Teaching Board, but then it reached a dead-end. I know for a fact that the QAA never saw these comments from the external examiners.<sup>1</sup> One of the Vice-Chancellors said earlier that the external examining system was 10 years out of date; I could not disagree more with that, I think we need to empower the external examiners so that their comments must be published by an institution. If I

can make a slightly different point, 10 years ago UNESCO published guidance, recommendations, on the status of staff teaching in higher education teaching institutions, and it defines things like what collegiality is, and what academic freedom is, and specifically there are things in there about the right to elect a majority of the academic bodies of an institution, and that has almost completely been lost. In my institution the Learning and Teaching Board is almost predominantly management; it only has four elected staff. The Senate, slightly different, it is around 50/50, but there is a working majority from management appointees. If we can go back to some of these more robust collegial arrangements that Sally was talking about, where the academics themselves have oversight of the academic issues, then we will have many more protections than we have at the moment. I am not sure if it is quite the QAA I see as performing that role, but I do see the QAA guiding the professional bodies where external professional accreditation is carried out.

**Q470 Dr Iddon:** Natalie, have you any comments on the QAA?

**Dr Fenton:** Yes, in my experience, the QAA is another bureaucratic, administrative burden that you learn to play the game of. You do it very well, you show the processes are there, but it does not actually command the respect of the academics delivering the teaching on the ground. As Gavin said, that respect is earned by your peers who come in and assess your work, and then comment—sometimes very harshly—on what is going on. The problem then is that those documents are not public and there is not a requirement that they actually deliver a response to them. Certainly, internally, the QAA does not actually, I think, ensure standards.

**Q471 Dr Iddon:** I want to pose this question to Gavin, in particular, because it is about physical sciences and it is about Leeds, too. Apparently, at Cambridge (and I would have to ask the Clerk where these figures came from), in order to get a degree we require 44.8 hours per week contact time, whereas at Leeds it is significantly less than that. My figure here is 25.5. I agree these figures may not be accurate, but do you think it is right that you can get the same degree, a first at Leeds or a first at another university, yet the contact times with the students are different?

**Dr Reid:** There are certainly different practices at Leeds than there are at Cambridge; we are one of the smaller chemistry departments in the country now, and that does impact both on teaching and on research. It makes things very difficult for staff to balance those. Formally, students study 120 credits in a year—each 10-credit module, if you like, carries 100 hours’ worth of study time. Within that there will be lecturing, there will be lab time and there will be tutorials. I do not recognise the significant difference in contact time that you describe, but certainly we do not have the college-based tutoring system that Oxbridge has because it is just not funded outside Oxford and Cambridge.

<sup>1</sup> See Ev

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6 May 2009 Sally Hunt, Dr Natalie Fenton, Veronica Killen and Dr Gavin Reid

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**Q472 Dr Iddon:** I am sorry; these figures were from a HEPI study. I am not reading my brief properly. Do the rest of the panel here see considerable differences between contact times and private study times, tutorials, that lead to the same degrees across the university system?

**Veronica Killen:** I think there is a big concern, particularly in health education and social care courses, where direct contact time has been reduced over recent years. On the basis of just teaching itself, teaching is not just the passage of information itself but it is about the assimilation of knowledge and the synthesis of that knowledge, and particularly for professional based courses it is about the application of that knowledge. A lot of that teaching needs to take place in the classroom, but there is more and more time now on self-directed study, there is less and less direct contact time, and that is leading to big concerns amongst many of the education staff, particularly in health education and social care as well. It is made worse by the cuts that are taking place. We have got possible impending cuts from the Department of Health on the MPA (?) budget and the benchmarking price which could lead to a further, up to, 500 jobs lost around the country for health educators. That is making things much worse.

**Q473 Dr Iddon:** I have one final question and that concerns the Higher Education Achievement Report. We have heard, even this morning, that there are so many variations for students across all the different varieties of universities. Is there any value in HEAR? Sally, shall we start with you?

**Sally Hunt:** I was hoping you would not! I am sick to death of reports on higher education and standards, and that is the honest—probably not very diplomatic—reaction. I think that our members have been assessed almost out of the lecture theatre, and I think that they have had what I would define very subjective assessments taking place of the standard of what they are doing to such an extent that I think it has been the most incredible demotivator for people right across the board. That is just me being absolutely honest, because I have not heard an academic who is not willing and, actually, very interested to have their peers give them a very, very rigorous assessment of the quality of work that they do and how they work, but not the type of assessment that is taking place. Maybe I am cynical, and maybe my colleagues have a more positive view on it, but certainly I do not think it is adding to the value. I am not sure it is adding to the knowledge of whether the sector is actually delivering; I think it is just giving you yet more scripts and yet more headlines.

**Dr Iddon:** We were asking, particularly, about the HEAR report. Has that particular report got value within the system?

**Q474 Chairman:** It is a question of whether, in fact, a student gets a 2:1 degree or whether they get the more rounded American style, if you like, graduation certificate.

**Sally Hunt:** What we are doing at the moment, Phil, is we are in the middle of an internal debate about that within the union, so what I cannot tell you is a UCU view. We do have discussions that are focused around quality, because it will not surprise you that when we are looking at that we actively support the concept that every community should have access to higher education, and that means of a particular quality. We believe that that has to have both research and teaching absolutely wedded to each other in a way that enables both students and academics to work in that way. That is a general point that is being debated. We are also very concerned, at the moment, that having that kind of discussion about higher education in this country, to a great extent, is masking a bigger debate that we think does need to take place, which is that it has been so under-funded and so—

**Q475 Chairman:** I am sorry, we do not want to go down that road. I specifically wanted to get an answer to this question as to whether that is a useful tool. Very briefly, please, Gavin.

**Dr Reid:** We have had some discussion internally in our institution, and what we have discovered is there are very different profiles of degree classifications between, say, the sciences and medicine and the arts; something like 60 per cent of all arts and humanities degrees are classified as 2:1s, and I can certainly see that employers may not be able to distinguish between one of those and the other. Students already receive full transcripts of their marks on all the modules, and that is, I think, what Burgess was recommending. I think that is there in the system already, and to concentrate too much effort on it, I think, at a time where there are other priorities—

**Dr Fenton:** I would agree with Gavin that we already give those transcripts, so actually to change the whole system now would be a complete waste of resources.

**Q476 Chairman:** Perhaps we ought to make sure that every student gets that.

**Sally Hunt:** Every student gets those transcripts. That is straightforward, if it is only on assessment; if you are then doing the entire student experience that is a different matter.

**Q477 Dr Harris:** Before I move on to access I wanted to ask this question about university reputation. Do any of you feel under pressure to not bring your university into disrepute by talking about issues to do with, say, standards?

**Veronica Killen:** Most definitely.

**Q478 Dr Gibson:** Why?

**Veronica Killen:** There is a culture of fear and many members would like to say things but they feel that they cannot take it forward. We found that out within the union, with things like bullying and harassment cases; you can only get so far with them and then if members are not willing to go through the whole process it is very difficult. So things like bullying and harassment is a lot wider than reported.

**Q479 Dr Harris:** Could the other panel members offer their view? I would be interested to know if this is an internal problem or whether it is getting worse because of the market, arguably (I do not want to lead you) and the importance of protecting the reputation when seeking to attract students, particularly international students, as Ian Gibson mentioned in the first question.

**Dr Fenton:** I think it is undoubtedly getting worse, partly because of the need to market yourself in a particular way. That makes those staff who are particularly vulnerable—i.e. younger members or newer members to the profession, maybe, who have not got as much clout, standing or protection within the institution—very nervous about speaking out, or recommending that certain students should not be getting certain grades. Again, we do not have any evidence for that, there is no hard-core evidence, but there is a sense that that carries on. It comes back to all the issues around contact time and those staff who are successful at bringing in research who are then hived off and do not do as much teaching; it is dumped on the younger members of the department or the new members of the profession to have intensive contact hours, or even the PhD students. They are much less likely to speak out.

**Q480 Dr Harris:** I am keen to focus on the issue of the reputation of the institution rather than bullying and harassment, and whether that is a good process. Dr Reid, on that question of feeling that you would be in trouble if you brought that in.

**Dr Reid:** There is no doubt there is nothing an institution values more closely than its external reputation, and they are very protective of that. I know people certainly feel as though they cannot speak out; they cannot even speak out in their own department's staff meetings, never mind to colleagues from *The Times Higher* who may be interested.

**Q481 Dr Harris:** Is it getting worse?

**Dr Reid:** There is no doubt about it, yes.

**Q482 Dr Harris:** Sally, has the UCU done a survey to get any harder sense than the assertions and anecdotes that we might consider?

**Sally Hunt:** We have evidence through casework, Evan. We have constant monitoring of this in terms of our work at a regional and at a local level. I am acutely aware that it is not necessarily possible for us to go public on that rather than simply in generalities. If the Committee think it would help we could supply you with that kind of information.

**Q483 Dr Harris:** A summary of the sorts of things.

**Sally Hunt:** I would stress that we would class that as highly sensitive.

**Q484 Dr Harris:** If you anonymise it and just give us a summary, perhaps.

**Sally Hunt:** That is something that we can do, but our colleagues certainly are telling us it is getting worse.

**Q485 Dr Harris:** A final question on that before I hand over to Gordon Marsden to talk about access issues. This question of feeling restricted in what you can say: is that overflowing at all into academic freedom and freedom to publish in your own area, or would you say it is a discrete issue that you have all agreed is a problem?

**Veronica Killen:** I think there is more and more pressure put on academic staff to publish that which fits in with the school or university agenda. That has an impact upon academic freedom because it is becoming more and more difficult to actually do research that members of staff individually want to do or even present papers at various conferences, and the like.

**Q486 Mr Marsden:** Thank you, Chairman. As my colleague, Evan Harris, said, I want to probe you on the issue of access and admissions, which obviously we have been talking quite a lot about. If I could start, perhaps, with you, Dr Reid, and then come on to Veronica and Natalie. (Sally, I am not excluding you but I will come back to you on something else, if I may.) What I want to get out of this, because we have had a lot of discussion in the previous session and elsewhere about the changing nature of the student body, the changing nature of the demography of students, and so on and so forth, is a sense from your experience as to how that has affected your teaching, your approach, in, say, the last five to 10 years. What are the pluses and minuses of a more diverse student body, from your position as a teacher?

**Dr Reid:** Certainly in my subject area, we do not have the luxury of selecting from students who come in with straight-As; we have always had a very diverse base, of necessity. It is quite a regional base and we are recruiting, mostly, out of local and regional schools rather than schools from the city centre in Leeds. Those students, almost invariably, have had very little advice at school level about what subjects to take at A level; they know they are interested, say, in studying chemistry but they do not have any math, they do not have any physics and they have never been advised at school level that that might be a good idea. So the weaker end of the spectrum, if you like, we would take from is a student who has got a C at A level in chemistry, no A level maths and no A level in physics, and we are expected to retain those students through the system and deliver them a degree at the end. The pressure on us is supporting students who, quite frankly, are ill-prepared for university, and an awful lot of staff time goes into doing that, very much on the math side, particularly.

**Q487 Mr Marsden:** Veronica, your teaching is in a very different area, which I assume has always had a substantial number of mature and continuing students. Indeed, I think, in one of our previous sessions we had a student who has come from that background. Again, how have things changed for you in the last 10 years, and has that been a positive or negative process?

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6 May 2009 Sally Hunt, Dr Natalie Fenton, Veronica Killen and Dr Gavin Reid

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**Veronica Killen:** It is very obvious that there has been a change in the students that are coming through, both in their ability to have the skills that they need in order to study at higher education level and, also, their ability to cope with a very demanding course as well. Again, because many students are having to work and study at the same time, it has a big impact.

**Q488 Mr Marsden:** Is that a good or a bad thing—that they are being stretched?

**Veronica Killen:** It is bad because it puts stress on the staff to try and raise the students up to the level where they should be, and it is stressful for the students as well. There are also issues to do with access and ELQ issues, and that is affecting an awful lot of institutions. I teach in the North East and we have one of the lowest local populations that come into higher education, and that is a big worry. It is getting people up to the level where they feel confident to apply to universities, and, also, to be able to fund themselves as well as they go through. So many of the universities are recruiting international students, which, again, has problems, and many students are not at the level where they should be to be studying higher education, and the investment is not going in from the universities to support those students either.

**Q489 Mr Marsden:** Natalie, if I can come to you: looking at it, not just obviously from your own experience of Goldsmiths but from the area you are studying and researching in—and here I declare an interest, having taught as a part-time course tutor for the Open University for nearly 20 years before I became an MP—my experience there was, yes, those sorts of part-time students were pressured because they did not have the resources and support, as Veronica, perhaps, describes, but what they had in spades, very often, over the people from the 18-21 cohort, was life experience and determination. We are getting a very negative perspective of the situation.

**Dr Fenton:** It is the opposite, really, and I think what is trying to be expressed is the fact that these students bring other demands with them into the department that it is very hard to manage, and really support properly. However, as students they are brilliant and I think they are the best students. If I went back (I have not done the research) and looked at those, the ones who do really well who really commit to it are the ones who come with less good A level results from more challenging backgrounds, but actually bring so much more to bear on that course that they are doing, and give so much more in lots of different ways. So I think it is absolutely critical that we bring those students in, and it is right and proper to do that. However, I spend an enormous amount of my time dealing pastorally with the problems that those students also have. I had a recent student with all manner of difficulties and it took me years and years to get her through her degree and she is finally going to graduate this year and is a wonderful student, and should do very well, but that has taken up the most extraordinary amount of time. If you times that by

20 I reckon I have a dozen cases on the go at any one time, of students that I have to ring regularly each week to check they are okay.

**Q490 Mr Marsden:** Sally, I need to bring this to a conclusion. Obviously, you have given us very strong evidence supporting the broader access process and everything that goes with it, and you have also heard from Natalie the sort of agony and the ecstasy, if I can put it that way, of dealing with that sort of cohort of students. What do you think we need to do structurally to both continue that diversification—which is going to happen anyway—but make sure that we have support structures? In America, as we know, the community college network is a very, very long-established network. We have not got the same structure here; some FE colleges are very good at it and some are not. What are the step-changes that we need to take?

**Sally Hunt:** Very quickly—that is a heck of a question! You need to look very hard at what has happened in terms of the definition of a successful academic, because we have to look at the structures that are in place that put demands and rewards that are based more on research than on successful teaching, and we have to acknowledge that that has an impact on how they deliver to students. We have to look at the support that academics get in terms of external examiners—and by that I mean independent, academic support—we have to look at the governance issues. We have to look at them being secure. That is the employment side. What I would say about students is that what this country needs is a process that says it wants to give people a hand up, not a pat on the head. A lot of the students who are coming through are people that we should be fantastically proud of, as a country; we should be incredibly admiring of what they do, because the amount of juggling they are doing is phenomenal, but we should, I think, be a lot more honest about the struggles they are having in terms of debt; we should be a lot more honest in terms of some of the policies which have been put through, which have been used on the basis of justifying better access, therefore we have to adjust what we do to support them, and sometimes I think we have to say that we have been wrong. What we need is a system that is clear, simple and gives support—not patronage—based on where you are or whether you are competent enough to do it, and if we can create that for students and a safe place to staff to actually be their most talented—and sometimes that is more teaching, sometimes that is more research—but able to do that in a collegiate way, I think you would actually get such a quality throughout this country that it would not be a case of just picking one particular university or a group and all the competition that happens between them (and you must hear it all the time); what we need is something that actually acknowledges that if we want to have a well-educated population that is going to drive us out of recession—and God knows we need that—we have got to have a university system that is safe for staff and one that is secure for the students.

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6 May 2009 Sally Hunt, Dr Natalie Fenton, Veronica Killen and Dr Gavin Reid

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**Q491 Dr Gibson:** When you talk about undergraduates, I do not want to put you down but there are postgraduates too, which are rather important. Could you say one sentence, Sally, about that? Is there something written you could send to us about it? They are the lifeblood of universities.

**Sally Hunt:** I can send you pages, but in terms of what is happening in the post-grad population, I think they are being undermined by their ability to actually take on further study. Those who want to go into an academic career, I think, are being absolutely slaughtered, and that is something that this Committee needs to be absolutely aware of. I am more than happy to send you chapter and verse on that, Ian, if that is what the Committee would like.

**Chairman:** Sally, this is specifically on undergraduates, but Ian is absolutely right; constantly, throughout this inquiry, the issue of postgraduates, MSc students and post-docs has come up, and I think the Committee has to return to that at some point.

**Q492 Mr Boswell:** Two quick industrial questions: one, I think, you cannot open, and I would not expect you to—the whole substance of the situation of the dispute with the UCA. Could you just say a word about the attitude to protecting students, if push does come to shove and there is a formal dispute?

**Sally Hunt:** I am challenged, Tim, because I thought Phil was going to tell me off if I raised that. We are in a situation where we have spoken at length with the National Union of Students because what we want is a situation where we are not actually putting them at risk, and that is something that is absolutely critical. However, we are also in a situation, where I have to say, taxpayers' money is being used by the employers—and by that I mean over 70 of all of the institutions that we are dealing with—to even challenge our right to ballot our members in support of us negotiating what is a job security agreement. I think that with what we have got taking place at the moment, we have to prioritise job security, and we want to do it with the employers. NUS and we are united in that, and that is what we will do. What I have to say, at the moment, is that the key to this is to actually get us round the table and have some meaningful negotiations. If we can do that a lot of this would not be something that comes into reality.

**Q493 Mr Boswell:** Thank you for that. Can I just ask, very briefly, wearing your hat as General Secretary and, also, a member of the Executive TUC, you have both, as it were, an industrial and, also, a wider interest in terms of input into DIUS. We hear an awful lot about the importance of business, and all that. How real do you think that relationship is, and could it be improved?

**Sally Hunt:** The relationship with business and education?

**Q494 Mr Boswell:** No, your relationship, as the General Secretary, both on behalf of your membership but, also, on behalf of, as it were, the university sector and the input you can make into the kind of formulation of policy.

**Sally Hunt:** I have always said that the department should, on a regular basis, listen to the staff, because we are actually very clear that our job is to tell the good news and the bad news; there are things that we think the Government is doing very well, and there are things that we are highly critical of. I think there is vast room for improvement, if I am honest, in terms of the dialogue, and I think that is something that we would welcome. Equally, I think, if you look at what is taking place within the Department for Children and the relationship with other education unions there, I think the inter-relationship is much closer, and I suspect it is one that has led to a much more cohesive and dynamic policy in terms of education discussion within that department. I think that is something that DIUS could learn from. All of the trade unions, at this point in time, are very focused on the need for all parties to realise that our clear responsibility is to protect our members' job, whatever sector that is in, and to make sure that our members are not asked to pay a price for something that they were not responsible for. That is the same within education as it is elsewhere. Certainly, I think that the more dialogue that we can have on a specific basis within DIUS (because it is not just about jobs for us; the jobs of our members, bluntly, are going to impact on our country's ability to actually dig itself out of recession and have a long-term future) and with the employers in a civilised way rather than it being a case of us being challenged through the courts because we want to raise the issue, the better I think it will be for all of us.

**Q495 Chairman:** You got that in, Sally. We have run out of time. Can I just say that I am confused (I am often confused): we have less money in the sector, we have larger teaching groups, we have fewer contact hours, and we have a more diverse, as Natalie was saying, and demanding population of students, yet the number of first-class degrees has doubled, and the number of 2:1s has gone up by over 60 per cent in the last 10 years. Something does not quite ring true to me on that, but I will leave that hanging in the air and ask you all for a simple yes or no, at the end. Gavin, do you think that every lecturer in our universities, whether in a Million+ or a Russell Group university, should, in fact, be trained to teach? Yes or no.

**Dr Reid:** Yes.

**Sally Hunt:** Yes.

**Veronica Killen:** Yes, definitely.

**Dr Fenton:** Yes. We all are.

**Chairman:** You all are, in your institution. On that note of unanimity, could I thank you all very much indeed for giving evidence to us this morning so frankly and fairly.

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**Monday 11 May 2009**

Members present

Mr Phil Willis, in the Chair

Mr Ian Cawsey  
Dr Ian Gibson  
Mr Gordon Marsden

Ian Stewart  
Graham Stringer

*Witnesses:* **Rt Hon John Denham MP**, Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills and **Sir Alan Langlands**, Chief Executive of Higher Education Funding Council for England, gave evidence.

**Q496 Chairman:** Good morning. Could I very much welcome the Secretary of State, Mr John Denham, to this final evidence session of our Students and Universities inquiry and also a particularly warm welcome to Sir Alan Langlands, the Chief Executive of the Higher Education Funding Council for England. Sir Alan, it is the first time we have had the pleasure of meeting you before this Committee, but you are very welcome indeed; we hope you enjoy the afternoon. Secretary of State, in February 2008 you made your speech to the Wellcome Foundation—I think a very welcome speech—about looking 15 years ahead with our higher education system. You have commissioned a number of individual organisations or individuals to actually feed back to you in terms of creating a framework for higher education. Could you tell us at what stage that is and how do you actually intend to bring that to the attention of the House and indeed the wider public? Is there a timescale?

**Mr Denham:** The process you describe is right. The key events I would point you towards are a speech that I made to a university vice-chancellors' audience at the end of February which I described as a "minded to conclude" speech, so it was a clear indication of the way in which I thought we would be going. The current plan is to produce the forward looking HE framework in the summer, certainly after the European and County Council elections, and then after that we will be launching the independent review of fees and of funding. I think the Committee will recall from last time I was here the basic idea was that the framework should set out the forward looking broad vision for higher education so that this time, when people come to look at funding issues, there is hopefully some sense of what it is we are trying to fund rather than trying to deal with the question of funding in the abstract without debating what sorts of universities, what their role is going to be, how they are going to develop in the future.

**Q497 Chairman:** So in June/July time that will be produced.

**Mr Denham:** Yes.

**Q498 Chairman:** You will then launch the fees debate straight away or will you leave some time for that to be debated before you actually go for this fees review? What is your timescale there?

**Mr Denham:** I need to be a bit cautious because I do not want you to get the idea that final decisions are being taken, so I will share with you the indication of current thinking and that might be that at the same time or about the same time that we publish the higher education framework we might indicate the broad terms of reference that a fees review might have. As you will know, Charles Clarke set a number forward in the original debate but we do need to look at whether that covers everything we need to look at. There then, I think, needs sensibly to be a period of time where people can comment on those and have some discussion about it before we move ahead with the review itself. So it is not an enormously drawn out process but long enough certainly for people to see the higher education framework, the way we want to move things and they can come back and make their comments on it.

**Q499 Chairman:** So you are not expecting any final decision before May 2010.

**Mr Denham:** I have not set a timetable on that.

**Q500 Chairman:** In his advisory report "Universities and Industry", Sir John Chisholm made a number of interesting suggestions. He called for the total removal of restrictions on fees and further incentives for donors and companies to increase their funding. He was very much looking at an American style market led higher education system. Do you share his vision?

**Mr Denham:** I would say that other people, including the National Union of Students, have very much argued the opposite position for fees. I think you would say to me that if I sat here or anywhere else and gave you a personal view on the future shape of the fees and funding system you would immediately then ask me how any review was going to be independent. The self-denying ordinance that ministers have had from the beginning of this process that we are not going to get into a debate about fees at this stage is going to hold. I think that is right. My own view is that there are a lot of issues about the future development of higher education which need to be discussed. Once a debate about fees is initiated, then nothing else will ever be discussed.

**Q501 Chairman:** All right, let us try you on another angle. With over 150 higher education institutions at the moment, do you feel that the time has come to have a more delineated role for universities, again very much in line with the American or the European

11 May 2009 Rt Hon John Denham MP and Sir Alan Langlands

systems, whereby we have universities with a much clearer strategic purpose given the importance of higher education for the 21<sup>st</sup> century economy?

**Mr Denham:** A lot depends by what you mean by delineated. If you mean that ministers or indeed Sir Alan and his colleagues should draw up a list of universities so that every university is put in one or other box, no, that is not the way that my thinking is going. If we mean we want an increasingly diverse higher education system where individual institutions choose different missions and where some, for example, would be very much concentrated on very high concentrations of world-class research, others will see their mission as reaching out to new groups of students, to older students, people studying in new ways, then we will have more of that diversity. It has grown a lot in the last 10 years and that will continue. I think the challenge is to try to produce a policy framework which gives us the diversity we want across the system as a whole. However, I think we would work against that if there was some central process for telling a vice-chancellor or a council, "This is exactly what your institution is going to be". We have to let the leadership of the institutions take those decisions.

**Q502 Chairman:** Is it not just a little bit dishonest—I do not mean dishonest in a *Daily Mail* sense—

**Mr Denham:** You are not accusing the *Daily Mail* of being dishonest, are you?

**Q503 Chairman:** I am not, but it frequently accuses politicians of being so, so I do not see why we should not reverse the trend. During our inquiry we have tried to pull out the difference between universities and I think you are quite right, Secretary of State, that some universities have a very, very clear mission about what their role is. I do not think anyone in this Committee would want you to centrally designate Cambridge as X and Teesside as Y; I do not think that would be right. When we visited America and we looked at the community college situation they regarded it as second chance (that was a phrase that I thought was a very, very pertinent phrase) where students were taken probably for the first two years of a four year course and if they gained sufficient credits they were then able to move into the state university and get their degree from the state university as if they had spent their four years there. Do you not find that a very attractive proposition?

**Mr Denham:** In the speech I made in February I certainly held out the prospect that students studying for a degree might gain credits from more than one institution offering higher education and that the sector would be very likely to develop a much better system of interchangeable and mutual recognition of credits in the future. I think again it is for the sector and not for me to describe that. That would open up the possibility of work done in one institution, possibly an FE<sup>1</sup>/HE<sup>2</sup> college, being a foundation for further study at another institution. Where I get nervous or just think it is not possible is

the idea that there should be some central restructuring of our institutions. The Americans have evolved quite a highly structured thing but it has evolved over time. We start from a different place and I think we could put a great deal of time and effort—

**Q504 Chairman:** Do you not think they have that? Are we not just pretending that we do not have that stratified, hierarchical system of higher education?

**Mr Denham:** We have a diverse system.

**Q505 Chairman:** It is not hierarchical?

**Mr Denham:** No, because I think what you get depends what you want out of the system.

**Q506 Chairman:** You could say that about the American system.

**Mr Denham:** I think we started from somewhere else, Chairman, where you were asking if we should have community colleges, you do two years there and you move on. What I am saying is the ability to follow that path is undoubtedly something for which there will be greater demand in the future. I think we will see a greater development of higher level work based learning. Foundation degrees deliver that to a considerable but not total extent. It is still actually the case that if you, for example, do an apprenticeship you reach craft level—level three—and you want to go to a higher level with the same method of learning, you will not easily always find a place in a higher education institution to do that, or necessarily in an FE/HE college. So there will be additional ways of learning to a higher level and that will be part of the system. However, it is not necessarily going to be through a rigid delineation of this institution does X and only X, that institution does Y and only Y.

**Q507 Chairman:** Are you attracted to a stronger sense of credit accumulation and transfer? It is laudable that you stick to this business of the division between your department and indeed the autonomy of universities, but given the fact that we spend 14 billion dollars on higher education in this country does the state not have some say—and do you not have some say—to say, "Look, you know, we want to encourage you to go in this particular direction".

**Mr Denham:** If you take an issue of academic record, the Burgess Report (which has led to the Higher Education Achievement Report) would not have happened without ministers saying to the sector that there is an issue here and we have to grasp it. That is seen as a product of the sector and the HEAR Report is being accepted around the sector because it is owned by them. I think that if ministers and others say that in the future we are going to need greater mutual recognition of credits and Sir Alan and his colleagues look at whether the funding system at least does not work against people doing that, we will find it happening. If I said that in five years' time that every course in every higher education institution must be on a credit basis that is accepted by every other university we would have

<sup>1</sup> Further education

<sup>2</sup> Higher education



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 11 May 2009 Rt Hon John Denham MP and Sir Alan Langlands
 

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a huge row, we would have a sub-optimal outcome, we would end up forcing all the sorts of things that did not really fit together and it would be a bad thing to do. I think we can make more progress more effectively by having an agreement about the sense of direction so I do not think there will be a point at which all credits on all courses are mutually recognised overnight. This will be a process. Some institutions will lead the way; some will say that it works better for their students than it does for others. Others will be slower; some may never join at all. However, we will make the right progress.

**Q508 Chairman:** If we were talking about the FE sector you would not hesitate to give them very close directions, but with higher education we seem to back off.

**Mr Denham:** Perhaps we can do this in another session, but if you look at what my department have done in the past two years I think you would see that the volume of central direction towards FE and the freeing up of, for example, how they provide level two courses and the changes in the nature of Train to Gain, there has been a considerable liberalisation since DIUS was started. You cannot just put the two sectors together, but I think there is a direction of travel which recognises that if professional leadership and autonomy have served us very well in higher education it probably will do in further education as well.

**Q509 Mr Cawsey:** John, in your department's submission to the Committee you stated that you are trying to set out a framework which will address the expansion and development of the sector and we hear a lot about there being an unprecedented demand for people to become students—perhaps linked to the recession—and indeed a government policy which I think is widely shared which is that the way to build out of recession is through high skills, so all laudable and good things. Then it comes crashing into the buffers with an announcement that there are going to be significant budget cuts and fewer student numbers. How do you square that particular circle?

**Mr Denham:** The challenge is this: for a society and an economy like ours, it is inconceivable to me that higher education will not be even more important in 10 to 15 years' time than it is today. When we draft the framework we have to try and say what is the route through? I have also said that I think generally as a nation—not necessarily just as a public sector—that means that we have to put more of our resource into higher education. We have to find a path through the current economic challenges which enables us to achieve that and that is what we will set out to do. Obviously in the immediate future we cannot say that my department should be immune from the general drive in government for greater efficiency and that is what has been reflected in the letters that we sent to HEFCE and the LSC last week. We have actually acknowledged in science—where much of the spending ends up in higher education—that although there should be efficiencies, they get recycled and the few budgets in

government to actually not have to produce cash release from savings so much of that will go into higher education. We have worked very hard to enable a further expansion of student numbers for 2010–11 to maintain that trajectory and we will have to look in future at how we operate as efficiently as we can. I do not think the fact that, like every other government department, we have to meet short terms challenges, should divert us from the long term vision. The saddest noises I have heard in some of the popular discussion about the current situation is the idea that higher education was a good idea, it was fine when money was around but we should abandon it now. That would be a fatal mistake.

**Q510 Mr Cawsey:** You could almost argue that it is more important now because you have people who are not in work and therefore could take opportunities to get a higher skilled degree. You could argue, as you say, that it is what the economy will need. How realistic then in that environment are efficiency savings? I was a council leader back in the mid-90s and every time we set a budget then there was always an efficiency saving and it went on year, after year, after year. When do we reach the point where simply, however you dress it up, an efficiency saving is actually fewer people working in universities and fewer people going to them?

**Mr Denham:** We have had a 10 year period of time in which there has been a 24 per cent increase in real terms in higher education funding where the overall income of the university sector has risen to over £23 billion. If you look at all the other sources of income we, as a government—and most colleagues round the table remember this all too well—took the difficult decision to allow variable fees to come into the system and that has brought in extra money. I think it is realistic at a time when people expect inflation to be low, when there has been that growth in resources, to say to the sector that you need to manage for 2010–11, to concentrate on efficiency savings, concentrate on protecting front line teaching and front line research. I have asked Sir Alan to look critically at the HEFCE budget and so on. I think it is a realistic thing to do, given that we are in the wider economic context and in public sector spending we have to be more efficient.

**Q511 Mr Cawsey:** Do you think that student numbers will grow during this period?

**Mr Denham:** We can reasonably predict that more than 40,000 more students will start university this September than started two years ago<sup>3</sup>. We have put in an extra 10,000 student funded places and, without getting to the theology of it, we all know that does not necessarily quite equate to the number of full time actual places. We have put that funding in and we have confirmed an additional 10,000 ASNs for 2010–11 so there is a central funding there. The balance that I have to strike is actually between the funding that we put in and not allowing so much unplanned expansion that the funding gets spread too thinly. That has happened in the past in the

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<sup>3</sup> Academic year 2006–07

11 May 2009 Rt Hon John Denham MP and Sir Alan Langlands

sector so one of the things we have to do almost on an annual basis is to balance the pressure for unplanned expansion with the absolute commitment that if you go to higher education there should be enough money spent on your education to make sure it has real quality.

**Q512 Mr Cawsey:** I can certainly see the point about spreading it too thinly, but it strikes me that what you are trying to push forward are a whole series of very good things but you are being held back by the money you have to deliver it. You talk about flexibility in delivering courses which I think is a good idea (weekends, evenings and all the rest). Wearing a former hat as a health minister you know the battle to get GPs to go down that route. It is beginning to happen but it has cost a lot more money to do it. When Professor Roger Brown came to speak to us he was saying that we cannot have these things unless the money comes along with it. It just strikes me that we are trying to have it both ways here. There are so many good intentions in everything you are saying and everything in your framework but the thing that is going to let you down is if you fail to deliver the resources to do it.

**Mr Denham:** I believe that over time it will be possible to develop the changes, the different models of teaching, the different ways of doing things that we have set out with the sort of resources that we can realistically make available. However, I do think that we have to be cautious about trying to prescribe that all from the centre. We do actually need the professional leadership of the sector to show what they can do with the money.

**Q513 Mr Marsden:** Secretary of State, I am sorry I missed your opening remarks but I am sure the Chairman has raised with you already the issue of our visit to the United States and the community colleges we saw there. I just wondered if you would say a few things about how you see the role of the FE sector specifically in supplying HE over the next five to 10 years. We know it is running at anything between nine and 12 per cent at the moment, but how do you see that developing.

**Mr Denham:** I think there are a number of issues there, one is that we know that the onward progress from FE colleges to universities is not as consistent as with sixth form colleges or sixth forms so there are some issues about the traditional undergraduate route which we are discussing with the colleges and have been raised with the National Council for Educational Excellence. More generally—as I was saying to the Chairman and I think we were broadly agreeing—we need more flexibility in the routes between FE itself as an activity and higher education, and also what the colleges can offer (those that do higher education provision) to enable students to move onto other institutions. Part of that is what we see as local partnerships which is about progression; part of that is going to come from greater mutual recognition of credits and qualifications from one sector to another.

**Q514 Mr Marsden:** Do you share the view that some have said that the whole nature of the relationship between FE and HE will change because of the nature of continuing and lifelong learning, that as people need to re-skill and up-skill, apart from any purely vocational routes they want to take, they are actually going to need a structure where people will take FE courses in FE colleges and that in turn will add into their higher education record?

**Mr Denham:** Yes, I think there will be a lot of changes. I am aware of at least one current proposal for an FE college and a university to merge under an umbrella holding institution to offer the two. I think there are a lot of people out there who want to explore the interface between the two. I am sounding a bit like a cracked record, but my preference is to try to operate a system and have a funding system which enables people out there to innovate, to experiment and to develop solutions to these problems rather than to have it all prescribed centrally. I know that there are a lot of people in higher education and a lot of people in further education who want to take that discussion further up and down the country; I would not want to stand in their way.

**Q515 Mr Marsden:** You have given me my cue there to ask Sir Alan a couple of questions. The Secretary of State has said already that in terms of expansion he wants to put strong emphasis on planned expansion as opposed to unplanned for all the reasons we know from—and I will use the direct word—the 1990s. Does that not imply therefore that, as the 157 Group suggested when they came to give evidence to us, that there ought to be more pressure on certain higher education institutions to have better and more formal relationships with some of their key local further education colleges?

**Sir Alan Langlands:** Maybe. I think there is an awful lot of very good work going on at a local level between higher education and further education colleges.

**Q516 Mr Marsden:** There always is, but the question is what is happening over all? There have been some suggestions to us that certain universities seem to be more impervious to relating to their regions and their locality FEs than others. What can you do via HEFCE to stimulate that good practice that you are talking about?

**Sir Alan Langlands:** Like the Secretary of State I do not think we can instruct the universities and would not want to.

**Q517 Mr Marsden:** But you have the purse strings.

**Sir Alan Langlands:** Yes, but we do not have the powers; universities are autonomous bodies. They are private bodies serving public functions.

**Q518 Mr Marsden:** I hear this argument but there is a push-pull relationship in any relationship between a body like HEFCE and those universities. If you know what the overall direction of government policy is and you know what the overall cross-party consensus is about needing to take things down that

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11 May 2009 Rt Hon John Denham MP and Sir Alan Langlands

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line, you are surely not sitting there saying that you have a completely hands-off approach to things, are you?

**Sir Alan Langlands:** No, I do not think we are saying that but I do think, as the Secretary of State said earlier, that it is possible to influence the debate so if he argues that the government's position is that they want more flexibility of provision and they see the possibility of greater flexibility in the boundary between FE and HE certainly we can encourage that direction of travel but we can only encourage by using the few levers we have in relation to the funding system.

**Chairman:** Graham Stringer, did you want to come in there?

**Q519 Graham Stringer:** I would just like to follow Gordon Marsden's point. It is complete fiction, is it not? It is close to rubbish to say that universities are autonomous. Nothing is autonomous if all the funding is provided by somebody else. What you are actually expressing is your self-restraint. If I pay you a million pounds a year and you have no other source of income, to carry on doing what you are doing you are in my control, are you not?

**Sir Alan Langlands:** It is not self-restraint. HEFCE does not have any statutory power to go down that road but it has a power to fund and it is funding about £8 billion in a £20 billion system.

**Q520 Dr Gibson:** Why do you exist then?

**Sir Alan Langlands:** We exist to administer public funds, to regulate the sector and to disseminate good practice.

**Q521 Dr Gibson:** That sounds like a very positive aim but if you are restricted by the other side being awkward in determining the rules of the game—

**Sir Alan Langlands:** I do not think the other side is awkward. I think the relationships between HEFCE and further education colleges providing higher education and HEFCE and universities are very strong. I think their relationships are highly productive across a whole range of activities.

**Q522 Graham Stringer:** Both the government and HEFCE use an excuse for not achieving social policies the fact that universities are autonomous.

**Mr Denham:** I do not use it as an excuse; I use it much more positively. I have to say to you that I believe that if there were no HEFCE, if I had my civil servants and my senior ministers giving more direct instructions to the universities, the universities would not be better than they are today, they would be worse. It is perfectly true, you can always pick this or that aspect of what a university does where you may be frustrated at the pace of change or things of that sort and if only I had the powers I could make them do it, but the accumulation of the inevitable processes of more and more directives effectively coming round, or even if I were to put that in the annual grant letter to HEFCE—"You must make them do this, you must make them do that"—you would actually lose the quality that has made overall our higher education sector so good, which is that by

and large the people running the institutions feel they have ability within the overall framework to develop the institutions in the way they want. I see it is a positive good to the system and therefore if there are aims that we share we have to find other ways to promote those aims that we share and of getting the sector to feel that they own them, that they are the things they want to do and indeed they genuinely do want to do them.

**Q523 Graham Stringer:** So you agree with me, it is self-restraint in the public good which will lead to a better result. I think that is what you are saying, but it is effectively self-restraint.

**Mr Denham:** I have not actually looked at the legal situation, but I am sure—

**Q524 Graham Stringer:** I was thinking of the financial situation.

**Mr Denham:** I am quite sure that even within the current law I can write a grant letter to HEFCE each year that was far more prescriptive—

**Q525 Chairman:** As you did with the ELQs; that is an example of where you did use those powers.

**Mr Denham:** We did and I remember how keen you were on that. We have done that but actually I think the general approach is to avoid taking those sorts of measures unless there is an overriding reason for doing so and I do think we get a better system as a result.

**Q526 Mr Marsden:** Sir Alan, the Secretary of State obviously puts great trust and faith in you because he has just said what he said. I entirely accept the arguments that he has put about the arms' length position and all the rest of it, but that puts a lot of emphasis on you not as an enforcer but to be creative and pro-active and not just a cheque signer. Can I ask you about your regional involvement because certainly in my neck of the woods in the North West the universities work closely together and there is a good, strong regional policy, but there are others where that is not the case. You do not actually have any offices on the ground, do you? You have officers who go around but you do not have any offices on the ground. Is that an impediment to you getting into the regions?

**Sir Alan Langlands:** I do not think so. We have officers who, as you say, go around and I think one or two of them do live in the north of England because their main focus is in the north of England. Of course what we do do is support the organisations on a regional basis so that they have money and the opportunity to come together. In fact a week on Friday, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of the month, I am going to be in the North West meeting the vice chancellors and other senior staff from all the universities in the North West.

**Q527 Mr Marsden:** The point I am getting at is that it is one thing to meet people, it is another thing to nudge them gently when they are not actually doing some of the things that we would hope. After all, that

11 May 2009 Rt Hon John Denham MP and Sir Alan Langlands

is what the Secretary of State expects you do to. I think we would like to feel a bit more confident that you were going to be pro-active in that area.

**Sir Alan Langlands:** I do not see that you have any reason for lack of confidence. I have just arrived and I may well be about to nudge them a week on Friday on a range of issues. Certainly the most recent example of this is the Secretary of State's letter last week on the budget. It is very clear in my view and very fair in terms of the current financial position, and the themes that he set out there I see as my responsibility to take forward and work with the sector to implement.

**Q528 Mr Marsden:** That is very useful. I have just one final question. We have had a lot of discussion in the inquiry about the rights and wrongs and the unintended consequences of a variegated bursary system. Both NUS and Million+—and indeed other people—have given us a very strong steer that they would like to see a national bursary system. What is your view about it? What are the problems and the downsides and what would the benefits be?

**Mr Denham:** If there were a national bursary system it would become indistinguishable from add-ons to student financial support and it would not be clear why you were bothering to have two mechanisms delivering the one outcome. The idea of the bursary scheme was to allow institutions to vary the bursary; that was the whole idea of it when people could experiment with whether they wanted to attract particular types of students or support particular types of students, have a heavier weighting in one area or another. It was the idea of being able to see how a more varied bursary system would develop that lay behind the original rejection of a national bursary scheme. My own view is that this has to be one of the issues that we put into the fees and funding review later this year because we do need to allow people to assess what is the evidence. If people have particular types of structures and they said were going to attract this type of student, has it actually worked and has it delivered what people wanted.

**Q529 Ian Stewart:** The first point I would like to put to you is a carry over from the previous questions to the area that I want to press you on which is around social engineering. Notwithstanding financial limitations, should we be moving to a 24/7 FE and HE sector and would that be desirable?

**Mr Denham:** If you look at the broad FE sector and particularly the development of Train to Gain you increasingly have a 24/7 training system. In Train to Gain in particular people will go and train a night shift at night. If you want to take work based learning to a higher level I think it is likely that the demand for that type of flexibility will grow. That is an entirely different thing from saying the entire sector delivers everything it does on a 24/7 basis. If you look internationally there is no doubt that one of the growth areas of higher education has been with institutions which are targeted weekend markets and others and some of our most successful institutions here—Birkbeck for example—have built their reputation around offering flexible higher

education. I think the answer would be that it would be very unlikely that the entire university sector will shift from what it does at the moment to an entirely different model of providing education. If you ask me, as part of the greater diversity in the future, whether there will be more flexibility about when and where you can study I would have thought the answer would be yes. Of course there is a continuing growth in on-line learning in particular through the Open University but many institutions as well which are almost, by definition, available to students 24/7. That is bound to grow in the future both here and around the world.

**Q530 Ian Stewart:** The reason I asked that question is that when we had Lord Leitch before us his recommendations were an increase of about 40 per cent of the skills base in this country. That is a big ask. If it is going to develop in the way you have just described, does that not put bigger pressures on the resources available? Is there a potential that it will increase access and not increase the levels in funds?

**Mr Denham:** It obviously depends on how you do it. Interestingly enough, the UCAS Report last week tended to show that we were on track for the Leitch target on higher level skills. It put the focus and the pressure on us perhaps in other areas but suggested we were on track for the 2020 target. If you took as one example the HEFCE co-funded degree places (usually foundation degrees funded with employers which I understand are often delivered in quite flexible ways) they are probably providing degrees at a lower cost to the public purse than some of our traditional undergraduate degrees but in ways that are more flexible for learners. I just give that as one example. It is not obvious that doing something in a new way is necessarily going to cost you more than doing what you do at the moment.

**Q531 Ian Stewart:** Moving onto the issue of access and social engineering as a concept, if you have a situation where there are two students and one place, and one has come from a background that is more needy but they have equal qualifications, is there an argument for giving the place to the person from the background that is more needy?

**Mr Denham:** We have been guided by the report from the National Council for Educational Excellence that looked at this very carefully last year. It is a significant report because it was endorsed by the universities taking part in the National Council for Educational Excellence. They said that it was important that universities have the full knowledge about the student and everything that indicates their ability (I have paraphrased it there but I should let you have the exact wording). The point that I would make is that the aim of the exercise must always be to get the student whose potential is greatest and to have ways of looking at students that enable you to identify the greatest potential. I do not think we should ever be in the business of saying that somebody whose potential is lower should be given an artificial advantage over somebody whose potential is higher for some extraneous reasons. The issue is how do universities identify those people?

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 11 May 2009 Rt Hon John Denham MP and Sir Alan Langlands
 

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Admissions policies are for the institutions themselves to follow. A lot will look at the NCEE recommendations and apply those locally and others already make greater efforts to more proactively seek out the students with ability and talent who might not otherwise apply.

**Q532 Ian Stewart:** Do you see that being done through a compact and different arrangements?

**Mr Denham:** We worked with a group of eleven universities who agreed to work together on two things—I think nine of them are Russell Group universities and two of them are the 1994 Group—and they are looking at doing two things. Each of them at the moment offers a compact arrangement with a number of students in their own area. They are looking essentially at a mutual recognition approach so that, for example, to name two of the universities involved, a student that might take part in the Exeter compact but who actually wanted to go to Newcastle would be recognised by Newcastle University as though they had come through one of the Newcastle University compacts. These are all institutions that say they have enough experience of running compacts to know that they can identify students with the greatest potential. The second thing that the universities look at on a slightly longer timetable is how can they reach out slightly earlier in students' lives to those students who might well go to university but would not necessarily have applied to a research intensive university and to offer them, through summer schools or weekend assessments or whatever it might be, the chance to look at what those universities have to offer to see if they can stimulate their interest in applying.

**Q533 Ian Stewart:** It is quite difficult to assess potential, I accept that. In terms of access, will the cap on students make it impossible to widen participation further? Using techniques like A\* to determine whether a student should get a place based on a potential for getting a qualification rather than already having that qualification, are these not questionable approaches?

**Mr Denham:** On the A\* specifically the National Council for Educational Excellence did say that institutions should be cautious about using A\* as a predictive tool until there was much more knowledge about how A\* operates. When you have a totally new system of assessment it is obviously difficult to begin with to say who is going to get an A\*. There are, rightly, cautions about predictions before anyone knows quite how to predict who will get it. In terms of student numbers, going to university has always been a competitive process; it has always been the case that about 80 per cent of those who initially put in an application actually get through. The issue here is continuing what we are doing to stimulate able young people to apply. As I say, there will be 40,000 more students this September than even two years ago<sup>4</sup> and I do think we can continue to make progress even though we

cannot afford to fully fund every single person who might like to go to university and we never have been able to.

**Q534 Dr Gibson:** In terms of contact hours and access to teachers, are students getting a good deal now? In our day you did not have notices outside saying, "I'll be back at four o'clock and then I've got one hour". I see more of that when I go round universities now. With research, teaching, administration and marking hundreds of scripts the pressure on teachers is amazing so you can see why they diversify their activities to different groups of teachers and so on. There is a sort of classification of teaching now in terms of what their skills are so the contact hours are changing now.

**Mr Denham:** It is quite hard to tell exactly what the trends are. The evidence from the student surveys—the ones supported by HEFCE and the ones done by the NUS—show very high levels of satisfaction amongst students with the courses and specifically about the quality of teaching and support that they get. It does not seem to me that they have a generalised problem. I think the issue is raised from time to time. It is clearly one where students need to have good information before they apply. It would be useful if there were a similar approach across universities presenting that information so you can compare like with like and that would enable students to understand exactly what sort of contact time they were going to get. The second thing is that I do not think that contact time necessarily as a crude measure tells you how good the quality of teaching is or the rest of the learning environment or the support that is available. It is an obvious thing to look at but it is not necessarily going to tell you how good the teaching is.

**Q535 Dr Gibson:** Put yourself in the position of an 18 year old looking for somewhere to go, how would you know where to go? Is it a haphazard process? Does it depend on the grades? Can you go to Nottingham for the same kind of course with fewer A levels? How does a student really make that decision?

**Mr Denham:** There is an awful lot of information out there for students. One of the first pieces of work the National Student Forum looked at was the quality of information open to students. Their conclusion was that there was an awful lot of information available although it was not necessarily easily accessible and we are working on that at the moment. I think part of it is to look at improving the quality of advice and guidance. The choice for an individual student will vary according to the student. The student already confident in working on their own initiative will have not difficulty in—

**Q536 Dr Gibson:** Have you seen the books in the States where they line up courses by the amount you have to pay and you choose the course which you can afford? Are we moving to that kind of society? I know we have not decided how we are going to do it yet, but that would be a simplistic way.

<sup>4</sup> Academic year 2006–07

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 11 May 2009 Rt Hon John Denham MP and Sir Alan Langlands
 

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**Sir Alan Langlands:** There is no sign of us moving there but there are plenty of signs that students choose their course and the location and the location is often dictated by the cost of living and distance from home and other factors. Primarily they choose the course and if you talk to young people making that decision they will say, "I want to do law at Warwick" or "I want to do history at Newcastle". They can be very precise about what they want to do.

**Q537 Dr Gibson:** How do they make that choice?

**Sir Alan Langlands:** I think they are basing that choice on a whole lot of information. A lot of it is based on the prospectuses of universities, perhaps advice from their career guidance teachers, perhaps peer information which I think is one of the most significant parts of that decision. Or it could even be experience of their siblings.

**Q538 Dr Gibson:** They go to visit a university and it is a really bad day, the buildings are grey, the rain is coming down, there are no directions from the car park to get to the department they want to go to and so on, does that put young students off making that final decision?

**Sir Alan Langlands:** These may be factors but I think the crucial thing is the choice of the course and often the way in which they are treated when they come to the university and the way in which they are welcomed. They are often inspired by the people they meet, sometimes other students and sometimes the staff who will be teaching them and supporting them through their degree programme.

**Q539 Dr Gibson:** There was a student listening programme set up in 2007; what difference has that made to anything?

**Mr Denham:** One of the pieces they did in the beginning was the complaints about poor quality of information, advice and guidance. We were quite surprised, if I am perfectly honest, at the number of students who are now on university courses who were saying they did not have enough advice before they went about what course they were going to do. That is leading to a major piece of work with ourselves and DCSF looking at the whole issue of information, advice and guidance. That work has been enormously helpful. The second thing the Forum is doing is that when they came to look at the information available they came to the conclusion that there was more information available than they, as students, had realised but it was just quite hard to find and that work is also being followed through by the Forum. So I think it has had a real impact and has changed some of our thinking about it. The other issue it threw up, incidentally, was a particular complaint about the quality of information about masters courses. Quite a lot of students were saying that it was not too difficult to find out about undergraduate courses but there are no equivalent sources of comparable information for people doing masters. I think you must not forget that one as well.

**Q540 Dr Gibson:** If you look at American universities their graduate school is huge, it is independent, it runs itself, students interact, they cross over from department to department. We do not have anything quite like that, do we? We are so focussed on undergraduate level—like we are doing in this inquiry really—that we cannot separate that from postgraduates who actually have to teach and do research, and students do projects too. They go into research labs and who looks after them? It is the post-docs, the students, the research fellows and whatever, not the superstar who is beaver away trying to get a grant.

**Mr Denham:** One of the things I said in my speech in February about the higher education review was that it had thrown up the fact that there is not actually a single place where you can say "This is the postgraduate policy in this country". In terms of postgraduate research there is no particular place where it is owned and one of the things we will have to do when we produce our framework is to set out how we can bring greater clarity into postgraduate policy in the future.

**Chairman:** I do not want to go into postgraduates at the moment, but I do think that that is an issue. It would be a very significant inquiry for the future.

**Q541 Mr Cawsey:** I want to ask a few questions about academic standards. You are probably aware that during the course of the inquiry this Committee has received a number of allegations from academics that university authorities are encouraging academic staff to inflate grades. I do not want to go on about any of the specific allegations but, in the view of the government, are the internal arrangements within higher education institutions adequate to maintain the quality of degree standards?

**Mr Denham:** I will tell you where I think we are. I think we have the individual institutions which hold responsibility for quality and standards; we have the QAA which audits the processes. I think the work of QAA in general shows that we do not have a systemic problem with quality and standards in the system. However, I think there are a number of things we need to look at and which I discussed about this time last year with both HEFCE and the QAA. The first is that the system is not very good at closing down those sorts of issues, stories and allegations that were brought before your Committee. We are not good enough at getting in with the individual institutions and actually having an outcome where we can say we managed to sort it out. The second thing is that it is not clear enough that essentially one body—I think it should be the QAA—has the lead responsibility for communicating to the public both here and indeed internationally the real story about the quality of higher education. I think QAA essentially services the higher education sector; the information is there but there is no obvious responsibility on anybody for communicating that effectively and for recognising how damaging it can be if an allegation—albeit a completely unsubstantiated allegation—is allowed to run for ages. The third thing is that there are some persistent issues that come up from time to time,

11 May 2009 Rt Hon John Denham MP and Sir Alan Langlands

external examiners being one, where I think it is useful to have a body that looks at that and says (as I think the QAA will do), “This is pretty much okay, but here are some ways that people could do it better; here’s some good practice to handle it better”. I think if the QAA were better able to make sure that the allegations that are made are sorted out, that they had a clearer responsibility for communicating quality and standards issues for the broader public and, thirdly, they do show proactively that if there are certain types of issues that keep coming up they have a look at them, then we could move forward. I will end where I started, I do not think we have a systemic problem.

**Q542 Mr Cawsey:** Not perfect; could be improved. In the last decade we have seen the proportion of first and upper second degrees increasing significantly. As Secretary of State is that just unbridled joy for you or, given what you have just said about work in progress, a matter of concern?

**Mr Denham:** I think that the increase was from 9 per cent to 13 per cent of students getting firsts. The proportion getting seconds has gone up, I think, from 42 to 45.

**Q543 Chairman:** The information we have is over a 10 year period.

**Mr Denham:** Perhaps I have a different time base.

**Q544 Chairman:** I think 10 years, 1999 to now, is a fairly good spread. Firsts have doubled and upper seconds have gone up by roughly 60 per cent. Those are the sorts of ball park figures we have been looking at during this inquiry.

**Mr Denham:** The figures I have—and we will therefore come back to you—are for 1997–98 and 2007–08. The proportion of graduates who were awarded a first went from 8.1 per cent to 13.3 per cent; upper seconds increased from 45.1 per cent to 48 per cent. If you look at how many people got them, you are ignoring the fact that far more people go to university, so the significance is that if you start in a particular year what is your chance of getting a higher degree? Those figures would not suggest to me that you have rampant grade inflation in the way that some people are saying. I think one of the good things the QAA is looking at (and I think Colin Riordan’s Committee from HEFCE is also looking at) is: is it useful to provide further guidance or advice to the sector on how they do these assessments to ensure internal consistencies? The second thing of course is that we are piloting the Higher Education Academic Record which is deliberately designed to say, can we take some of the weight off purely the degree classification and actually give somebody who might be thinking of employing a student further information about what they have actually achieved?

**Q545 Graham Stringer:** In response to your answers about the QAA, did you read our evidence when we had the QAA before us?

**Mr Denham:** I have not read the transcript, no.

**Q546 Graham Stringer:** My question will be slightly longer then. When we had the QAA here before us they basically said they had not interfered in any course, they only dealt with the process so they could not discriminate between the different qualities of degrees and when asked was that not outrageous they said that loads of people are coming to our universities; so they gave a market based response. Do you think that is adequate, that we got a response from the QAA that they had never interfered in any course so that every course in all our universities is okay? I just find that incredible and I think the answers from the QAA meant that in essence they are a waste of space. Are you not concerned that they were giving those sorts of answers?

**Mr Denham:** I said earlier that I think the QAA needs to have a clearer responsibility for communicating effectively what it does and how universities handle issues of quality and standards. If you get replies such as “Well the students turn up, there is not a problem” that would suggest they are not actually thinking seriously about how they are communicating a wider message and I believe, having talked to the new team at QAA, that is the way things will go in the future. I think the idea that they focus on the internal processes of the universities rather than individual courses is right. There is a philosophical choice. We could, as it were, do an Ofsted, and you could have somebody sat in the back of a lecture or whatever assessing teaching quality. That, to me, is a move towards a very prescriptive and different sort of regime. I think it is right that the universities hold the responsibility for the processes by which they establish quality and standards and QAA checks whether they are good enough. It is certainly not the case that QAA has never raised any issues of concern. The third issue is that we need to be better. If somebody comes out and says, “I was an external examiner and I was leant on by X university to pass a load of people who were not up to it”, we are not very good at sorting out that situation one way or another quickly. This has been kicking around the system for years—they are not exactly new allegations—but we do not close them off effectively and that means the ability to intervene much more smartly where there are allegations of this sort. I am realistic; we have 141 institutions, we have two million students, we have hundreds of thousands of staff, of course things will go wrong somewhere sometime but that does not mean you have a systemic problem with standards. We have to have a system that can understand that something somewhere is going to go wrong and you have to get straight in there and sort it out.

**Q547 Graham Stringer:** There are two issues there. I agree with you that there must be some pretty poor courses out there and some pretty poor teaching and research being done. There is nobody pointing that out. There is also the comparative issue that nobody is sorting out. We have an opaque system. Whenever we ask the question: is a degree in history from Oxford the same as a degree in history from the

11 May 2009 Rt Hon John Denham MP and Sir Alan Langlands

Central Lancaster University, everybody says they are equivalent. Nobody out there believes that and there is nobody to tell us what is going on and yet there are billions of pounds of public money going in. How can we justify such an ineffective and opaque system?

**Mr Denham:** I am not sure that I agree that it is so ineffective and opaque. I think the QAA can and will do a better job in communicating how standards vary.

**Q548 Graham Stringer:** They have never directly criticised a course.

**Mr Denham:** As I understand it, it has never been their role to take responsibility for the quality assessment of every single course in every single university. They are there to say: this university is meant to have systems in place for maintaining quality and for maintaining standards, and for establishing whether those systems of quality and standards are being done properly. Where I think we have some problems is when allegations are made that that has broken down and the QAA is seen to be not fleet of foot enough to get involved and to work with the institution to resolve those allegations. That is where we need to be. I do not think it is feasible to have a body which would, for example, produce a list of all the history degrees in the country and give you some sort of comparative objective ranking. What is important is that both students and employers know what each university has on offer.

**Q549 Graham Stringer:** I do not see why it is not possible to give at least ball park areas where courses are concerned. We are spending public money, there are clearly different products out there and we are not providing any information to would-be applicants about the difference between them.

**Mr Denham:** I do think that the scale of the exercise that would be required to assess every course across every institution on that sort of basis would certainly have some impact on Sir Alan's budget.

**Q550 Graham Stringer:** I do not accept that.

**Mr Denham:** He would have to find the money for it. I am not sure that we have such a deep problem that it would justify doing it. What I think we do have is a poor system for communicating to the world at large how the quality and standard systems in universities work and we have a less effective than we might have system for communicating what quality and standards are generally like, and we need to be more pro-active at tackling problems when they are highlighted. I do not think we should go from that to saying that we need a fundamental change which would end up inevitably in the inspection of every single individual course and the rating of it by a huge central organisation because that is what it would take.

**Sir Alan Langlands:** I think the real danger here is that we completely underestimate the effort that goes into improving quality and standards at a local and institutional level. People take this enormously seriously and the processes that are in place in

universities are on the whole in my experience very rigorous, very clear and easily auditable by the QAA. There is a huge human effort going into this process of quality improvement and I think we underestimate that at our peril.

**Q551 Dr Gibson:** Why do we have a separate QAA in Scotland?

**Sir Alan Langlands:** They have adopted a slightly different approach.

**Q552 Dr Gibson:** What is the difference?

**Sir Alan Langlands:** The difference is that they claim the Scottish system is a little bit more developmental—the name that is given is “enhancement led institutional review”—and universities are encouraged not only to assess their policies and processes in the way the QAA do here but also highlight areas of good practice and then that is disseminated more widely around the sector. On the whole the systems are very similar.

**Q553 Mr Cawsey:** I was interested in what you said, John, that there are issues about standards between one institution and another but not of such a scale that it is worth setting up a huge apparatus to try and resolve it. When we spoke to universities as part of this inquiry we were all surprised by the reluctance to acknowledge that there were different standards in different universities. You strike us as a very straightforward kind of guy; do you seriously think that a first in geography from Oxford is the same as a first in geography from Southampton Solent?

**Mr Denham:** I think the institutions are different institutions. The teaching may well be different. The nature of the staff may be different. There will be some nationally agreed reference points in the academic infrastructure about what should be in the course<sup>5</sup> and each institution will have its own system for verifying the quality and standards of it. People are studying the same subject in different institutions. Where I am reluctant to go is into an argument about better or worse. A lot is going to depend on the individual student, the nature of the study and what they are going to get out of it.

**Q554 Ian Stewart:** Does that mean there are minimum standards?

**Mr Denham:** I am perfectly happy to recognise that our universities are different. This seems to be the fundamental point that frustrates me sometimes about the subject. If you are saying that we have a diverse sector you cannot also say that everything is identical in a diverse sector. That does not make sense to me. What I do believe though is that the assumption that people make that one is automatically better than another is missing the point.

**Q555 Dr Gibson:** Do you think it is a daft question then to try to compare different subjects in different universities. At the end of the day it is the teacher that makes the difference, whether they follow the

<sup>5</sup> Note from the witness: Levels of achievement



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 11 May 2009 Rt Hon John Denham MP and Sir Alan Langlands
 

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curriculum or not. If you do something at LSE it is LSE who has the name—Oxford, Cambridge, Edinburgh, Dundee, a few places get the name—but it does not really matter, does it? It does not matter if there is a quality difference.

**Mr Denham:** It is important that people know what it is they are going to study and what they are going to get from their studies. You asked the hypothetical question: could you in theory compare every course in the country? I guess in some way you could.

**Q556 Chairman:** In a specific subject area.

**Mr Denham:** I guess in principle you could, but do we have a need to do that?

**Q557 Dr Gibson:** If I was asked, “Where’s the best place to do bio-chemistry?” I would say Dundee because of Phil Cohen, for example. It is the people in the departments who attract the attention. There are very good people at LSE in different departments and you would say that to young people. You pick different universities for different subjects.

**Sir Alan Langlands:** You are picking them on the basis of people and possibly content; what we are talking about here is standards. The content may be different but the standards are matching the benchmarks of the subject descriptors that are set out in the national framework. I think that is the difference.

**Graham Stringer:** We have also received evidence that not only do, say Oxford and Cambridge, take in some of the brightest young people in this country but they also have much longer contact hours with their staff and much more intensive education by factors of two to one sometimes compared to others. We cannot possibly believe that what comes out at the end of that is the same. To put the question the other way round, it would be a disservice not to say that there is an excellent course in history at Leeds University, for example, where actually the product is better than at Oxford, but by not providing the information are we not just leaving up to the market, as the QAA told us we were, so Oxford, LSE, Cambridge, UCL all have better reputations so you do not get that information out that Leeds has a better course because it has not been assessed by anybody.

**Q558 Chairman:** Could I answer that and say that we heard from Professor Alan Ryan from Oxford that perhaps the time has come for a CNAAs to be resurrected so that you could actually have the whole business of accrediting courses in particular subject areas?

**Mr Denham:** Let us take a step back here. We are talking about two issues and they are getting mixed up here. One is, do we have, within the institutions, a national system for looking at how standards are assessed within those institutions? Do we have a system for verifying that? As Sir Alan said, within the institutions in his view there is and the QAA, yes I think they do. I am not going to repeat myself, but there are ways in which the role of the QAA could be strengthened to say that those processes are in place, that things like external examiners and so on that

give consistency across the system are actually working properly and all the rest of it. The second question is, should we go one stage further and have a national body whose job it is to prescribe, in addition to all of that, a way of comparing degrees in different universities? I think that would take a huge part of the higher education budget for a very little benefit.

**Q559 Graham Stringer:** Have you done an assessment to say how much it would cost?

**Mr Denham:** I must confess that I have not.

**Q560 Graham Stringer:** So you are guessing.

**Mr Denham:** Yes, I am guessing. I am guessing that if you wanted to send somebody in every year to assess every individual degree course in our universities objectively against a nationally agreed set of requirements that would cost a great deal of money. It may be cheap, but I very much doubt it. The second thing is, as Dr Gibson has said, if you want to go to a university with high quality researchers you do not need a national Ofsted for higher education to find out where the best research groups are. If you are the sort of student who wants to be guided in a subject then it is not too difficult to find out where the researchers are. We have an RAE, for example, which tells you where you have the best concentrations of researchers in particular subjects. It would also point out where you might have world class people doing research in the university round the corner that you had not thought about. The RAE also shows where excellence is. There are ways of finding out.

**Q561 Dr Gibson:** I remember Malcolm Bradbury and creative writing; nobody saw much of Malcolm because he was too busy writing books.

**Mr Denham:** Allegedly a lot of poets went to Hull because Phillip Larkin was there in the library. There are improvements we can make to what we have at the moment but I think they would be enormously expensive. It might well be the case that if you had a more centralised system the worst bits in the system would be better but I would be pretty certain the best bits would get a lot worse.

**Q562 Mr Marsden:** I want to move onto teaching and research and to the relationship and relative weighting we give to them. I am going to say that you have just argued for what I would regard as a variegated university system; I cannot remember the words you used, but that was the thrust of it. One of the things that has concerned us from a lot of the evidence we have had is that a variegated system where you have some universities which are research intensive and some which are teaching intensive has, nevertheless, led to a gap in funding over a significant period of time. In 2006–07 the HEFCE current grant for teaching rose by 5.3 per cent and was required to fund 23,000 additional students; research funding and capital investment went up by eight per cent. In 2007–08 the current grant for teaching went up by 4.4 per cent; 25,000 additional students required; research funding up by 6.9 per

11 May 2009 Rt Hon John Denham MP and Sir Alan Langlands

cent. Is the issue here that if you are going to have some degree of variation that you actually need to create new incentives for those universities that are teaching with the greatest impact and give them proper financial recognition because they do not appear to be getting much of it in the system as it stands at the moment.

**Mr Denham:** The real terms funding on the teaching side went up by about 24 per cent since 1997. We have doubled the research budget since 1997 because we were spending far too little on research. There used to be a campaign called Save British Science it was that bad, and I think the government has invested significantly in higher education but for all sorts of reasons it was necessary to substantially increase the science and research budget and we have done that. I understand how you present the figures and there are some institutional implications of that big emphasis on research but I think that nationally we had to make that investment.

**Q563 Mr Marsden:** Let us take that as read; let us not argue about the case then but let us talk about the situation now. The situation now is that there appears to be a drift apart. Perhaps also significantly (again this touches on the RAE issues but I am not going to go down that route at the moment) the government is committed to a much broader social inclusion agenda in terms of HE but there is nothing in the system instrumentally that would encourage a young academic in their late 30s or early 40s to use some of his or her gifts and talents to do that social inclusion work as opposed to getting their heads down and doing masses of research. We do not have any leaders in that system, do we?

**Sir Alan Langlands:** I do not think that is true.

**Q564 Mr Marsden:** Can you give us some examples?

**Sir Alan Langlands:** People choose as their career develops.

**Q565 Mr Marsden:** Sir Alan, give us some examples. If I am a young academic in my late 30s and I want to engage in my local schools community, I want to go out and do social outreach stuff, I want to be in continuing education and all those laudable things, I could spend masses of time on that and I would not get a penny of credit out of your council because your council has put all the emphasis and the funding on those people who are doing research.

**Sir Alan Langlands:** Our council does not deal with personal reward. I think there are people at institutional level who are rewarded for doing precisely these things. I can only talk about an institution in which I was involved, where one of the very best mathematicians (one of the hottest researchers in mathematics) spent a lot of time supporting these public engagement type activities—working with local schools, teaching on our summer programmes for widening access—and I think there are people like that throughout the sector.

**Q566 Mr Marsden:** I understand that, Sir Alan, but with respect you are talking about the Scottish system with a far smaller number of universities and a far smaller number of people in the system where it is easier to do that. Let me leave that and let me come onto another question which I would like to put to you. When we had the Russell Group before us, the vice-chancellor for Leeds argued the case for strong research intensive universities on the basis that research fuelled good teaching and good teaching relied on good research. However, time and time again when we pressed him in the session on that issue he could not give any objective evidence for that and was reduced in the end to flattering some members of the Committee by saying that the majority of us had been to Russell Group universities so they must be doing something right, which did not seem to be a very good argument. Is it not the case that there is not any research out there which demonstrates, other than by the sort of assertion that we had from the vice-chancellor of Leeds, that good teaching relies on good research and would it not be a good idea to start commissioning some?

**Sir Alan Langlands:** The vice-chancellor of Leeds also talked about the good work they are doing there on widening participation and I do not think the point I made applies only to Scotland; I think it would apply equally to many of the big provincial cities.

**Q567 Mr Marsden:** That is not the point if was making. If I was being ungenerous I would say he did not really give us a great number of examples, but in fact I am not going to make that point because I trust what you said. The point that I am making is that this is a crucial issue. It informs the position of the government but we do not actually have any research on this, do we?

**Sir Alan Langlands:** I do not know of any research but I know that there has been a long-range discussion about what some people have referred to as “research-led teaching” and I know that there is a strong belief in many institutions that it is an advantage to have people who are working researchers teaching the students and encouraging them not just to fill their heads with knowledge or the specialist skills they might need for the future, but helping them to understand important issues in relation to problem solving, the research method, the way in which you would tackle problems not just in an academic laboratory for example but also in an industrial laboratory or in a company setting.

**Q568 Mr Marsden:** Would you at least go away to your colleagues at HEFCE and ask them and say to them that the Committee thinks it is about time there was some?

**Sir Alan Langlands:** We will ask the question and if there is evidence that we could provide to you we will do so.

**Q569 Mr Marsden:** John, the 2008 RAE allocated more funding to the post-92 universities and in your comments you rather echoed what the *Times Higher*

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11 May 2009 Rt Hon John Denham MP and Sir Alan Langlands

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*Educational Supplement* said about it being a good thing that there were islands or pockets of excellence in non-research intensive universities. How do we encourage that process while meeting the targets which I fully understand and which the government very much stresses of keeping our international base and status?

**Mr Denham:** It is very important that we recognise excellence where ever it is and that is what the RAE did. However, we do recognise as a government the dilemma and we have been fairly clear, I think, that it would be wrong to interpret this year's RAE as part of a 20 year trajectory in which the research money is moved out across the entire system. I think there is a case for having fairly high levels of research concentration. We need to ensure that those people who are working in pockets of excellence in some universities are not isolated, are able to work with research teams in others and be properly recognised for doing so. We need to get the balance there right. One thing I would pick up on is that the government view about research concentration is broadly driven by the strength of research and the need to have institutions with concentrations of a wide range of research. We actually think that teaching is important everywhere and we do not actually think that only good teaching takes place in research

intensive universities. One thing I would observe, though, is that I have never met a vice-chancellor in a university that is not research intensive who does not believe that it is important to give their teaching staff the space to do scholarships of some sort of another. They may not be leading, world-beating research teams, but they do not believe that their staff can teach effectively all the time unless they have some space for scholarships and for developing their knowledge in whatever way it might be. The consensus about the importance of people having time for that is right across the sector.

**Mr Marsden:** I am sure that is the case but I would just finish with a quote from a student which says, "Sometimes I feel I am a bit like a sausage factory rather than surrounded by some of the foremost minds in my field. I appreciate students can sometimes get in the way of research but the whole point of university is for lecturers to pass on their knowledge".

**Q570 Chairman:** Secretary of State, you have passed on you knowledge, thank you very much.

**Mr Denham:** I am not offering myself as one of the finest minds around!

**Chairman:** I did not go that far but we were very pleased to have you! Thank you both very much for your presence this afternoon.

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## Taken before the Sub-Committee on Students and Universities on Monday 23 March 2009

Members present

Mr Phil Willis, in the Chair

Mr Gordon Marsden

Graham Stringer

*Witnesses:* **Professor Gerald Pillay**, Vice-Chancellor and Rector, Liverpool Hope University; **Professor Michael Brown**, Vice-Chancellor, Liverpool John Moores University; and **Professor Jon Saunders**, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, University of Liverpool, gave evidence.

**Q1 Chairman:** First of all, could I thank Liverpool Hope University for accepting our request to be invited here today and indeed to thank you very much indeed, Professor Pillay, for the amount of hospitality that we have received during our visit. This is an inquiry specifically about the student experience in our universities, and we are hoping that our report, which we expect to have published before the summer recess, will add to the Secretary of State, John Denham's body of knowledge as he reviews the higher education system, and indeed makes various proposals about the future higher education system, of course as well as the funding streams which are due to be considered later in 2009. For our first panel this afternoon we have three distinguished academics: Professor Pillay, Vice-Chancellor and Rector of Liverpool Hope University; Professor Michael Brown, the Vice-Chancellor of Liverpool, John Moores University; and Professor Jon Saunders, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University of Liverpool, so welcome to you all. I wonder if I could start with you, Professor Brown. There are three different institutions in front of us which is a good spectrum of the British higher education system, with very different traditions, coming from different backgrounds. How do you make sure that your academic standards are broadly the same?

**Professor Brown:** We all work broadly to the same system. We are inspected by the QAA to make sure that our systems comply with best practice. That is a five-year cycle and it so happens that the University of Liverpool have got them in at the moment and we have got them in in about three months' time. Our systems and approaches to academic quality control and the way we manage our affairs are subject to public scrutiny. I think that is a very valuable exercise. Secondly, on a subject level, we have our own quality assurance systems which involve external reviews every time you renew a programme, and at the end of the day we have external examiners to make sure that the standards in our programmes reciprocate the standards that they see in their own programmes in other universities, so there is a cross-matching across the whole piece. Of course, we have statistical analysis to see how we stand against the national spectrum, so there is a variety of controls there.

**Q2 Chairman:** Professor Pillay, would you accept Michael Brown's comments?

**Professor Pillay:** Chairman, I do. I think the formal mechanisms of systems comparison should make sure that universities are at least required to comply and we are open to public scrutiny. Those are formal mechanisms applicable to any institution in the country that is a university.

**Q3 Chairman:** But you are not open to public scrutiny, are you, because the quality standards at Liverpool Hope are not publicly scrutinised by anyone other than a small group of people within the system?

**Professor Pillay:** Yes, except that for the first time in the last couple of years all the external examiners' reports and a lot of the "critical friend" reports are now available to the students publicly. They can find them on the websites and we are required to publish all of that. While there may have been a more in-house inspection before, it is more public in Britain than I have seen it anywhere in the world. In fact, the problem now is that there is such a mountain of material in public that nobody has time to read it. You create the opposite in that having so much it is not valuable. I was saying to you that I agree with the formal measures that Professor Brown, my colleague, reported on, but there are in-house benchmarking processes certainly at my university, and I am sure at my colleagues' universities as well, which are constantly evolving in-house good practice, learning good practice, and passing good practice on, not only within the campus but also across campuses. There are a range of collaborative processes introduced by the CETLS,<sup>1</sup> and other mechanisms so that one is all the time talking to colleague institutions.

**Q4 Chairman:** Professor Saunders, do you accept that across your three institutions standards are broadly similar and that we should rest easy in our beds?

**Professor Saunders:** I accept everything that has already been said. I think the standards are maintained very strongly through the external examiner system. Having experienced that, both within the UK and overseas, I can assure you that the standards are the same wherever you go in that

<sup>1</sup> *Note from the witness:* Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning

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23 March 2009 Professor Gerald Pillay, Professor Michael Brown and Professor Jon Saunders

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system. I am quite happy with the level of scrutiny that is imposed on the basis of subject specialist experts.

**Q5 Chairman:** So a 2:1 degree at Liverpool University is broadly similar to one at John Moores, is broadly similar to one at Liverpool Hope? That is what you are saying?

**Professor Saunders:** If they were in identical subjects, I would feel perfectly comfortable with that.

**Q6 Chairman:** The recent HEPI study looked at the total amount of teaching and private study delivered in your university and also in Liverpool John Moores in the areas allied to medicine. The total hours invested at John Moores is 40.1 hours and the percentage of students gaining a first or an upper second is 51.8 per cent. At the University of Liverpool it is 32.1 hours, eight hours less, and yet 63.4 per cent get firsts or 2:1s. Is that because your teaching is better, you do not need as much time, or your students are better? How does that equate with your comment that everything is the same?

**Professor Saunders:** It might also be because the two provisions do not overlap with each other, except in the case of nursing. Where we have subjects allied to health they are different in John Moores than they are in Hope.

**Q7 Chairman:** But you know the point I am making, it is significantly different.

**Professor Saunders:** I take your point but the subjects, the amount of work involved, the amount of time in experiential learning in the National Health Service is different depending on the programme, so I would not expect the time spent to be the same.

**Q8 Chairman:** Professor Brown?

**Professor Brown:** You are assuming that the students are identical and that they are applying themselves in identical ways and have no other additional pressures. You need to be assured that the 2:1/first standard is being looked at very closely by all universities, and they are not being given away. I think one of the things in the press at the moment is that there is grade inflation and there is something going wrong here. There is not. We look very carefully at this and we ask external examiners in particular to make quite sure that the standard of the grading of degrees is the same in all institutions.

**Q9 Chairman:** So the explosion, the doubling of firsts over the last 20 years, and the 60 per cent increase in 2:1s is just because universities are teaching better, they have got better students, something in the water?

**Professor Brown:** I would say that the evidence that I see at universities these days is that much maligned students are much harder working students than they were in my day. They are also holding down part-time jobs as well. I think that experience concentrates them on working very hard. They know what the requirements are and they are

applying themselves better. I must say that in my own university the number of firsts and 2:1s is not as high as the national average now and we are wondering why, so we are looking at that as part of our continual review of programmes. As my colleague Professor Pillay says, there are many internal measures we look at in terms of the performance of courses to make sure that they are producing the right service and the right challenge to our students. I do not think that you can equate them exactly. Certainly the number of taught hours is not a necessary measure because you might expect students to do other things in the hours where they are not being formally taught, but I think the standards of degrees are pretty robustly looked at.

**Q10 Graham Stringer:** Professor Brown, if we can go back to your first answer where you referred to the Quality Assurance Agency whose mission is to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education. When we had them before us giving evidence and as witnesses, really what they told us that they were looking at was process not standards, and they were just checking an audit trail really that the work set had been undertaken. That is not really looking at standards, is it?

**Professor Brown:** It is not directly looking at standards. What they are looking for is whether the university has a self-appraisal system that looks at how it operates, how it runs the operations, how it assesses its standards, and how it looks to improve its standards and a self-improvement regime has to be in there as well. Essentially, what they are looking at is whether you have a well-run institution in terms of managing your processes, managing your standards yourself, and the externalisation is done by external examiners' benchmarks and other benchmarks.

**Q11 Graham Stringer:** But that does mean though, does it not, that if your processes are good you could be setting low standards and the QAA would not tell you off about it? They would not chastise you so long as you did everything according to the book?

**Professor Brown:** You may believe that, sir, but I have experience of the QAA, and that is not my experience.

**Q12 Graham Stringer:** Professor Brown, there is no evidence that they have ever taken a university to task. There is not one university which has ever been taken to task about academic standards.

**Professor Brown:** That is true so far.

**Q13 Graham Stringer:** Do you not find that surprising? Do you not find that slightly Panglossian?

**Professor Brown:** Not really because if you take the premise that the most important thing that a university does is to manage its quality and its affairs, it gets it right the first time. If it knows it is going to be inspected and subject to public inspection, it makes damn sure it gets it right. One of the criticisms of the QAA system has been the inordinate amount of work the universities did to

make sure the inspection worked. I think the balance is about right now; it is not that intrusive and yet we make quite sure that our processes, our assessments, our self-assessment, the way we run our standard reviews are professional and are improving continuously. We take that one stage further at Liverpool John Moores University, as you probably know, because we have adopted the European Excellence Model for the whole university, of which academic standards and the operation of our programmes is a part.

**Q14 Chairman:** But that is self-assessed as well.

**Professor Brown:** No, it is not self-assessed. It is assessed by an outside panel coming in making sure that you deliver to the standard.

**Q15 Chairman:** Which you set?

**Professor Brown:** No, no, no, you have a standard model which you work against and you make sure you work against 32 different criteria, from leadership, to processes, to results. The key to it—and the public sector frankly usually do not do very well the first time they are assessed—is automatic, built-in, continuous improvement.

**Chairman:** Sorry to interrupt.

**Q16 Graham Stringer:** Can I ask Professors Saunders and Pillay what your universities' relationship is with the QAA? Are you satisfied with the process?

**Professor Pillay:** I think what my colleague Professor Brown says is true simply because there is at least a form by which we are judged, but that does not mean that we cannot concede that there has not been an over-interest in process and not sufficient interest in substance. I think one can concede that. Also there has been an over-emphasis, in my view Chairman, on management of quality rather than enhancing quality, and that is a QAA problem, but we have to live under that particular regime. The fact that no university has had to have remedial processes shows that the UK system is at least placed in a similar structure and in same form, considering when before this obsession with the process in the 1990s kicked in, we were all “laws unto ourselves”, “islands entirely to ourselves”. At least that part is over but I think the next phase that QAA in this country would have to consider is whether we have the same rigour in our teaching quality measurement as we have about research at the moment. Nothing, not even the Student Survey, in my view, is assessing teaching quality. Nothing is assessing yet the quality of scholarship. I do not just mean research outputs, because that is only part of what a university does. Something is going missing but I think these are the challenges and questions we raise for the future.

**Q17 Graham Stringer:** What would be your remedy for that absence of assessment of quality?

**Professor Pillay:** I would like to think that the freedom and the autonomy of a university must be taken even more seriously rather than finding a national mechanism where again we create these unintended consequence of emphasis on form in the

end. I think that a university must be held true to its responsibilities about scholarship and as part of its public accountability it must put up “the measure” by which it measures itself, and the external examining processes, and everything else, must investigate whether that is rigorous enough. I think more responsibility must be given to the university to actually show why it maintains and enhances quality, with the emphasis now on teaching quality not just on research quality.

**Q18 Graham Stringer:** Professor Saunders?

**Professor Saunders:** As has already been mentioned, we have already had an institutional audit from the QAA last week and we await that report with interest. We found that very helpful and very professional and very probing and critical of various systems in ways which we felt we could answer, so I have no problem with them as an institution or organisation. I think they are helpful to the case. Going back to your original point to Professor Brown, you asked how you maintain standards. What has not been mentioned here is, as opposed to the institutional level, the role of our academic staff in maintaining standards. It is very important to them that the standards are maintained or are seen to meet with the standards in the rest of the system across the sector, otherwise that is affecting the perception of those staff with respect to how they are perceived by their peers in other universities. It is not only at the top level, it is right down at the grassroots in terms of the assessment procedure.

**Professor Brown:** As a major part to that answer we have also forgotten one other thing, which is that many of our programmes are independently assessed by professional bodies on standards as well.

**Q19 Graham Stringer:** Just going on to the role of external examiners, it has been put to us that it is an old boys'/old girls' networks, that people who are working in closely related fields of individual academics know each other come and do it, so there is no incentive for them to be over-critical of the standards.

**Professor Saunders:** I think you probably underestimate the ability of academics to compete with each other. If I were to go to another institution and I thought their standards were not as good as those in my own institution, I would be totally unafraid to mention that.

**Q20 Chairman:** Even if they were coming back to you?

**Professor Saunders:** They would not be asked to. We have systems to prevent examiners from being in that club, they cannot come back within a period of time, they cannot be associated, so there is a degree of holding people at a distance. Of course in a professional area you will know the people and you will know the people who have the ability to determine quality, but I do not think people pull any punches if they find things that they do not like.

**Q21 Graham Stringer:** Is there not a disincentive for punching in as much as if you as an external examiner find a paper which is either above or below standard, not the standard you expect—

**Professor Saunders:** You mean in the form of the questions or in the assessment of the answers by the external examiner?

**Q22 Graham Stringer:** I was meaning the students' standards in the form of the answers, but it is an interesting point you make about the questions as well. In terms of levels being awarded, is there not a disincentive in as much as if you think one paper is at the wrong standard you have to then go through all the papers, and external examiners are not well paid, are they?

**Professor Saunders:** I do not think any external examiner does it for the money. I think it is done as an obligation to the profession and to the sector. Most external examiners that I know, including myself, one would read a range of papers in all classes, either sampling or reading the whole cohort. The monetary return to an external examiner is not a factor, in my experience.

**Q23 Graham Stringer:** But the work might be. Correct me if I have got this wrong, you are normally looking at borderline firsts/2:1s, but if you find the central standard of the 2:1s is not what you would expect it to be, and a person should be getting a first or a 2:2, you would then have to read through the whole papers if you thought the standards were incorrect, and that must be a disincentive surely?

**Professor Saunders:** Usually one would read more than just the borderline papers. One would read a range of papers in all the classes that have been determined internally to see whether they agree with your perception of the standards and all the evidence that is available. If one felt there was any systematic failure to align and calibrate correctly, one would raise that at the time. My experience is that usually what happens is that it is down to individual interpretations of a small number of questions over a small number of students where there is ambiguity about what the mark should be. Sometimes because the internal markers have disagreed, you act as an arbiter between those markers.

**Q24 Graham Stringer:** Just as a final point, it has also been brought to our attention—and I ask you this because you are a member of the Russell Group—that Russell Group universities only use Russell Group external examiners. Is that correct and is that fair?

**Professor Saunders:** I would not like to generalise about the Russell Group. There may be some universities that do that, but it is not true of my own institution. Examiners are whoever the most appropriate person is. I happen to know Russell Group university members of staff who act as external examiners in all sorts of universities across the country. There is no systematic thing in my own institution. I cannot speak for the Russell Group in general and if that has been said, I am not sure of the evidence.

**Professor Pillay:** I think Mr Stringer's questions are absolutely pointed and therefore we need to ask constantly how robust the external examining systems are. That there will be lapses and there will be not the same rigour everywhere is quite possible. The problem is what is the alternative? If we take away this traditional convention that still governs the best university systems in the world, what is the alternative if we do not have an external examining system? If we have a national exam in each discipline like the GCSEs and A levels it will be a travesty of the academic freedom of institutions.

**Q25 Chairman:** Could I turn this round because I think this is important. What all three of you have said is that the integrity of our current higher education system really depends on the internal processes of having academics working to the very highest standards, demanding the highest possible standards from their students, and then reporting those areas where students do not meet up or people within their departments do not meet up to the relevant standards. Yet the information that we have had to our inquiry indicates that in some universities academics who do challenge standards are disciplined, sometimes they are removed, and certainly they are scapegoated. Is that an acceptable situation?

**Professor Pillay:** I cannot imagine in what conditions that would happen, Chairman, but I do know that at this university all of those reports go into an annual monitoring report, and that annual monitoring report goes to the meeting of all the heads and deans. It then goes to the Senate. We ask for that level of rigour, that would be encouraged in a place like ours, and I am sure at the other two universities as well.

**Q26 Chairman:** Professor Saunders, can I speak to you specifically, has that occurred where academics have challenged things?

**Professor Saunders:** Academics by their nature challenge everything. I know of no case where an academic has been disciplined for challenging anything of that nature. It is part of academic life that people discuss these matters.

**Q27 Chairman:** It is inconceivable that an academic who said, "We are marking too leniently, we are passing too many students at 2:1s," or those borderline cases, would be told to be quiet?

**Professor Saunders:** They would not be told to be quiet. If they were saying that in the face of evidence then—

**Q28 Chairman:** Obviously.

**Professor Saunders:** —that would be wrong. The place where those things are discussed would be the examination boards for the subjects. If people have objections that is where they should be raising them. Normally examination boards are composed of all the people who teach that subject, so if they have been involved in the process they should be able to say that there, and not do it privately, they should be doing it through the proper channels.

**Chairman:** Gordon?

**Q29 Mr Marsden:** Thank you, Chairman. Can I repeat your thanks to Liverpool Hope for hosting us today. In the memoranda that we have received to the inquiry there has been a continuing theme of a clear connection between good teaching and good research, and perhaps I could start with you, Professor Saunders, and ask if you can give us any evidence of this connection?

**Professor Saunders:** A central theme of teaching in a research-intensive university, as it is in many other universities, is that research informs the teaching. Research facilities are an integral part of the teaching in terms of the library and all the other assets that are used for research and teaching. Where that becomes embedded is particularly in the third and final year of programmes where students do projects, normally in the STEM subjects, at least as part of the research teams, so they are undergoing an apprenticeship in the research activities, in real research labs, not those put on especially for them, so they can experience that. That is a prime example of where the research element impinges on the student experience. In order to get to that level, of course they have to go through acquiring the knowledge appropriate to the discipline and the skill-set they need before they can engage at the higher level research.

**Q30 Mr Marsden:** Some of those people who are rather critical of the balance that is struck in universities such as your own between research and teaching might say that from the point of view of the student experience the downside of that—and I accept that you took a particular example—is that students do not, as it were, get the full benefit of the research-intensive lecturer until their third year. Would that be a fair criticism or not?

**Professor Saunders:** No, it would not. Not all staff can teach every single cohort of students in their first or second year but normally those jobs are distributed around the staff. It is quite common for a very intensively research-active professor to be lecturing to first-year students. That is how they get exposed to that area of science or whatever it is.

**Q31 Mr Marsden:** So you do not have anybody on the staff at Liverpool University who has been hired as a research professor purely for their research capabilities who does no teaching, as has been alleged at some other universities?

**Professor Saunders:** We expect all our staff to participate in the teaching activity. It may well be that individuals have lead fellowships which prevent them from doing their teaching duties, as it were, and that is covered for. We do not appoint people on the basis that they do not have an obligation to teach. We might well appoint people as teachers who do not have an obligation to do research, but that is different.

**Q32 Mr Marsden:** So this so-called “transfer fee” culture that has been alleged in some universities does not exist in yours?

**Professor Saunders:** Throughout the entire sector people are trying to recruit the best staff they can acquire, both as researchers and teachers. Those things come at a price in many disciplines and that is what universities have to decide when they are recruiting people. It is no more a transfer fee culture than in any other activity of life.

**Q33 Mr Marsden:** Professor Brown, if I can move on to you because at Liverpool John Moores you obviously come from a post-1992 university perspective as a former polytechnic, but you have actually embraced the research culture quite strongly in terms of the RAE output and all the rest of it. Do you feel that the emphasis and resources which the RAE process has given to research means that the attention given to teaching has suffered?

**Professor Brown:** No, I do not. It is perfectly true that we were a polytechnic until 1992. That did not mean however that we did not do research and enjoy funding in research. “We were created equal to, but different from, universities”, so, frankly, I bridle at this arbitrary division between before 1992 and after. Why do we not talk about 1947 when three-quarters of the universities in this country did not exist?

**Q34 Mr Marsden:** With respect, before you include us in the bridling, perhaps I should just say that the reason that I chose that particular example is because many policy-makers—and I am not going to name names—have argued that there should be a strong division between research-intensive universities and teaching-intensive universities (and I accept the point that you are making) and have rather crudely characterised that as pre-’92 and post-’92. The reason I asked you the question was that you seem at John Moores, if I can put it provocatively, to be having your cake and eating it, in the sense that you have a reputation for being strong on teaching but you are coming up fast on the sidelines on research. Would that be a fair assessment?

**Professor Brown:** Let me answer the question in a slightly different way. I take the view and my board takes the view that a university worthy of its salt does three things: it does teaching; it does research and scholarship; and it does knowledge transfer, transferring knowledge for the benefit of humankind, in whatever way that is, and all of our staff are encouraged to do all three. We do not think that modern teaching is going to be as effective as it should be unless the staff member in that subject area is doing research and scholarship to some degree, otherwise the students could get it from books or from the web. What our teachers are about is “inspiring”—it is an old-fashioned word—getting the students to go beyond where they could get to by themselves. To do that they have to have subject mastery and they have to understand what they are doing and they have to love it. Part of that is therefore to have everybody in the university doing research or scholarship at some level. We cannot fund it everywhere at world leadership level, although we do research at world leadership level. Part of the university’s reputation—and universities



live or die on their reputation—is having large pockets of world-class research which people recognise and give a stamp to. From that we then get contract work in research, from industry and commerce. For every pound the Funding Council gives us to underpin our research we bring another £8 through the door, so the gearing is very good, because we have that reputation in the first place. Our portfolio of activities works together in having all three: research, teaching and knowledge transfer.

**Mr Marsden:** I think the Chairman wants to come in on that point.

**Q35 Chairman:** I just wanted to make you bridle a little further, and that is I failed to give you the opportunity in my last round of questioning to ask in this pursuit of excellence whether academics at John Moores University are discouraged from complaining if in fact they see standards slipping within the university?

**Professor Brown:** Absolutely not. There are mechanisms for them to go through the university to bring in their grievances if they wish to raise them. They do and, as John says, the very nature of academics is they will make their points.

**Q36 Chairman:** So you are quite convinced that in terms of this drive to improve the standing of John Moores University you do not trample on the academics who raise major questions about the integrity of what product you are offering?

**Professor Brown:** Absolutely not. The ethos in the university is to be open and questioning.

**Q37 Mr Marsden:** Professor Pillay, if I can come on to you again, continuing this theme of the balance between research, scholarship and teaching. At Liverpool Hope—and I am drawing now on the interview that you gave to the *Guardian* just over a year ago—you made a great thing about the fact that Hope has very strong links with Merseyside schools and that potential undergraduates are spotted early and supported for up to two years before they come to Hope. Those are things which all of us who have been looking at this area think are vital in terms of trying to widen and deepen participation. The fact of the matter is that you do not actually get Brownie points in the funding system for doing that very much at the moment, do you? If you are a young academic in your 30s or 40s, for example, and if you want to go out and teach in schools or to do social inclusion work or community work, or any of the things that we now emphasise very strongly that universities should do, there are actually very few rewards in the system, certainly in the system that is handing out funding from government, that encourage you to do that? Is that not true?

**Professor Pillay:** Yes, I think you are right, Mr Marsden, that is perfectly true, we are not rewarded for that. We do that not because of the reward but because of the mission of this university, which in the 19th century was established for women when Oxford and Cambridge did not accept women, and these early commitments to widening participation. There were only six universities in 1844 when our

first college was started and in the genetic blueprint of this institution there is a commitment to social justice. That is why we still exist as the only ecumenical foundation in Europe. What drives all of that is its mission and its values, which have now survived some 160-odd years. What we have also done, which follows from your previous question, is we have widened participation without necessarily increasing participation. There is a confusion in the country about the two. We have raised the entry points. We have started projects using our outreach network primarily to find those people with prospects who are excluded because of socio-economic disadvantage and get them into the system. That is our mission. We have also raised the entry points and we have developed a research profile as well.

**Q38 Mr Marsden:** That is your position and I accept that. In terms of what the broader system does, would you and your two colleagues agree with the fact that there is not much in the system that encourages people to do that? Professor Saunders, if I am a bright, young academic at Liverpool University in my late 30s and I want to go out and do stuff in Toxteth and all the rest of it, am I getting any benefit from the university or from the system for that?

**Professor Saunders:** You would not get any from the system but you would from the university. It would be seen as part of your contribution to the university when you came up for promotion. Without boring you with the details of our scoring system, research and teaching are weighted equally and then there is “other”, which includes administration and outreach of that kind. It would include that and I think we need to develop that, but there is provision for it, and somebody who is outstanding at it should be rewarded, I agree.

**Q39 Mr Marsden:** Can I come on finally to talk about the issue of the RAE and whether it promotes too much of a competitive culture across universities. At the moment there is a controversy in and around your university—I will put it no stronger—about the potential closure of various department. It is being said that that is directly related to the outcome of the RAE inquiry that has just taken place. Is that the case or not?

**Professor Saunders:** Firstly may I say that there is no proposal to make closures of anything. I will say that the RAE has provoked self-analysis of our performance with respect to the rest of the sector. By their nature, universities are competitive, academics are competitive, and they wish to be involved in excellence. We have examined our research activity against the standards of excellence which we would like to move to in the next assessment period. As part of that analysis we have had a review document before our Senate and Council. That document was modified in response to the comments of Senate and has gone forward now. It does not—

**Q40 Mr Marsden:** Sorry to interrupt but I know the Chairman wants to come in on this particular point and I want to ask one very simple, straightforward question. Do you therefore think that it is reasonable, with all the weaknesses and deficiencies that the RAE system has been alleged to have, for you to make critical decisions about the closures of departments on one snapshot RAE exercise?

**Professor Saunders:** We would not make those decisions on the basis of any single factor. We are reviewing all departments as a matter of routine between the RAE periods and we will be looking at the research activity of all of them. We will obviously concentrate on those that did not do so well in that particular national competition. If there are faults with the system then everybody in the country is subjected to the same faults.

**Q41 Chairman:** What concerns me, Professor Saunders—and remember this is an inquiry about the student experience—is that we spent a significant amount of time trying to look at quality, and in particular quality of teaching, and what makes good teaching, and yet it does appear from the announcements, and admittedly they have come via a third party and therefore you have always got to have a question mark over them, that the University of Liverpool would look at the future of a department based on its research but not on its teaching.

**Professor Saunders:** That is not so. You rather correctly pointed out that this information has come from a third party not from the university. The proposal in front of our Senate and Governing Council was to examine the RAE performance and the research performance of departments, and then to consider options to improve that performance, and indeed what the impact might be on all the other activities. That is part of the consultation process which is taking place now. It does not cause prejudice to any outcome and will take account of all the possible ramifications of any action that was taken.

**Q42 Chairman:** Would you not agree that with hindsight actually referring to possible closures as a result of RAE is the wrong starting point for a consultation?

**Professor Saunders:** If you are to address difficult issues, you have to be open and honest about them. I do not think you can say we will not consider something because it might cause a furor in the press, for example. It has to be based on evidence about whether you can afford to support certain areas, whether you need to invest more in certain areas, and you need to have a rational discussion. We have opened up that discussion. It has gone through the normal procedures and is now out to staff and students. We will receive their feedback by the beginning of May and then we will have proper discussions aligning that to what the external review process says.

**Q43 Chairman:** If you take an area like dentistry, and I know a number of colleagues who work in North West universities and North West MPs fought very, very strongly to extend the dentistry school across the North West to try to make sure that we have got capacity, the possible closure of the dentistry school at Liverpool University would be absolutely horrendous for the area.

**Professor Saunders:** I agree.

**Q44 Chairman:** Let me finish the question. Is it not therefore important to have a consultation with a wider group of people, not simply the academics and students who are currently involved in that particular activity?

**Professor Saunders:** Yes, we will consult our stakeholders. We have not proposed to close dentistry. You need to be careful with dentistry. Dentistry research and research in dentistry schools are two separate things. It would be quite possible to maintain dentistry but have the research done in other cognate areas.

**Q45 Chairman:** You have just said to us earlier that you cannot have good teaching without good research.

**Professor Saunders:** The people who teach in dentistry do not have to be dentists, for example. Those people who teach the fundamental science—

**Q46 Chairman:** Sorry?

**Professor Saunders:** All medicine is based on pre-medicine, biochemistry, cell biology, all those things, and you do not have to do the research to deliver the high-level teaching in those particular areas in the context of the mouth, let us say. It is quite possible to have research-led teaching in dentistry by people who are not dentists. The dentists' job is to teach the clinical side of it. There is a distinction there.

**Chairman:** It was important to try and get that on the record. Graham?

**Graham Stringer:** Five years ago the House of Commons was in turmoil about top-up fees—

**Chairman:** We still are!

**Q47 Graham Stringer:** We may be again if the proposals that have been mooted recently come to fruition. Can I ask the three of you if tuition fees went up to £6,000—£7,000 whether your universities would charge that level?

**Professor Brown:** Shall I take that death pass first? The honest answer is that the university as a whole has not addressed that issue yet and it is too early days to do it. The issue for us, I think the fundamental principles are that the Government should ensure that the funding of the student experience, including the teaching part, at every university should be the same and should not be dependent on people paying extra out of their own pockets to get extra benefits, if that institution is receiving public funds as a whole. In other words a private university is a private university that is acceptable; but I do not think public with a private

wing is acceptable. I am also concerned that there may be a tendency in some universities that are very research-intensive with a strong brand to charge higher fees and that money will not be put entirely into the student experience. I put it no stronger than that. As to what the right figure will be, that is a different matter. What I do think is important when the so-called top-up fee was introduced (and of course everybody topped up so it is not really a top-up fee, it is the new fee) was that there were bursaries in place for students from poorer backgrounds not to be disadvantaged. In fact, they ended up better off in the main than they were before and the money they could obtain on extremely good terms from the government to support them paying those fees and the money they had for living on was enough to live on. There was a period of course three or four years ago when the money that students could borrow from the Student Loans Company was not enough for them to provide minimum living standards to do a degree full time. That has been corrected now. I was delighted to support that when the Bill came through. For me the important ingredients are that students from economically poor backgrounds will be able to study full time and do the work properly, and that funding for all the universities and all students for their teaching should be the same, and there should not be any disadvantage. Of course the fee level, if you think about it, is a government statement, about what should the balance be of the private individual and the state investing in higher education and the balancing of financial advantage.

**Q48 Graham Stringer:** Can I interrupt there. It is in one sense but it is also a response by government to strong lobbying and requests from the universities. It is not something they thought of in the bath one night. There was terrific pressure for the top-up fees.

**Professor Brown:** Yes, there was terrific pressure for additional public finance because universities were in deep financial problems and the political solution, which I fully understand, was top-up fees, which essentially asked the individual for whom there is evidence they would get some financial benefit from it in some cases (not all cases) to contribute a bit towards their higher education which then gave them financial benefit later on. A good part of the policy that was introduced was that if someone did not get a large financial advantage from higher education, in other words went into a job that was not well paid, then they did not have to pay it back. I thought that was a good compromise between not disadvantaging people who go into higher education and yet some people who get a financial benefit paying something into the pot.

**Graham Stringer:** I would like it if you would say, "We would charge this if allowed to . . ." that would be helpful to the inquiry, but if you cannot say that because your Senates and Councils have not considered it, I would be interested to know in answer to the hypothetical question that if you had that freedom how the universities would improve, how the student experience would improve if that extra money was going into your universities?

**Q49 Chairman:** Because we have been told it is perfect.

**Professor Brown:** To give a personal answer as opposed to a university answer, I would like to improve the number of academic staff in university to improve the staff/student ratio. I cannot do that at the moment. On the other hand, part of me also asks if the judgment was taken five years ago about what the private individual should be prepared to contribute to the advantage of high education, has that moved in the last five years? In the present financial situation, I think it has probably gone the other way, so I do not think there is a case, frankly, on a personal basis to increase the fees at this stage.

**Professor Saunders:** I think the fee level is a matter for the Government. We will have to live with it whatever it is. I do not think we should say without considering our own position.

**Q50 Chairman:** Do you mind if I just interrupt you there. Universities UK, of which you are a member, came forward last year with the very question which my colleague has asked of a £6,500 fee. They are the people who represent you and I do not think you can be a little bit like whoever it was who said we will simply ignore it and we are not part and parcel of this organisation.

**Professor Brown:** I was not intending to imply that, but I think if there was additional funding available to us we would use it, hopefully wisely, to invest in the student experience.

**Q51 Mr Marsden:** Are you pushing for it?

**Professor Brown:** Not at this moment, no.

**Q52 Chairman:** Who is then because you are all members of Universities UK? We have had a farcical, sorry, we have had an unfortunate situation whereby we have had the Chairman of Universities UK, we have had the head of the Russell Group, the head of the 1994 Group, all of whom say everything is perfect in higher education, and within two weeks there is a demand to double the student fee. To be fair, Professor Brown, I think you have made an excellent point to say what we would do is give students the sorts of things they have asked for in the Student Survey, which include more contact time.

**Professor Pillay:** Some of us were opposed to top-up fees in the first place. I was one of those, simply because I believe that the commodification of higher education is not in the cultural interest of a country. That is my personal view. When we did go to £3,000, as Professor Brown just pointed out, it was because there was £9 billion of underfunding over a 10-year period. The top-up fees do not make up for the £9 billion of underfunding. Also the UK Government is spending less of its GDP than many other Western countries on HE.<sup>2</sup> In the absence of correcting that and making up for the £9 billion underfunding, we went to the market. There is a point at which in going to the market you commodify and marketise the

<sup>2</sup> Note from the witness: on Higher Education

system. One of the greatest drawbacks I find coming from the outside, (and I enjoy my work in this country, but I am always stunned by it), is the level of entrenched elitism in the system. Governments and ministers often remind us that we need to have at least half a dozen “world class” universities but when they compare them they are comparing them to private institutions in America that are not government-funded and somehow we believe that we can get government funding, raise our top-up fees and compete with these private institutions. While I am against the marketisation of the sector, I am all for having three or four who if they think they can command £20,000 a year to go ahead and do that, provided they do not come to the public purse for a penny. If we really want to undermine the elitism in the system I would suggest to them that for every two pounds you get more they should give up a pound from the purse, so that the others serving the country, like our institution, which if they are a British university also have to provide a top-class education, are better funded.

**Q53 Graham Stringer:** I can imagine parts of the country where that would not be very popular.

**Professor Pillay:** Sure.

**Q54 Graham Stringer:** Just two or three quick questions as we are running out of time. Professor Brown, you mentioned bursaries. Is it fair that students attending Liverpool University get higher bursaries of £1,400 than people attending your university? If you do think it is unfair, do you think a solution to that is to have a national bursary scheme?

**Professor Brown:** I would be very happy with a national bursary scheme. I think it is implicitly unfair now. You might ask why are we not more generous and why do we not match the University of Liverpool bursary scheme. The answer is very simple: we could not afford it. We spend about a third of the additional money that we get from so-called top-up fees on bursaries and scholarships. 42 per cent of our students qualify for the full government grant and 62 per cent qualify for the full and partial grant. That is the mix of our students. Our bursaries match that. It is £1,000 for people who would qualify for the government grant and it is £400 for those who qualify for the partial grant. We mirror it exactly. We have a few specialist scholarship schemes and one of our scholarships is £10,000 a year for really outstanding students; there are not many of those! Because we have so many students in those categories, we spend a lot of money and a small increase in our bursaries would be a very expensive final solution for us. A national scheme which would then not take account of the mix of students (we do very well, as you can see, on the wider participation agenda) would be a great advantage to us and therefore to our students, which is more important.

**Q55 Mr Marsden:** The issue about the type of students that you have just touched on, Professor Brown, brings me to ask a question briefly of all three of you, but particularly perhaps initially to

Professor Saunders. We have talked about widening participation but much of the evidence that we have taken in this inquiry and evidence that has been going around for some time suggests that if you do not actually target non-traditional participants in university education at a much earlier age, your ability to deliver that agenda is going to be fettered. If I could just ask you, to what extent is building up relationships with schools at the age of 13 or 14 or 15 a key part of what you are trying to do to broaden the agenda, both locally in the area and outside the area?

**Professor Saunders:** As a major part of our strategy we are recognised within the Russell Group as a leading university for wider participation and related topics. I would take you further than the 13 to 14 year-olds and go back earlier than that. We are engaged with both secondary schools and with primary schools in terms of engendering knowledge about the university sector and raising aspirations amongst students.

**Q56 Mr Marsden:** How does that deliver itself in concrete fashion?

**Professor Saunders:** We have a very able team who go out to schools on a very regular basis both within the region and outside. They bring students at very young ages into the university to see what it is like to be a student and what that leads to in terms of the professions.

**Q57 Mr Marsden:** Can I ask you, Professor, because we are running out of time, and perhaps also a brief comment from Professors Brown and Pillay, we know that the whole qualifications process at secondary level is in flux, and we now have the diplomas coming through for the first time, and we have an increasing emphasis from the Government on the role of apprenticeships as a mechanism to get into higher education. How equipped is Liverpool University to cope in terms of judging on admissions with apprenticeships and diplomas?

**Professor Saunders:** We would have to take them on on the basis of equivalent qualifications to enter the university. We have been considering various approaches of that type. It is not our primary business at the moment to do that.

**Q58 Mr Marsden:** Do I take that as a lukewarm reference to apprenticeships and diplomas as a way to get into HE?

**Professor Saunders:** Not necessarily, but it is not something that is going to be mainstream for us. It might well be for other institutions.

**Q59 Mr Marsden:** So it is good enough for other universities but not for you?

**Professor Saunders:** That is not the point. There is only a limited number of things that we can do. We do full time-provision and part-time provision and we have a very high post-graduate opening and we have overseas campuses. We cannot do everything.

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23 March 2009 Professor Gerald Pillay, Professor Michael Brown and Professor Jon Saunders

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**Q60 Mr Marsden:** Professor Brown and Professor Pillay, what is your attitude on those other non-A level routes into university?

**Professor Brown:** There are two parts to the question. The first is whether we reach in, and the answer is I think all three of us reach in. It goes beyond the age range that you mentioned. You are raising aspirations and perceptions, and we all do that. There are two areas that I thought you might find interesting by way of evidence of how to reach different groups. One is the National Schools' Observatory which Liverpool John Moores University runs. We have our own robotically controlled telescopes up a mountain in La Palma, and it is a very efficient telescope so we have some spare capacity so 10 per cent of the observing time goes to amateur groups and 5 per cent goes to the National Schools' Observatory, and 1,000 schools at primary level as well as secondary—that is why I thought I would mention it to you—and the children in those schools can drive the telescope from their own classroom and deal with real observations. We made our 10,000th observation in a school last month, and of course they discover the new supernova and can name them, and all the rest of it. The whole idea is to excite young people into science and technology through the stars and astronomy, which is a good route through. The other one is using IT, which could be as simple as a mobile phone camera to get people who tend to be a little bit disconnected from society, young males in particular in deprived areas and travelling people, into thinking that. HE,

(Higher Education) is for them as well. They can use new technology to make their own films and we can then get them into traditional education. That has been a very successful route. In terms of your final question, the rule that we use to recruit students to John Moores University, is are those people prepared adequately with the right background and the right attitudes to benefit, with hard work, from our programmes? What the qualification is, frankly, does not matter to us, provided we are convinced that the syllabus and their preparation fits an assessment of the course. We will look at any qualification and make quite sure it matches, and we can be very versatile.

**Q61 Mr Marsden:** Professor Pillay I must bring you in, albeit briefly.

**Professor Pillay:** For our institution it is very important to say that anyone with potential, anyone who can be successful, can come to university; I admit it. However, it has also been important to raise the bar because we are setting up a lot of people to fail simply because it is thought that getting them to university has been the only route for them to live meaningful lives or even have careers. I think there is a range of options. There is confusion coming out of the system because in the same week that the Government announced the new diplomas they also announced the International Baccalaureate so there is a lot of confusion about what in the end will greet us in 2010–11 or 2011–12. Be that as it may, this Government is trying to make a difference and I think our institutions are in step with the Government's objectives, and that is to ensure that nobody with the potential is left out. Certainly my university is keen to do that.

**Q62 Mr Marsden:** Would it help if all universities signed up to the UCAS points system in that respect?

**Professor Pillay:** I think there is a whole range of people that come to us when they do not come through UCAS. Many people on the HND come to us and do a very good job and end up doing post-graduate work with us.

**Q63 Chairman:** On that note, can I thank you all. You have been an absolutely splendid panel and you have been as robust in your answers as hopefully we have been in our questions. Thank you very much, Professor Pillay, Professor Brown and Professor Saunders.

**Professor Pillay:** Before I go could I also record all three universities' thanks to the panel. I think it is the first time that we have had MPs come on our campuses and talk to us and enquire from us. I really applaud that and I think I speak for my colleagues as well.

**Professor Brown:** Can I also say that my Chairman of Governors, Sir Malcolm Thornton, as a former Chairman of the Select Committee on Education and Science was delighted to know that you were on the road again, which is what he did some years ago.

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*Witnesses:* **Professor Bernard Longden**, Liverpool Hope University; **Professor Lin Norton**, Liverpool Hope University; and **Professor Mantz Yorke**, Lancaster University, formerly of John Moores University, gave evidence.

**Q64 Chairman:** We welcome our second panel this afternoon: Professor Bernard Longden, of Liverpool Hope University; Professor Lin Norton from Liverpool Hope University; and Professor Mantz Yorke from Lancaster University, formerly from John Moores University. Can we say that we have enjoyed very much your written submissions to the inquiry and we found those very, very interesting indeed. I am going to start with you, Professor Norton. The key recommendations which the Flying Start project make appear to concern A levels and

putting greater emphasis on analysis, evaluation and argument. Are the main levers to widening participation in higher education outside the reach of universities? Should we in fact be looking somewhere totally different if we are going to have in 10 years' time or 20 years' time a university population that more adequately represents the society that we know?

**Professor Norton:** I think in terms of levers the question that you are asking is very complex. I do believe that what is required at A level is very

different from what is required at university level. I believe that students see assessment as the curriculum. We know that assessment drives the learning and how students perceive the curriculum. We also know that there are big differences between what is required at A level and what is required at university, so I think in terms of your question about levers, what I would like to put forward is that there is a need for greater synergy between higher education lecturers and A level tutors.

**Q65 Chairman:** There is a totally different concept at A level, is there not really, in terms of processing students through those programmes. Students often talk—and I am sure I speak for all my colleagues—about getting through the modules, there is not that sort of engagement with the subject matter, that sort of analysis and that sort of empathy with the material. I am a philosopher by background so I think about these things. Do you feel that there is that huge gap? Whose job is it to fill it? Is it the job of the schools, is it home, or is it the university?

**Professor Norton:** I think there is a huge gap. I think it is the job of both the universities and the schools working together. I think that transition between what is required at A level tends to be content-focused. Students are, for very good reasons, and I understand those reasons because schools are under pressure, taught to the test and are very much guided in a step-by-step process, and are given the opportunity to have many goes and drafts at a piece of assessment, and tend to be given feedback formatively very, very quickly. They come to university and they are expected to be independent learners. Often the assessment is high stakes assessment and often the feedback is at a single point rather than continuous, so I think this is a big gap between what our students are experiencing at A level.

**Q66 Chairman:** So what should we be doing about it?

**Professor Norton:** I think what we need to be doing about it is for there to be greater awareness and staff development in universities to understand what is going on in A levels. I do not think that lecturers always understand what the curriculum is like at A level, for example. I think it is a two-way thing. School teachers should be persuaded to understand what goes on in the first year at university. I think there should be more synergy between the two.

**Q67 Chairman:** Professor Longden and Professor Yorke, we found your papers on the link between non-completion and a student's willingness to adopt good study habits a really quite fascinating piece of work, but if by the time they arrive at university students have not acquired that ability to be able to work and study independently, the likelihood, as you have pointed out in your research, is that they are going to drop out, and they have a greater chance of dropping out of the system altogether. Surely if a university knows that, it ought in fact to be putting into place various activities or programmes to stop that happening, should it not?

**Professor Longden:** You would think so, yes.

**Q68 Chairman:** Why are they not?

**Professor Longden:** I suppose the business about students who do not complete appears to be a complicated problem or puzzle, and I suppose it is only in the last 10 or so years that we have tried to go behind the numbers to try and make some sort of sense of what are the key factors, what are the gears that are causing this to happen. Once that insight is provided, how do you then embed it inside institutions so that they pick it up and they go with it? Some institutions do and are very concerned about retention and they are active. Others look at it and simply say, "That is interesting," but no further than that, "We are just looking at it and we will carry on doing what we have been doing in the past." It is not seen as an institutional problem; it is seen as the students' problem. It is about saying to both parties that there is an element contributed by the student there but there is also quite a considerable element which is the responsibility of the institution to pick up and to do something about reducing its impact.

**Q69 Chairman:** Professor Yorke, do you support that view?

**Professor Yorke:** Yes, I was once interviewed for a job, and the first question I got was if you were going to be Minister of Education what would you like to do? My reaction, after a nanosecond's thought, was I would like to streamline the education system right through from primary to university so in a sense you anticipate the potential problem and deal with it, and you do not have a whole series of things that seem to be rather disconnected one from the other. You would not have this big jump from A level into university in terms of the expectations on students. I think really we are almost doing a sticking plaster job here in that universities often have to come to terms with students who have learned in a particular way, and have to do something about it. When modular schemes first came in—and this was late 1980s' thinking, particularly by the institution I was in then—the argument was that we need to have flexibility and we will run semesterised programmes rather than year-long programmes. The problem with that is that it does not give students much time to acclimatise to what higher education is about. It is interesting that there has been something of a shift backwards to year-long full-time modules, so the students do actually get a degree of formative assessment back in. One department which learned of the switch back said that it did not need to do any assessment until the summer, which I did not think had quite caught the point of the change, but there we are. There is a big structural and strategic issue which is important, but I think within the higher education community we are dealing with a part of that and taking it slightly out of context.

**Q70 Chairman:** Professor Norton, one of the Flying Start recommendations is that university academics should be trained to increase "their awareness of students' pre-university experiences of learning, teaching and assessment". What does that mean?

When you think of how many students are entering universities at the moment, 43 per cent of 18 to 25-year-olds, is it not possible, is it?

**Professor Norton:** I think it is possible. What that recommendation is about is raising awareness of what the student experience is of assessment and being assessed at A level. If I can give you an example, in psychology there has been a research project where FE<sup>3</sup> students and HE<sup>4</sup> students have very, very different understandings of what is required in the first year at university, and what this research study found was that FE students tended to be very confident about what was expected, but their confidence is aligned around content and around the surface approach to learning, whereas the HE students were much more aware of critical argument and structuring your answer and that it is not about content. What I am saying is that there is a need for staff at universities to understand that students are coming from a very different context. That can be done in a lot of different ways. It can be done through staff development sessions. It can be done through seminars. It can be done through bringing together communities of practice. It can be done through teaching qualifications such as post-graduate certificates in teaching and learning in higher education, so I think there is a number of ways in which it can be done. What I see is a clear disjunction of understanding as to what goes on in the two separate sectors.

**Q71 Mr Marsden:** If I could just stick for a moment with that scenario, Professor Norton. It seems to us, and certainly seems to me, that most if not all of the recommendations that Flying Start has made make admirable common sense, but the issue surely is how you do something about implementing them. One of the problems, is it not, is that we have a situation where again, to refer back to the previous session, all the things that you talk about, incentivising, making staff aware and all the rest of it, are good things in themselves, but there is no incentive in the system for lecturers in HE to do it, is there? If I was John Denham and I was sitting here saying, “You have done a great report, Professor Norton, now tell me how I actually implement this in practical terms?” what would you be saying to him?

**Professor Norton:** I think what I would be saying—and I do understand the difference between how teaching is rewarded and seen and perceived and how research is rewarded and seen and perceived—it is a slow process, but I think it is happening. For example, in our own university, Liverpool Hope University, it is clearly written into our promotions criteria that we would expect that, over and above being a really good lecturer, to be promoted from lecturer to senior lecturer to principal lecturer. I can see that rewarding staff for teaching as well as for research is something that is happening, perhaps not as quickly as we would want it to happen but it is happening. I think there is student pressure for it to happen even more, so I think there are external drivers.

**Q72 Mr Marsden:** In my own area, I trained as an historian and I have talked a lot to my colleagues in the Historical Association and indeed in the North West Historical Society about this disjunction between HE and A level. One of the things that used to happen 20 or 30 years ago was that people in HE used to set exam questions for A level. They very seldom do these days. Is this issue of teaching to the test and the disjunction between HE and secondary education a problem?

**Professor Norton:** I think that is a problem and I think HE lecturers joining in with exam boards to set exam papers and assessment criteria would be a very good move.

**Q73 Mr Marsden:** Professors Longden and Yorke, can I come on now to some of your recent research. Is it the case—because again there are lots of statistics flying around—that non-completion rates are actually rising, because the overall data on the HESA website appears to show that those rates are stable or even improving?

**Professor Longden:** I think they are broadly stable.

**Q74 Mr Marsden:** If they are broadly stable, is this an area that we should be worried about? Should we be worried about the implications of widening participation in terms of completion rates?

**Professor Longden:** If you go for a mean for universities then, fine, maybe it is stable, but maybe you need to dig behind that in order to see what individual institutions are doing, whether they are increasing or decreasing. There is quite a wide variation from 30 per cent non-completion rates right down to virtually zero. You have got a very, very mixed population, and I suppose you need to go in behind all of that to see what on earth is happening to individuals and what they are doing.

**Q75 Mr Marsden:** Drilling down a little bit further in that area, one implication of what you have said, and again I am putting it in a slightly loaded way, and it is a loaded way that has been put in media and policy-makers’ comments, would be that government has asked a certain group of universities in particular to take up the brunt of widening participation, but at the end of the day HEFCE have not been quick enough to respond to the funding implications of that and, in fact, when these universities—and they are predominantly but not exclusively post-‘92 universities—have taken up the challenge and when their completion rates have faltered slightly as a result they have got it in the neck from the *Daily Mail* and various other people and therefore that is a discouragement to them to proceed down that path. Is that a fair analysis?

**Professor Longden:** It is: it is not just the image that is being presented in the papers but it is also the funding implication that sits behind that. If you take a risk in taking on a student who may not complete, you can put some sort of value on that. Why would you take that student on if you know there is a real risk that the student will not complete the course,

<sup>3</sup> Further education

<sup>4</sup> Higher education

and, therefore, as it used to be up until this year, you received no funding whatsoever for that student for the whole year? They may progress through near to the exam date and then withdraw. I know that has been covered now in the changes to the funding but it was the situation for well over 12 years, certainly to my knowledge and experience, which then had an adverse effect within institutions, a reluctance, if you like, to take the risk.

**Professor Yorke:** Can I add a bit to that.

**Q76 Mr Marsden:** Very briefly because we are running a bit short of time.

**Professor Yorke:** It is important to think about the time that it takes for people to complete. The way the methodology works at the moment is that the HESA stats have a particularly narrow view of what completion might be. If you look at the data from the States you find institutions vary very considerably about the time it takes for a student to complete. The elite institutions take three or four years, but commuter institutions, awkward areas, much longer and the rates are much lower. The issue there is about the capacity of the students to cope. If we are talking about widening participation we are also probably mixing that with social class in here as well, and the ability of people to fund their own studies or be supported by rich parents. There are a lot of issues mixed up in your question.

**Q77 Mr Marsden:** Okay, so you are saying that we are expecting people to complete over too short a timescale?

**Professor Yorke:** I have suggested to the Funding Council a long while ago that we ought to look at completion per module rather than completion per year block. It would have the side effect of giving you a better score in the international statistics as well.

**Q78 Mr Marsden:** That is always welcome to civil servants. Can I move on to another part of your memorandum and that is the issue regarding part-time students. Professor Longden, perhaps I can start with you and ask you what more do you think institutions as a whole (because we know certain institutions are doing it very well) can do to help part-time students?

**Professor Longden:** If they make a commitment to offer part-time study, then I suppose they have got to take on the costs and the implications of providing a programme of study which is fit for purpose. When you look through the transcripts of students who wrote in the survey that we completed last year, it came up so many times that the students were feeling that they were “invisible” and that they were treated as if they were “full time”. It is about the institutions in a way, and if they are taking that on as a means of delivery, then they are taking on the implications that follow behind it.

**Q79 Mr Marsden:** Related to that, Professor Yorke, again in your memorandum you point to the difficulties that part-time students can sometimes

have in forming bonds among themselves. Is that something institutions could help with? Perhaps the other question, which is an interesting one because we have already have student panels and sessions on this inquiry and the previous ones, which is one or two full-time students have remarked to us, and I am talking about full-time students now, that they got a great deal out of sitting alongside part-time mature students, but presumably the opportunity for that in many universities is somewhat circumscribed?

**Professor Yorke:** I do not know about the levels of that but I imagine that must be the case.

**Q80 Mr Marsden:** To go back to the first part of my question, is there anything that institutions can do to help part-time students, as it were, to form closer associations and bonds, or is it just intrinsic in the system that it is going to be more difficult?

**Professor Yorke:** I think they do in some areas. I have been looking latterly at foundation degrees, where people do quite a lot of stuff in the workplace as well as in the education institution, and you begin to get the response from students that as much as they are getting out of this bonding with others is the strength they get from working with other people. That helps and sustains them and helps develop self-esteem, and all the things that go with that. It does happen, but I think probably the way you go about the teaching and learning, and the student experience issue, plays a part in doing that. If you just bring people in and lecture them and then they go away again, they are not going to have much chance of making that bonding. If they work in a group kind of way they are much more likely to make that kind of bonding.

**Q81 Chairman:** One of the things I found interesting about your evidence was the way in which the course was delivered. You seemed to indicate, and tell me if I have got this wrong, that if in fact you had a part-time course which was constructed as a part-time course, which took into account the circumstances of students, the fact that they worked part time, had family commitments, and other things, that they seemed to be more successful compared with those part-time students who had to fit into the full-time course because that was what was offered and yet that seems to be in contradiction to what we have just been talking about, that richness of working alongside full-time under-graduates. How did you come to balance those two sides in that way?

**Professor Yorke:** I do not think it is a contradiction; it is a difficulty in how you actually operate. If you know in your full-time course that you have got some part-time students you need to be alert to that and adjust what you are doing as a teacher to cater for both groups and not cater for the full-time people and leave the others as an afterthought where they get messed up with schedules for assessment and things like that.

**Q82 Mr Marsden:** Two quick final questions, if I may, the first one to you, Professor Longden. We are



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23 March 2009 Professor Bernard Longden, Professor Lin Norton and Professor Mantz Yorke

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having this inquiry in the middle of the economic turmoil and recession that we have, and it would not be unreasonable to assume that we may have a much larger number of young mature students but also a larger number of young part-time students for the foreseeable future. Does that mean that the issues that face largely mature part-time students at the moment are more intractable than those that will face young part-time students?

**Professor Longden:** If you want me to respond on evidence then I do not have the evidence for that.

**Q83 Mr Marsden:** Do you have a view?

**Professor Longden:** I have a view about it, yes, and I would say that the part-time students who are mature students are coming in and give up a huge amount if they are studying part time. Over 50 per cent of the students are paying their own way in terms of fees so that is a big issue. That is not the total cost. The other cost is the maintenance that runs alongside it, buying the books, buying the various equipment that is required for the course, travelling to the place, finding parking spaces.

**Q84 Mr Marsden:** Practical things?

**Professor Longden:** Practical things but they are disincentives for some people. I think the country has to make a decision. Does it want more graduates contributing to society or not? I have just come back from South Korea where 80 per cent of students at 18 go to university. We are lingering around 43 per cent. It seems to me that either we want these students to gain benefit from higher education or we do not, we appear unsure what we do want.

**Q85 Mr Marsden:** I am going to stop you there because I want to leave the last word on this section with Professor Yorke. The implication of what your colleague has said is obviously a big boost in numbers, but certainly most people in the political sphere would think it is unlikely that you are going to push beyond the 50 per cent full-time barrier at the moment. In fact, it is inconceivable in the present circumstances. Therefore should the forthcoming review of fees that we are going to have be one that covers part-time students as well as full-time students? Obviously there have been improvements in the situation of part-time students over recent years but they are still in funding terms second-class citizens, are they not?

**Professor Yorke:** I think it should, full stop. There is another bit as well to that and that is looking at what it is we expect people to do when they engage in higher education. It is a broad big picture question. I go back to the 2003 White Paper which talked about<sup>5</sup> not necessarily being the same as before, or whatever the words were. I think higher education probably needs to think about different ways in which it actually delivers because if you want lots and lots of people into higher education and the money is tight, then you are going to have to be clever and it is the being clever bit that I think is the real challenge.

**Q86 Graham Stringer:** Should we be flying the flags or should our brows be furrowing a little that more students are getting a better class of degree?

**Professor Norton:** I think we should be flying flags. There are a number of reasons and it is impossible to disaggregate what the reasons are, but it could be that students are far more committed, far more hard-working these days, and they are far more strategic. They have a better understanding of what is required in the assessment for their degrees. It could be an indication that teaching quality has gone up. For those reasons I think we should be flying the flags. One can have the brows furrowed response in does this mean that there is a drift in standards. In terms of classification of degrees, I know this is another issue altogether, the Burgess Report and the Higher Education Achievement Record is a very good initiative because it broadens out exactly what students do in what areas, so the question might be that simply trying to capture the whole of a student's experience, performance and achievement in a single degree classification is too broad an indicator of that student's achievement.

**Q87 Graham Stringer:** Anybody else?

**Professor Longden:** I would say fly the flags. It is interesting, I have a quote in preparation for this, and it says: "Uninterested, apathetic instructors who had little or no interest in their students' progress other than ensuring that they did well their exams," and that was in 1852 by Newman. I think we have moved hugely—

**Q88 Graham Stringer:** One would hope so.

**Professor Longden:** One would hope so, absolutely, so why should we not be progressing up and why should there not be more students who are gaining access to university, gaining the benefits and the opportunities that are being presented to them, and benefiting from it and demonstrating that they have the capability?

**Graham Stringer:** But it is rather surprising, is it not, that as more students have access to university, not just the absolute numbers of people getting firsts and 2:1s have gone up but the percentage has gone up. Surely you must be worried that there is a lowering of standards and grade inflation when you see those two things together? It is not totally related but it is something that I have looked at a lot recently. If you take a normal distribution curve of academic achievements in literacy, and take the bottom 23 or 24 per cent out, then you are basically saying that almost everybody who can read is getting a degree, so you must be worried about standards, surely?

**Q89 Chairman:** Professor Yorke, you look puzzled.

**Professor Yorke:** I was just wondering who is supposed to be answering, that is all.

**Q90 Chairman:** I have resolved that problem.

**Professor Yorke:** I do not think we should be too worried. If I was flying the flags I would be looking up at the flags and the sky would be bright, so I

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<sup>5</sup> Note from the witness: higher education is being referred to here in this evidence

would have a furrow on my brow as well. The reason I have a furrow on my brow is that if we have student curricula expressed in terms of learning outcomes so students know what they are supposed to do, which is no bad thing, they should know what they are expected to do and they do it, fine. What may get missed is that they just do that and we lose something from round the edges that is important for the higher education experience, so it may be possible to do rather better but on a narrower front, which is maybe what we are seeing. It is part of the story and it is complex. You have read the evidence that we have submitted, and it is a complex story. That is one of the bits that I think may be important. It is quite interesting if you look at the more recent data, and I have looked at some more recently than the stuff I have been able to send into the Committee—

**Q91 Graham Stringer:** Will you send us that as well?

**Professor Yorke:** I can give you the link to it. It has been published on the Academy website this morning. I have done graphs of where different subjects have been over 13 years and although they have been going up in the time up to 2002, often it is the case that they have pretty well flattened off thereafter. I wonder—and it is only speculation—that it may be something to do with using learning outcomes and writing curricula in those terms over that decade or so before, and now we have got used to it, things may be flattening off a bit. That may be part of the story, I do not know, but it seems to be one big piece of it.

**Q92 Graham Stringer:** Why has grade inflation been higher in the Russell Group of universities than elsewhere?

**Professor Yorke:** I do not want to use the phrase grade inflation because that has a pejorative connotation and the complexity makes me reluctant to use it because I do not want to assent to it. I do not know the answer as to why it should have gone up in the Russell Group in that time when it did. The suggestion was that it might actually be that their entrance standards have gone up. The very limited evidence that I was able to get on entrance standards, which was pretty vestigial, suggests that it was not. It is perfectly possible to check it out but is a rather complex statistical study using data to which I do not have access. The Funding Council would have it if it was to trawl through. Whether it is worth doing I am not sure. Latterly that relatively sharp rise seems to have flattened out and in some cases reversed a bit. I would be rather cautious about using grade inflation in the Russell Group as an issue.

**Q93 Graham Stringer:** Is it not likely, given that universities are competing heavily and actively for the best students, which they are, that they are looking for a relative competitive advantage by students looking at what the outcomes in different departments in differing universities are, and

students can make a judgment about whether they are likely to get a first or a 2:1. They can read the statistics as well as you and I can.

**Professor Yorke:** Yes they can, but they need to read them rather subtly because it depends which subject you look at where the statistics come out. If you are doing a mathematical subject, you tend to get more firsts and more thirds, so if you are okay you pick that; if you are a bit dodgy on that you might well do something else. The distributions in the different subjects are so different. Going back to the issue about standards of comparability there is a real problem about comparing like with like.

**Q94 Graham Stringer:** Were you here for the previous evidence session?

**Professor Yorke:** Yes.

**Q95 Graham Stringer:** You heard the discussion we had about assessing standards and quality in the previous evidence session. Do you think that the QAA is fit for purpose? Do you think it should be extended or abolished? Do you think its range should be increased, as we tend to do when regulatory bodies are not doing quite what we expect, or do you think there is no need for it at all and we should use something else?

**Professor Yorke:** I do not think there is a need for a great change, to be honest, and the reason for that is that there is probably, implicitly rather than explicitly, more attention in the QAA work on standards than there was hitherto. In the evidence session we talked about the QAA being process driven rather than standards driven, but when you have got curricula expressed in learning outcomes and you have benchmark statements and things like that, you have begun to put standards into the picture in a way that perhaps was not the case when the QAA activity (under a different agency at the time) was actually started. I think you have got something there. It is oblique rather than direct but I do not think we really want the panoply of direct inspection and perhaps national curriculum and things like that to bring it on because that would make life extremely difficult and fraught, and I do not believe would be very helpful to the innovativeness of institutions.

**Q96 Graham Stringer:** A lot of the dialogue this afternoon has been about dealing with, and quite rightly so, independent institutions that are jealous about their academic freedoms, but actually getting hold of hard evidence about what is going on—and we are talking about standards at the moment—is actually very difficult for us to recommend to government what policies they should be pursuing. What do you think we should do about that lack of evidence? First of all, do you agree with that statement and, secondly, if you do agree with it, what do you think could be done about it?

**Professor Yorke:** I will deal with the second part of your question because I think there is something that could be done. I have begun to scratch into it because I think it is an issue that affects not so much

the firsts/2:1s issue but the honours degree/non-honours classification issue, which I think is something rather left forgotten. I have been looking at a particular data set which I have had given to me and trying to follow what has gone through. I have gone right back to the components that made up the module scores which are then built up into the degree classification. The difference seems to be early on and whether the student has passed the early module or not is the thing, with performance perhaps on a marginal basis. I think there is an issue about how you actually cumulate performances together to make a pass or non-pass decision at the end of the year, which ties in very much with the issue about completion rates and continuation rates and so on, which ties in with statistics and eventually funding. There is a whole range of issues there that come together that are actually quite important. If we begin to look a little bit more closely at what is going on within the assessments and also within institutional assessment regulations, because there is quite a lot of variation in that, as you will perhaps hear on a future occasion, there are issues there that I think probably need some looking at and probably some developmental work. If we could get institutions having greater clarity about what they are doing in the assessment arena, which is a difficult and challenging arena, then we might actually do something to help the system understand better what it is doing and therefore have greater confidence in its outcomes.

**Q97 Graham Stringer:** That was a very comprehensive answer to the second part of the question. To the first part of the question do you think there is a sufficient evidence base?

**Professor Yorke:** No, I do not think there is. We can always get more evidence from various sources. I think some of the things in which colleagues and I have been involved help in that way. There is quite a lot of statistical data around. I remember speaking to HEFCE some years ago and they were saying, "We cannot analyse all this stuff, we just do not have the person power to do it. Is there somebody else who would be willing to do it?" It may well be that there are possibilities for gaining more access to data sets and doing something with them that might be helpful in answering the kinds of questions that you have in the back of your mind.

**Q98 Chairman:** I was interested in Sir David Watson, the Professor of Higher Education at the Institute of Education, University of London who taught this quality agenda of, as he called them, the "gangs" into which institutions have put themselves, who have a greater interest in maintaining the reputational range within that group of universities and that that is what they see as standards. Do you share those views of Professor Watson? Do you think he is right that organisations like the Russell Group or the 1994 Group or the Million+ Group

are more interested in maintaining their reputation within those groups than they are in the whole system and the competitive advantage?

**Professor Longden:** There are characteristics that pull them together. If you take the Russell Group maybe you would call them research intensive. There will be other groups that will have less emphasis on the research and more on the teaching. My institution would say it is teaching-led, research-informed, and that makes it slightly different from many of the other categories. If you go across to the States they acknowledge this and group colleges and universities through the "Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education", it enables them to work comfortably. My university took a decision three years ago to withdraw from publication of data to go out into league tables. We took that decision because we thought that they were not helping prospective students understand what our institution was about by showing where we were in the rankings because we were being compared with the top end of the Russell Group. It does not make a lot of sense. It would have been much better to have checked a whole lot of institutions, shall we call them "cathedral" universities, who have very similar missions so that they could share and be seen as a coherent, homogenous group. That makes more sense than 130-odd institutions all trying to move their positions up ranking orders.

**Q99 Chairman:** With the greatest of respect, which means I do not agree, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor and the two Vice Chancellors that you saw before all agreed that the degrees you award are all exactly the same.

**Professor Longden:** Rankings do not just measure the degrees. They measure a whole lot of other values that somebody has determined and they add them all together in a particular way to come up with a number which provides a rank order. That is the thing that goes out to parents, it goes out to students, and they look at that and they decide that institution X must be the best institution because it is at the top of the table, but it does not tell you very much about the subject in that particular context. That really is the heart of the matter. I am delighted to see developments like Unistats coming out of UCAS. At least the data is there. I agree with Professor Gerald Pillay when he said that we are probably overwhelmed with information. That is really going to be our problem. How do we sieve it down so that it becomes manageable and sensible for us to interpret.

**Q100 Mr Marsden:** Perhaps we should be encouraging the *Times* to run subject tables every year rather than university tables.

**Professor Longden:** Well, the *Guardian* does.

**Chairman:** On that note and a plea for more research what seems to be self-interest, if you do not mind me saying, we come to the end of this session. We thank you very much indeed. The session is suspended for 15 minutes.

*Witnesses:* **Ms Carly Rowley**, Student, Hope University; **Mr Tom Dutton**, Student, Liverpool Hope University; **Mr Adam Hodgson**, Student, John Moores University; **Mr Joel Martin**, Student, John Moores University; **Mr Gemma Jerome**, Student, University of Liverpool; and **Mr Edward Nussey**, Student, University of Liverpool, gave evidence.

**Q101 Chairman:** We come to the final session of our evidence taking this afternoon at Liverpool Hope University. Just before I start this session could I make a point. I have received a communication from the University and College Union about not having a specific representative of the UCU on the panel today. First of all, can I thank Dr Bennett, the UCU Secretary, for that communication, and to say that I do apologise for not having a specific representative on the panel, but could I also say that at the other sessions which we are having on this particular inquiry, I would like to assure you and the UCU that junior lecturing staff, if I could use that term in a positive sense rather than a pejorative sense, will be on a panel. It is something which my colleague Mr Marsden brought up at our meeting last week. We do intend to have that on one of our final panels and we will make sure that the UCU's views are properly represented. I apologise if we have caused any offence to you this afternoon. Could I welcome, I do not know what a collective of students is, students I suppose Ms Carly Rowley from Liverpool Hope; Tom Dutton from Liverpool Hope; Adam Hodgson from Liverpool John Moores; Joel Martin from John Moores; Gemma Jerome from University of Liverpool; and Edward Nussey from the University of Liverpool. Welcome to you all and thank you very much indeed. I know you have sat through the other two sessions so you will be well versed in answering our questions. We would like first of all to give you roughly a minute, two minutes at the maximum (we will not time you but Glen will!) just to say what you are studying, why you came to university at all, and why this particular university. So Carly the floor is all yours. The whole world is listening at this moment in time.

**Ms Rowley:** My name is Carly. I study English Literature and Music as a combined degree. I am in my final year. I have immensely enjoyed it. The reason I decided to come to university was because in my A levels I did not feel that I got grades that were sufficient to reflect my capability and my hard work. I have always worked really hard all the way through my education and I wanted the chance to come to university to study things that I had a passion for. I chose Hope University because of the connections between the Philharmonic and Hope University. Generally I feel that I have been really well looked after and I have learnt a lot about myself and a lot about the topics that I have been studying as well.

**Q102 Chairman:** Fantastic. How long was that? One minute—that was brilliant. Tom?

**Mr Dutton:** Good afternoon. I am studying Philosophy and English Language. I came to Liverpool because before I came to university I took a year out to work so a lot of my friends had already gone and it was the last city to be taken. As you can understand, it is quite unusual to have someone everywhere around the country so Liverpool it was. I chose Liverpool Hope because it offered combined

courses and I wanted to study philosophy but not as a whole topic or a single honours. That is why I came here.

**Mr Hodgson:** I study Business Maths. I am in my third year. I have just taken a gap year as well in between my studies to work. I chose this university originally for the course, although that course was Informational Mathematics, and then all the full maths courses were combined into one because there were not enough students, so I did not actually get the opportunity to do the course that I wanted to do. I chose Liverpool because it was far away from home. I am from Essex and I just wanted to get far away. I came to university because there was an expectation in my school that all students there would be going to university. I think all but three students actually went to university. My parents also wanted me to go to university. Neither of them did so they put a lot of money into giving all of us, my brother and two sisters, a good education so that we would all get into university.

**Mr Martin:** I study Psychology and Biology at John Moores. I have to admit it has taken me quite a while to get myself sorted. I was far from the perfect student in college, but the pressure was on from my family to go to university. I did not have the luxury of choice when it came down to it and John Moores was the only place at which I got accepted. I did apply for a position at Teesside, which is where I come from, but I was determined to move away from home and, I do not know, here I am.

**Q103 Chairman:** Joel, just to inform you I was the head of Ormsby School just down the bank from you and we had great rivalry with Nunthorpe, which was a far inferior school to Ormsby at the time, just to make you feel at home! Gemma?

**Ms Jerome:** My decision to go to university was based on a pursuit of ideals and aspirations plus a realistic consideration about the conditions of employability. I think both these intentions remain relevant in today's increasingly difficult employment market and economic downturn, including the changing nature of the higher education system that seems increasingly focused on those subjects which have the most secure revenue-raising and research potential. My decision to come to the University of Liverpool was not merely as one-dimensional as academic attainment, and its corollary resource. I was impressed that the Civic Design Department, in which I am now an actively engaged pupil, was exemplary in its field. The lecturers, in the main, engage in policy guidance at various levels of agency and governance. However, my decision was measured and these institutional accolades were of marginal concern. Moreover, I was persuaded by the characteristic diversity of Liverpool as a city and a place of study. This diversity should be manifest in the range of subjects offered and at present this is true of the University of Liverpool, a thriving academic community, a stone's throw from the city centre, and a capital of culture. I appreciate it for its

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23 March 2009 Ms Carly Rowley, Mr Tom Dutton, Mr Adam Hodgson, Mr Joel Martin, Mr Gemma Jerome and Mr Edward Nussey

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diversity and equal opportunities. I am keen that these key characteristics remain a feature of both my city and my university.

**Q104 Chairman:** Thank you very much indeed, Gemma. Edward?

**Mr Nussey:** Good afternoon. I am studying Life Sciences Applicable to Medicine. I went through clearing and I come to the University of Liverpool and as such I had the opportunity to stay on an extra year at school to attain the grades to get into dental school, which was my initial aim. I chose to go to university mainly for the independence and to develop as a person academically and personally. I think university has allowed me to fulfil all those things and I do not think the three years that I have spent at university has been wasted time at all. I chose Liverpool University itself mainly because of the course that it offered and the potential outcome that it would give me when I wanted to reapply for dentistry, which I have done. Also the University of Liverpool is in a good location for me. It is far enough away from home that my parents do not hear everything that is going on and it gives me the freedom that I think is important at university.

**Q105 Chairman:** Thank you all very much indeed. Adam, can I come straight back to you. All members of the panel appear to have made personal decisions about coming into higher education but you said something else about there was an expectation of your school and an expectation of your parents. What in terms of your school did the careers department do to guide you into the most appropriate post-19 university course, whatever you want to call it, what did they do that was so brilliant?

**Mr Hodgson:** They got me to come to John Moores.

**Q106 Chairman:** A good answer is that!

**Mr Hodgson:** They did not encourage me to come to John Moores personally. When I told the careers adviser I was applying for John Moores he said, "I have never heard of that university before." What did the university do to get students to go?

**Q107 Chairman:** What did your school do? What was the careers department like? How carefully were you guided?

**Mr Hodgson:** Not very. There was a careers adviser, I met her once, we had a chat. I remember filling out some very long questionnaire. It was questions and it was meant to guide you into what course would be best and at the end it told me maths and I was like, "Oh good, I am glad I spent an hour doing that," when I knew that I was going to do maths anyway because that was my best achieving subject.

**Q108 Chairman:** Does anybody else have a view about their careers department? How were you helped, Edward?

**Mr Nussey:** A lot of the push at our school was along the line that they wanted a take of how many

students went to Cambridge and Oxford. I cannot speak for other schools, but I think what is more important is that the students are going into a course or an area, whether it is further education or an apprenticeship, which they want to do and which leads them on the journey of where they want to go. Judging everyone on what graded university that they are going for is the wrong way of looking at it and it should be more whether people have achieved what they want to achieve and that the potential to go into any different area is available to every student.

**Q109 Chairman:** Tom, did you have a good careers department at school that sat down with you?

**Mr Dutton:** Yes, I would not be here without them, if I can say that much. I went to South Cheshire College which was very, very good, so I have heard. They used to tell me that it was the best in the country while I was there, but, yes, they have a very good careers department.

**Q110 Chairman:** What was good about it?

**Mr Dutton:** They were on my back all the time, "If you want to go to uni you do need to get this personal statement in," ringing me up.

**Q111 Chairman:** They were very proactive?

**Mr Dutton:** Definitely.

**Chairman:** You mention, Edward, this issue about pecking order so perhaps I could ask my colleague to come in on that particular issue about the Liverpool universities.

**Q112 Mr Marsden:** If I could ask all of you really but maybe if I start with you, Joel, because one of the issues that we have just touched on, and I know one or two of you were in on the last session, was whether universities should be rated in terms of a whole or whether they should be rated in terms of their school. When you considered coming here was it the school or was it the university or was it just circumstance? You seemed to indicate that it was circumstance.

**Mr Martin:** It was circumstance. I did not have the luxury of choice, as I said. My first choice was actually Edinburgh. I did have an auntie who was very knowledgeable and she provided me with a lot of useful information. She said that John Moores had a very good psychology department. I did know that it was psychology I wanted to study because I did biology A level as well. That is what attracted me to the psychology and biology course.

**Q113 Mr Marsden:** Gemma, of course you are a faculty rep for social and environmental studies at Liverpool and you gave, if I can put it this way, a very good promotion both for your university and also for the city in your presentation. In terms of mixing and matching across the university, we have

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**23 March 2009 Ms Carly Rowley, Mr Tom Dutton, Mr Adam Hodgson, Mr Joel Martin, Mr Gemma Jerome and Mr Edward Nussey**

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brought six of you here together this afternoon from three different universities, but how much mixing is there between the students of the various universities? How much are you involved in communal activities and things like that?

**Ms Jerome:** I am also a trustee for the Guild of Students at Liverpool University and we are currently undergoing a policy of collaboration between ourselves and John Moores, so definitely on policy and from a political dimension there is a proactive approach to the two universities, not only sharing resources but considering themselves brethren within the city in terms of offering academic and social space. Maybe from a grass-roots level there is still—and I am not from Liverpool so maybe I am a student picking it up more—an element of competition between the institutions and that is not going away.

**Q114 Mr Marsden:** When people meet in the bars and the pubs, it is a bit like Everton and Liverpool, is it?

**Ms Jerome:** I suppose that is a fair analogy, yes, there is a degree of judgment between the universities.

**Q115 Chairman:** What is it based on? What is the hierarchy based on?

**Ms Jerome:** I think it is from outside perspectives, league tables, the kind of national perception of red brick and Russell Group and perhaps also the type of courses offered at each institution. Tom mentioned about the opportunity to study combined subjects. That is not necessarily the traditional remit of a civic institution like the University of Liverpool where it would be at Hope.

**Q116 Mr Marsden:** Carly, can I come to you because you were very specific in what you said. You said, “I came to Liverpool Hope because . . .” and then you listed a whole range of unique selling points, as it were, that combined I would not say eclectic but the very interesting combination of things that you wanted to do. Presumably you are in a slight minority in that respect among your colleagues here at Hope?

**Ms Rowley:** The fact that I picked these two subjects that may not appear to have any relationship?

**Q117 Mr Marsden:** Yes.

**Ms Rowley:** Certainly as I have come into the third year, there have been lots of interesting crossovers in the subject matter in the two subjects, and I think knowing more about both of them has in fact helped my knowledge of each, if that makes any sense.

**Q118 Mr Marsden:** Can I ask you a very specific question because again in the previous session and other sessions we have talked about modules. Of course, there are two sorts of modules structures. The first one is you start off with a very broad module and then become more specialised. Then there is the other one which I sometimes refer to as the YO! Sushi model whereby you have a bite-sized course and then about three or four weeks later you

have another bite-sized course, but rather like the YO! Sushi thing where they all go round on a roundabout, you do not always remember by the time you have eaten the third one what the first or the second one was. Was your course a pyramid course or a flat course?

**Ms Rowley:** To be honest, I suppose I have had two pyramids and a sushi-style arrangement as well. When I came in the first year everything was rather broad but because I was taking both subjects I was starting at the bottom of those pyramids, and as I have gone upwards it has gone into that more specialised formation, but at the same time music, by its nature, incorporates lots of different things so in my second year I studied composition for half of the time and performance for half of a module, if you like, and then this year I have gone to teach in Sweden as half of a module and performance as half of a module. I think it is a really good thing because it means that I am getting to take more risks and to develop myself as an individual as well as being an academic.

**Chairman:** One of the key things about this inquiry is your experiences as students of the teaching quality and I am going to bring in my colleague Graham Stringer here. We want you to be as frank as you can because nobody is listening—

**Mr Marsden:** Apart from the world!

**Q119 Graham Stringer:** You listened to the evidence session earlier and different professors said that the reason more people got better classes of degrees now was because you all worked harder. I am prepared to accept that you all work harder than I did when I was at university, but I would be interested in knowing how many hours a week you do and what contact team you have with your lecturer in tutorials and if you do practicals. If you could tell us as honestly as you can, because, as Phil says, nobody is listening, how many hours you put in a week.

**Mr Nussey:** In my third year now it is probably about eight or so hours of fixed lectures, but built into that we have lab periods because we do research projects, so although my supervisor is part-time so it may be half a day a week that we have one-on-one contact, other colleagues of mine at the university will have considerably more.

**Q120 Graham Stringer:** If you are stuck with something that you completely do not understand, can you nip in and see your tutor or lecturer? Are they available at short notice?

**Mr Nussey:** Well, I have had that experience quite a lot in this third year, so I might go to my supervisor in labs, but he is part-time so sometimes he is not available and my tutor may not be available, but now I am in my third year I know quite a lot of the lecturers and I feel I could walk into any of their offices and talk to them. A lot of them are more than willing to go through in depth any problems that I have.

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23 March 2009 Ms Carly Rowley, Mr Tom Dutton, Mr Adam Hodgson, Mr Joel Martin, Mr Gemma Jerome and Mr Edward Nussey

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**Q121 Graham Stringer:** Gemma?

**Ms Jerome:** Again timetabled lectures, about eight to 10 hours a week, and that stays fairly consistent throughout the four years of my particular degree. On top of that we are expected—I think it is in the prospectus—to do about 20 to 30 hours of personal study.

**Q122 Graham Stringer:** Do you or did you, rather?

**Ms Jerome:** No I did not, but then again that is down to individual study style. I find that I do things rather well last minute. It should be noted that in civic design there is a lot of group work, so you have to schedule that in and you have to timetable that for yourself. You are expected to spend at least 10 to 20 hours in your group outside of study time. Then we have a PDP system at the University of Liverpool, so you are expected to meet with your personal development tutor at least once a semester. To add in the context of higher tuition fees, that has definitely impacted on students' perceptions.

**Graham Stringer:** Can I come on to tuition fees later.

**Chairman:** We will come back to that.

**Q123 Graham Stringer:** You have been very honest and admitted that you did not do the 20-odd hours a week and I guess you are not on your own. What are the consequences if you do not go to lectures?

**Ms Jerome:** Depending on your subjects and your department you can receive emails of concern and then there is an academic appraisal system where you have to then go to a board and explain your lack of attendance. Otherwise there is a record of attendance at each lecture, and you have to sign in, unless you get your friend to do it.

**Q124 Graham Stringer:** If you miss two or three weeks are you under threat of removal from the course?

**Ms Jerome:** No, there is a definite structure of assessment, so you go through some kind of system to check why it is that you are not attending, so there is more of a support system there rather than just penalising.

**Q125 Graham Stringer:** Joel?

**Mr Martin:** Yes, we have eight hours a week, at least I do, of scheduled lectures, contact time. Also there is the honours project which is the same credits as the modules that I do. I tend to treat university as a nine-to-five job, although that does not mean I will be working nine until five every day. Some days I will only be doing pure revision for maybe one or two hours, but it is the fact that I am always engaged in the process of working throughout the nine until five timeslot that I allocate myself.

**Q126 Graham Stringer:** What are the consequences for you if you do not attend lectures?

**Mr Martin:** To my knowledge people who do not attend lectures do not tend to get confronted. I am not sure. I have noticed that some people just vanish from our lectures and do not seem to show up.

**Q127 Graham Stringer:** And they are not expelled from university?

**Mr Martin:** I have never heard of a single instance where that has happened, no.

**Q128 Graham Stringer:** Adam?

**Mr Hodgson:** Technically I have 15 hours contact time per week, that is three hours per module and five modules per semester. In final year that varies because there are projects. It depends on the lecturer as well. Some lecturers have slightly less time and some lecturers will always do three hours a week. I do not always go to my lectures. I do a lot of other stuff in between university. I am very involved in the Student Union, for example.

**Q129 Graham Stringer:** What happens when you do not go to your lectures?

**Mr Hodgson:** Nothing. I am again missing my Monday afternoon lecture to be here and this will be my third week in a row that I have not been there.

**Chairman:** We are guilty!

**Q130 Graham Stringer:** We are a relatively good excuse!

**Mr Hodgson:** To be honest, every time I miss a lecture I always feel that I have a good excuse for not being there! The amount of work I do outside lectures is normally limited to course work. Because it is maths there is not always a need for independent study. We are not set anything like homework to do in between lectures. I personally have no other contact time for anything else apart from lectures.

**Q131 Graham Stringer:** Tom?

**Mr Dutton:** Again eight hours a week, that is two hours per module, four modules. Obviously my course is split into two with two modules of English and two of philosophy. Outside of that philosophy is all the time really, is it not, you are learning!

**Q132 Chairman:** That was the right answer as well, Tom.

**Mr Dutton:** When am I not doing philosophy? As long as my brain is ticking over, there is something happening in there. The English course I am doing at the minute is quite varied. One of my modules is the history of the English language which is obviously a lot of history. I have always been into history since I was young anyway. There are a lot of books and a book called the *Adventure of English* by Melvyn Bragg, which was a book I started reading over last summer, and that was before I knew what the module was, so it is stuff like that, I suppose you could count. My other module is called, let me think, sorry, I am not good on the spot—

**Q133 Graham Stringer:** If you do not attend lectures or if people on your course do not attend lectures, are there any consequences?

**Mr Dutton:** You probably get an email asking why. I have had two lectures I have missed today but I have emailed to say I am doing this.

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23 March 2009 Ms Carly Rowley, Mr Tom Dutton, Mr Adam Hodgson, Mr Joel Martin, Mr Gemma Jerome and Mr Edward Nussey

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**Q134 Graham Stringer:** But if you miss for two or three weeks?

**Mr Dutton:** If I miss two lectures the faculty will be on you.

**Q135 Graham Stringer:** And if you continue to miss are you under threat of expulsion or withdrawal from the course?

**Mr Dutton:** I would not know.

**Ms Rowley:** I have about eight hours contact per week. I also do a dissertation so I do not have contact time for that per se, I have to have individual tutorials with my supervisor, which are usually a few weeks between each one. It also does not take into account that I do performance and have to practise my instrument each day because it is the practice that goes behind the scenes, if you like, that goes towards the recital at the end of the year. Approachability of tutors, I find that I can go and talk to any of mine and they will give me the time. I think that is because I have gone and asked for it. I think it is one of those situations where you have to make it for yourself. If you want some extra support then you have to go and find it and then they will respect you for doing that. In terms of absence and things, I have been told, and I am not sure what they call it, of something like a card system or a points card system, and if you miss perhaps two lectures and you are not explaining why you have missed them, then you are given a yellow card. Then if you continue to miss it goes to a red card. Then you will have to present yourself as to why it is that you have been missing things. And if you cannot adequately explain then it could be that you are kicked off. Also it is taking into account now not just your attendance but your participation, which I think is really important for something like literature, because you have to read the books in order to take part in the seminars and the lectures and so forth, and if you are not reading and not participating in the seminars then it just makes for less productive learning, I suppose, so they are taking that into account as well.

**Q136 Graham Stringer:** Gemma mentioned fees before and I would like you all to answer as quickly as you can the question about whether top-up fees have influenced you at all in choosing to go into higher education and whether they would influence you differently if the top-up fees rather than being just over £3,000 were £6,000? Do you want to start Carly?

**Ms Rowley:** I am actually from the old system. I did a gap year at the time when it was just going to top-up fees, so I actually pay the old fees. I cannot really speak for the top-up fees' effect on me but my brother, for instance, is 18 and he is looking at going into university now, and if it were a case of paying £6,000 a year I am not sure that he would be able to contemplate the amount of debt that he would have to battle with at the end of it. I think university is just so important for all young individuals. It has made

me a different person and I do not think it is fair if we have to put it up to such an amount that people cannot take part.

**Mr Dutton:** It actually works out the same for me as it would under the old system. When I left home my mum cut down her hours of work, in all her wisdom, so I got the maximum grant. If it was a lot more I cannot really see how it is going to benefit anyone because if you double the price it is not that unrealistic to suggest you might get half as many people coming in.

**Mr Hodgson:** Again I am on the old fees system. One thing I want to say is that obviously the people in the year below me are paying twice the amount and yet there is absolutely no visible difference as to the kind of university experience they are getting. They get the same amount of lectures, they get the same lecturers, they get the same amount of support, so I would be hesitant to support in any way increasing those fees because I do not see how that would benefit any student at all. I have not seen the benefit between the £1,200 fees to the £3,000 fees.

**Mr Martin:** Even when the fees were raised by £75 two years ago it came as quite a shock to me. The fact that now there is talk of maybe charging £6,000, I know if that were the case when I was deciding on going to university, it really would have influenced me. From my point, I was always going to go to university, that was always the way it was going to pan out, provided I got the grades to get in, but money would have been an issue if it was that expensive.

**Ms Jerome:** What I was going to mention briefly before is that there is a complexity of issues surrounding fees, and I think that there is a connection between students' engagement in education and the money they are putting into it. If you work out that you are paying £25 a lecture maybe you are less likely to miss one. The fact that we do as students—maybe it is our parents, maybe it is through a bursary or maybe it is through a grant—pay for our education means that there is a problem of seeing ourselves as consumers. I know that that can go either way, negative or positive, and usually somewhere in the middle. If you see yourself more as a consumer, are you less likely to play a part in the decision-making process or do you see it as the duty of your institution to make decisions on your behalf because you are paying for them to do that?

**Q137 Chairman:** Do you think that you are a consumer?

**Ms Jerome:** Personally I do not perceive education in that light but I know plenty of people who do. It is primarily connected to the fact that they are paying for their education. If it is a question of the fact that higher education needs its standards to rise, if it is an issue that money is going to directly affect the quality of the education that we are receiving then obviously that is unquestionable and that is important, but I think the question is who should pay for that, and if it is through fees then it is obviously—



23 March 2009 Ms Carly Rowley, Mr Tom Dutton, Mr Adam Hodgson, Mr Joel Martin, Mr Gemma Jerome and Mr Edward Nussey

**Q138 Chairman:** The point that Adam made, and I think it is a very good point that he has made, is that the rise from £1,000 to £3,000 has not had a commensurate increase in the quality for the consumer or the client or the student, if you want to call them that. Do you honestly believe that by moving the fees to 6,000 there would be a doubling in the quality or an improvement in the quality? Do you think that is realistic?

**Ms Jerome:** I do not think it is necessarily where that money is going to go.

**Q139 Chairman:** It must go somewhere, must it not?

**Ms Jerome:** It must, yes, but then again money comes from our RAE results and if an institution like Liverpool is considering departmental closures based on RAE results, and yet they are still getting more money for their results, it just suggests to me that there is a wider agenda of what institutions want to offer, and it is not necessarily about the quality of the whole spectrum of courses.

**Q140 Graham Stringer:** Edward?

**Mr Nussey:** When I applied to university, I have got older brothers and they were on the old scheme, and the fact that the costs had gone up did not really come to me that it would be an issue. I just accepted it and went into education and I think it will only hit home when I have to pay it off. In my situation where I am going into another course with potentially another four years, whether it is because I am better informed about the financial burden that it is going to put me in, or just the fact that it is another four years, the decision that I have made about which course I will go to has for the majority been based on finances. I have chosen a four-year course because the NHS will pay for tuition fees later in that course whereas the same scheme is not run in a five-year course and there is also the obvious extra year of fees that you have to pay.

**Q141 Graham Stringer:** Just going back to the beginning, if it had been £6,000 rather than £3,000 would that have affected your choice?

**Mr Nussey:** If I was well informed about it I think it would have, but I think if you are going to pay more for your education students will expect more input into decisions that the university makes, whether it is this consumer view I do not know, but you are still putting in a lot of your money, and even though it is not affecting you right now, in the future when you have to pay it back, it is going to affect you considerably.

**Q142 Mr Marsden:** I was about to say that one of the issues around seeing yourself as a consumer is that you might want, all of you, to get more bang for your buck from some of your lecturers and teachers, but we will come on to that. Can I ask a quick question, not to everybody but to anybody who feels that they want to comment on it. In the previous session we touched on the issue of part-

time students and we also touched on the issue of mature students. Obviously all of you here, with the exception of Gemma, are first-time students and you are all full-time students. The question I have got is a question that was raised in the previous session about the invisibility of part-time students. I am just interested in terms of the people that you mix with, your fellow students on courses, or even students you know socially, how much mixing is there with part-time students or with mature students? If there is, is there anything particularly beneficial you get out of that? Does anyone want to come in on that?

**Mr Nussey:** There are a number of mature students within the Department of Biology at the University of Liverpool, but the contact with them is reduced because of the number of under-graduate students. From my experience, the contact that I have had with them has been beneficial because they bring a new dimension to the course and how you approach learning. On the part-time students, I am heavily involved in sport within the university and in that context mature students and part-time students who have made commitments toward sport have benefited everyone in the club, no question, because it just brings a wealth of experience and knowledge about several areas that help the university.

**Q143 Mr Marsden:** Interesting. Carly?

**Ms Rowley:** I think there is a high number of mature students at our university as a general sort of thing and particularly in the arts it has been really nice because with some being older it brings a sense of maturity and responsibility and really getting everything out of it. Sometimes going from my tutor in the writing centre you see the youngest students coming in and sometimes they are still in that school kind of mind, and it takes a little bit to get into the momentum of university. I think those that are coming back into education after a number of years are really making it for themselves and I have had really great experiences with mature students. I am in a band with one of them and he is highly intellectual and well read, and I do not think he could have got all that breadth of experience if he had not taken a little bit of time out first.

**Q144 Mr Marsden:** Interesting. Can I just stick with you for a moment, Carly, because one of the points that has been made to us, as you may have heard, is about the strong link between academics and lecturers engaged in research and the quality of the teaching. What I want to ask you all briefly is, first of all, you do not have to name names but just the span of them, are the majority of your lecturers involved in research? If they are, does that affect positively or negatively your teaching experience?

**Ms Rowley:** In both of my areas, literature and music, research is a key area. I am looking into doing a PhD next in the works of Anthony Burgess and I get to be tutored by the head of the

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23 March 2009 Ms Carly Rowley, Mr Tom Dutton, Mr Adam Hodgson, Mr Joel Martin, Mr Gemma Jerome and Mr Edward Nussey

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Foundation who is a forerunner in that sort of research. My dissertation tutor is on the board of trustees of that Foundation. All of my tutors seem to be in really key areas of research that need more doing and they will support the students who want to go into these new areas also. I think it has had an effect on how many bursaries they can give for masters as well as on how well they do in the research.

**Q145 Mr Marsden:** Okay, Tom, what about philosophy and English, are your tutors involved in research?

**Mr Dutton:** I know one tutor who definitely is, and I imagine they all are to an extent. I know that one of my philosophy tutors, Patrice Haynes, has so much work to do that she finds that she has very little time. She is a really, really good tutor but I think she struggles to do the research on top of her other commitments.

**Q146 Mr Marsden:** So that is an issue where your tutor is, as it were, giving time to her students that otherwise would have to come off her research. Again, do you know of examples where it works the other way round where research people are just not around for a certain period of time?

**Mr Dutton:** I think generally the main people doing research do not teach as much. I think they are either separate or maybe only do a bit of research.

**Q147 Mr Marsden:** Obviously it varies from discipline to discipline but, Adam, what is your experience?

**Mr Hodgson:** In my first two years we were taught by PhD students on a couple of modules. This year we have had one tutor who has been involved in research and this has had a really bad impact on our teaching. It means that he has cancelled lectures because he has had to travel to other universities. In our first semester we have probably had around half of our lectures cancelled because of it. We worked with him and the Department to try and get those lectures rearranged, so we have had a lot more lectures in the second semester, although that in itself is problematic for students who are working round their studies, for example, like myself.

**Q148 Mr Marsden:** Was that something that just happened straight off? You went in and he said, "Terribly sorry, but I have got to do X, Y and Z," I would have thought—and I am not trying to put anyone on the spot—if that was something that was pre-planned that should have been the responsibility of the faculty and/or him to make those rearrangements beforehand.

**Mr Hodgson:** He is the only lecturer who can teach this module at this university, so that makes problems.

**Mr Marsden:** So that is the problem, he was not easy to replace.

**Q149 Graham Stringer:** Was there any noticeable difference in the quality of teaching when PhD students were taking you than if it was lecturers?

**Mr Hodgson:** In the first year we actually talked to our personal tutors and asked if we could get one of the doctorate tutors changed because we thought he was a really bad teacher, but the other two doctorate tutors we have had have been amazing and they have been at the same level of quality as the full-time staff.

**Mr Martin:** Each of my module leaders is involved in research to a certain extent. In one instance I have managed to secure an under-graduate research studentship with one of my module leaders, which is quite good.

**Q150 Mr Marsden:** You have benefited directly from that?

**Mr Martin:** Yes, but most notably my primatology module leader has his own research site in Costa Rica and he is to and from there regularly, but not once has it impacted on the lectures. He has always delivered the full two hours every week and he is always giving us reading to complete for the next week, and even in some cases back-up plans in case he cannot make it, but he has never actually done that.

**Q151 Mr Marsden:** Gemma?

**Ms Jerome:** In terms of this tension between research and teaching, as has been indicated in the previous panel, the University of Liverpool definitely in the view of some people has a prejudicial research focus. In terms of civic design, there is not necessarily that tension there. Most of the lecturers are engaged in research and usually at some kind of excellent level.

**Q152 Mr Marsden:** Sorry to interrupt you, is there a link between the research that they are doing and what you are being taught by them? Do they come along and say, "We are talking about X this week but I would like also to tell you here about my latest research on this which fits directly in"?

**Ms Jerome:** Sometimes but not always. There is not necessarily a rule there. What I have noticed just anecdotally is a particular lecturer I can think of who is very much engaged in the research, and I have found that quite often they are unable to bring that level of knowledge down to an under-graduate level to enable us to engage with it. They are so focused and I think the majority of their working week is in that research.

**Q153 Mr Marsden:** It is this middle ground we were talking about earlier between teaching, research and scholarship, which is supposed to be about disseminating research whether it is their own or somebody else's?

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23 March 2009 Ms Carly Rowley, Mr Tom Dutton, Mr Adam Hodgson, Mr Joel Martin, Mr Gemma Jerome and Mr Edward Nussey

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*Ms Jerome:* Definitely.

**Q154 Mr Marsden:** Edward?

*Mr Nussey:* I think research within my course has had a very beneficial effect. Starting from a very broad base in the first year the most interesting parts of that course were the bits where the lecturer would say, "In my lab over the road we are doing this," and then they teach us about it. It is becoming more important now that we are coming into third year and honours and people are looking at potentially going into research jobs within the university and elsewhere, that lecturers who are lecturing on their specific subject and specialist subject are the ones that are the most passionate about their courses. I am amazed by the number of students that are considering further education, PhDs and masters. I think the reason for that is because we have got the world-class researchers in our department. Although I think teaching is a very important side of it, research has improved the teaching in the faculty, yes.

**Q155 Mr Marsden:** Finally, just to keep with you on that, this debate about whether you are a learner or a consumer, in terms of a balance between teaching and research from what you are saying that does not seem to be particularly relevant, does it?

*Mr Nussey:* I do not quite follow.

**Q156 Mr Marsden:** In the sense that if you are getting the best of both worlds, which is what you are indicating in terms of the research feeding into teaching, then presumably you are getting value both from the consumer point of view but also from a learner point of view in terms of you are getting the top people involved but equally at the same time you are getting the learning out of it as well?

*Mr Nussey:* Yes I think so.

**Q157 Chairman:** Could I just finally put one or two very, very quick points to you. We have heard a lot during this inquiry about plagiarism, of using other people's work and passing it off as your own. Do you feel, Gemma, that is a big issue at Liverpool?

*Mr Martin:* I think it is more inflated than it actually is a real problem. There were a few quite humorous examples where work has been handed in and it had actually been plagiarised from that particular tutor so they have recognised it straightaway. I think there is quite advanced software now fully rolled out at the University of Liverpool, so it is quite difficult, and it is at the forefront of students' minds. I do not think they go about it with relish.

**Q158 Chairman:** Do you know of any student who has been disciplined or sent down as a result of plagiarism?

*Ms Jerome:* I do not know anyone.

*Mr Nussey:* I know students who have been marked down for plagiarism. As Gemma said, there is a system called Turn It In and everything that we have to submit and will be marked has to be submitted through this as a way of the lecturers knowing how much.

**Q159 Chairman:** But your lab work is not, is it?

*Mr Nussey:* That will go through it.

**Q160 Chairman:** Will it?

*Mr Nussey:* Yes and we have to sign a form saying that we have not plagiarised or colluded on any aspects of it.

**Q161 Chairman:** What about John Moores?

*Mr Martin:* I am not sure I have ever heard of any instances where people have been disciplined for plagiarism. I have certainly heard of instances of collusion where people have colluded on certain course work and been disciplined for it.

**Q162 Chairman:** Right so the third years do not simply sell the stuff to the second years and the second years to the first years? That never happens?

*Mr Martin:* No, I do not think so.

**Q163 Chairman:** You would never dream of it?

*Ms Jerome:* Maybe it does actually because some of the psychology modules I was on in level two do have up to 250 people in huge lectures, and rarely is the full amount there and the content does stay the same. I have a friend who is doing the exact same course work that I did and I could have given him mine and said model it on that. Obviously I did not.

**Q164 Chairman:** Of course!

*Mr Martin:* I have never heard of that so—

*Mr Hodgson:* I guess plagiarising maths is somewhat more difficult than it would be for other subjects. Does it happen in the university? Yes, it does happen in the university. I cannot say I know anyone personally but being involved within the Student Union I do know that it happens.

*Mr Dutton:* If it happens, and I imagine it does happen, I have never heard of it.

*Ms Rowley:* I have heard of one person in particular, I do not know how much detail we need to go into, it was a dissertation that got sent in and then it was picked up that something was not referenced and it has meant that she has had to resit that module this year and could not graduate last year. That is quite tough for her. We have to sign a consent form to say that we have not plagiarised. We have not actually got much in the way of software at the moment. It is not plagiarism detecting, this Turn It In thing, but we were introduced to it as writing tutors. We have been told that it is going to be up to individual departments as to whether they want to implement

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23 March 2009 Ms Carly Rowley, Mr Tom Dutton, Mr Adam Hodgson, Mr Joel Martin, Mr Gemma Jerome and Mr Edward Nussey

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it into their own area as to whether Turn It In is going to be used in all subjects or it might just be used in some.

**Q165 Chairman:** Can I finally very quickly run down the line in terms of the National Student Survey on student satisfaction. Were any of you involved in that?

**Mr Nussey:** No.

**Ms Jerome:** Yes, through the Student Union.

**Q166 Chairman:** And you filled it in? Was there a good response from Liverpool? Were a lot of students involved at Liverpool, apart from Edward?

**Ms Jerome:** It was a relatively good response, yes, I think it was higher than before at least.

**Mr Martin:** I myself filled it in and I think our Union has done a lot of work to push students to do it as well.

**Mr Hodgson:** I filled it in but after I filled it in they told me that they had not received my details so I had to go through some kind of special submission to make sure it was put through. I made a personal effort to do it. I know the Student Union has done a little bit to try and get it done but it sits somewhere around 33 per cent of students who fill it out at John Moores. It is a bit pointless.

**Mr Dutton:** No.

**Q167 Chairman:** You have never seen it?

**Mr Dutton:** No.

**Q168 Chairman:** Carly?

**Ms Rowley:** I have filled it in. We were introduced to it through a graduation briefing session that it was important to fill it in.

**Chairman:** On that note, could we thank you all enormously for coming this afternoon, for sitting through the earlier sessions, and for giving us your time in such an honest and forthright way. We thank you very much indeed.

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**Monday 30 March 2009**

Members present

Mr Phil Willis, in the Chair

Mr Tim Boswell  
Dr Evan Harris

Ian Stewart  
Graham Stringer

*Witnesses:* **Professor Janet Beer**, Vice-Chancellor, Oxford Brookes University, and **Dr John Hood**, Vice-Chancellor, University of Oxford, gave evidence.

**Chairman:** Could I welcome our first panel of distinguished witnesses to our inquiry this afternoon: Professor Janet Beer, the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford Brookes University and Dr John Hood, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Oxford. Can we thank you very much indeed, Professor Beer, for your hospitality at lunchtime today and, Dr Hood, for your hospitality this morning when we visited the Business Centre. Before we start, declarations of interest.

**Mr Boswell:** It would be proper for me to declare publicly my interest as a graduate of Oxford University and as a former member of New College, Oxford.

**Ian Stewart:** Seeing as we are into declarations I have got to record that I am a PhD student registered at Manchester and I am on the Council of Salford University.

**Dr Harris:** I am a member of Oxford Brookes University Court and a graduate of Oxford University, and have the pleasure of representing many of the staff and students at both universities.

**Q169 Chairman:** I am on the Court at Birmingham University. I wonder if I could start with you, Professor Beer; literally in just a few sentences what do you regard from the point of view of your institution as the purpose of higher education?

**Professor Beer:** There is a balance of benefit between the individual and society in terms of what universities are for. They are obviously to enable individuals to develop their full potential and to develop potential intellectually, but also to equip them for work, to equip them to make a contribution to society and also to achieve personal fulfilment, so there is the individual. In terms of wider society universities exist to increase knowledge, both for its own sake and for applied purposes. Obviously universities serve the needs of a knowledge-based economy and, probably finally, they play a vital role in fostering and shaping a democratic society.

**Q170 Chairman:** Have we got the balance right between those different factors?

**Professor Beer:** I believe that we have.

**Q171 Chairman:** Dr Hood, what is the purpose of higher education as you see it from an Oxford point of view?

**Dr Hood:** I thought Professor Beer gave a very good answer actually. I could elaborate in places but I do not think it probably serves the time of the Committee well.

**Q172 Chairman:** Do you think we have got the balance right?

**Dr Hood:** The question about balance is not for one institution to answer or another institution to answer, it is a question of looking at the institutional profile across the nation and it is a question that perhaps more properly should be asked of those who are thoughtful about the policy for the system because you are talking about a higher education system in this country and in many countries that is extraordinarily diverse. The institution that I represent is at one particular point in what is an extraordinary array of different types of institution each with, I would think, valid purposes as defined by their local communities, their national communities, their international communities. Do I think that we have got the purpose of the University of Oxford right? The purpose of the University of Oxford is a purpose that is defined by the scholars of the University of Oxford and it has been reasonably consistent for a very long period of time; by and large it is serving its multiple constituencies very well indeed.

**Q173 Chairman:** Given the fact that the UK taxpayer puts some £12 billion into higher education in one form or another, is it not time that the UK taxpayer had a greater say over what happens in its universities rather than leaving it to yourself and your fellow Vice-Chancellors, Dr Hood?

**Dr Hood:** The UK taxpayer through Parliament, through the civil service and through representation on governing bodies and the like has a very substantial say over what happens in British universities to the extent that they receive taxpayer funding.

**Q174 Chairman:** You have total autonomy I am told.

**Dr Hood:** I wish we did.

**Q175 Chairman:** Enlighten us, why have you not got autonomy?

**Dr Hood:** We have autonomy and we protect our autonomy in the sense of academic freedom but we do not have autonomy in the sense that we are unregulated, that we are in a non-compliant regime, for example, where we set our own regulatory framework, our own compliance norms, quite the contrary. The Government's funding, be it teaching funding or research funding or funding for various outreach purposes or for tech transfer purposes

comes with very prescriptive conditions attaching to it and very strong audit and other related requirements.

**Q176 Chairman:** Is that right, Professor Beer, and is it right that we should have that level of interference from the Government?

**Professor Beer:** I would prefer not to talk about—and I do not think John was talking about—interference; we can all talk about partnership, we work in partnership with Government to deliver desirable social and economic benefits as I already talked about when we discussed the purpose of higher education. Like John, in order to maintain the integrity of our institutions we do need to keep a distance and we do need to maintain institutional autonomy, but that is not to say that there are all kinds of partnership and it is not just with the Higher Education Funding Council or with DIUS, it is obviously with the Department of Health, with Children, Schools and Families and all branches of Government.

**Q177 Mr Boswell:** If I might first take the point that Dr Hood has raised it occurs to me that at the formal and institutional level there is a high degree of autonomy. In terms of planning the system there is almost no academic autonomy; there may be influence but having had some participation in the other side of it anyone who runs the system as a whole is probably in or around Government and the funding bodies. Do you think that is a happy balance or would you like to see less interference in your day-to-day activities ideally and possibly, at the same time, wishing for the ideal, more influence on the overall shape of the system delivered by academics rather than by officials?

**Dr Hood:** It is very important that institutions have autonomy in terms of the election of members of staff, in terms of the design and delivery of their academic programmes and so forth. We would all accept that where other parties are funding our activities then we have a responsibility to ensure that those who fund us are satisfied with what we are receiving the funding for, so the question of is there too much compliance, is there too little compliance, is not a question I fear that can be discussed in the general, it would have to be discussed in the particular. In the case of the particular, whether we are talking here about the nature of research contracts and the reports that are required of researchers on one side or the funding that we receive from HEFCE and the various levels of compliance that are required for that, ranging from academic audit at one end to financial audit at the other, these are all things in their own case that are subject to an ongoing dialogue between the various bodies that are involved, and one hopes that we are able through time to establish a reasonable balance that keeps the funder satisfied that the funds they are providing are being responsibly used for the purpose for which they are provided, and on the other hand that the

university has its autonomy preserved in terms of its academic activity and purpose and that the freedom of its scholars to pursue that which they are pursuing is preserved at all costs.

**Q178 Dr Harris:** Both universities here that you represent are shown to be some distance from achieving your benchmark for the state school participation rate. I was just wondering whether you think the benchmark is wrong or, if it is not, what it is that is preventing you from reaching it or whether it is a combination of the two.

**Professor Beer:** The first thing I would like to say is that I am really, really pleased to be asked that question because my colleague Vice-Chancellors in the Russell Group are constantly asked that question but nobody seems to take much of an interest in Oxford Brookes being away from its benchmark in terms of the mix of state and private school students, so I am very happy to answer that question. I do not think we have got any sense at Brookes that there are two tribes in the university, far from it, it is a very harmonious institution. In the mix we have got 20 per cent international students as well and on my latest figures we have got 74 per cent state school entries and 26 per cent private school.

**Q179 Dr Harris:** And the benchmark is 88 per cent.

**Professor Beer:** We are 12 per cent adrift from the benchmark. Having said that, the benchmark needs to be more sensitive because we out-perform another benchmark exponentially and that is the one that describes participation of social classes three manual, four and five, and we have a completely off-the-scale number of students from those social classes. We work very hard in terms of bringing students in from those social groups.

**Q180 Chairman:** That is not the question that Dr Harris has asked; I would like you to keep to the question he has asked.

**Professor Beer:** Missing from Brookes are the state-educated middle classes. If I am answering a question about whether I think the benchmark is appropriate—

**Q181 Chairman:** We can always move the benchmarks if we do not agree with them but the question Dr Harris has quite rightly asked is why are we not meeting the benchmark that has been set.

**Professor Beer:** There is not a simple answer to that because we work hard in state schools to bring in more students; we do no recruitment activity at all in private schools, nothing at all. All our money is spent on recruitment from the state school sector.

**Q182 Dr Harris:** I would just like Dr Hood to answer the same question and then I will come on to drill down a little further about what might be going wrong.

**Dr Hood:** Clearly we do not meet the benchmark that is set, but the question that is on the table is, is the benchmark relevant to the University of Oxford given the disciplinary mix and the numbers that we have apply for each disciplinary area from the

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30 March 2009 Professor Janet Beer and Dr John Hood

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respective schools of the national system. My answer to that would be comprehensively, no, it is not the right benchmark for that, and you were present in an earlier session where we pointed out, for example, that we would have of the order of 1,300 applicants for undergraduate medicine for 150 places. We have fewer than 300 applicants for 150 places in classics, for example. The spectrum of schools in this country does not prepare students for classics degrees—that is just one illustration—and you need to do this discipline by discipline by discipline. Another of the flaws in the comparisons that are made is to assume that the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge should be the same, but again there are disciplinary differences, for example veterinary science and architecture at Cambridge which we do not have here at Oxford, and different profiles of applicants from the different sub-sectors of the national system. My answer to your question, therefore, is no, I do not think the benchmark is appropriate.

**Q183 Chairman:** That was not the question.

**Dr Hood:** I thought that was where Dr Harris was leading, I am sorry.

**Q184 Dr Harris:** You are saying it is not sensitive enough but if it was sensitive enough you might be able to meet the benchmark, but one of the questions is, is this a worthwhile debate at all?

**Dr Hood:** There is another facet to sensitivity and that is the assumption that lies behind the benchmark that all students who sit A-levels achieve A-levels with the appropriate subject A-levels to apply for the disciplines in these institutions, so there are all sorts of other variables and they would have to be fine-tuned.

**Q185 Dr Harris:** Is this a worthwhile argument to have? In your evidence, Professor Beer, you said this had the potential to be a distraction.

**Professor Beer:** Yes, access to higher education per se ought to be what we are talking about rather than access to a few institutions; we ought to be making sure that every student who in a sense qualifies for higher education gets the opportunity to go into higher education and that more students qualify for higher education, so we need the interventions lower down in the educational system. All higher education is a good thing.

**Q186 Dr Harris:** Having said that focusing on individual institutions is not that useful we are here today, so at the risk of breaching your injunction I just want to ask some questions about the issues in admissions at both universities. Clearly you can only, through your admissions process, deal with the people who apply to you, okay, and I understand all the work that is being done to promote applications—we dealt with that in our informal session this morning, so I do not want to talk about the number of applications. Once you get the applications is it of concern, Dr Hood, that the success rate for a state school and specifically a comprehensive school student applying, who has

applied despite everything—you have dragged them in—is significantly lower every year than that from either a grammar school or an independent school. I hope you accept what I have just said—

**Dr Hood:** No, I would accept part of what you just said. The success rate for the students who apply from grammar schools is virtually identical to the success rate from independent schools.

**Q187 Dr Harris:** That is right, comprehensive versus grammar and comprehensive versus independent.

**Dr Hood:** Yes.

**Q188 Dr Harris:** That must be disappointing in a sense because you have done a huge amount, or a huge amount is being done to get them to apply, but then they have less of a chance of getting in. Are they getting lower results—are you getting worse candidates in other words from the state sector?

**Dr Hood:** I would not want to make any judgments about better or worse per se; what I do think is correct is that we are getting different results and, given the history of this country and the social history of this country, what we have been at pains to try and do is to present the University of Oxford and its extremely high entry requirements and academic standards to as many people in the wider communities of the country and the schools of the country and those who run and control and teach in the schools in a way that would encourage the most talented of students to apply to our institution.

**Q189 Dr Harris:** I understand that but I do not want to deal with that; post application I am talking about.

**Dr Hood:** I do not want to make any judgments, I just want to say that what we have done at Oxford in the past three or four years is to try and ensure that our admission processes—and you heard about them this morning—are as fair as possibly they can be in terms of assessing the quality of those applicants and most particularly their potential to succeed at Oxford. We have been transparent about that and we have been rigorous about it, and if those systems are fair and transparent then the outcome will unfortunately be what the outcome is. It is for those who have the ability to analyse in depth the sociology, the social history, the performance of the school sector to draw conclusions about the whys and wherefores of it.

**Q190 Dr Harris:** But there is evidence—which I hope you will accept—that students from comprehensive schools, with the same qualifications as those from privileged educational backgrounds, and they still achieve the same, do better in their final degrees, so there is an argument that the success rates if everything was working—and no one doubts your motives—if everything was being done to do this right, the success rates for those students who had overcome the hurdle of a poor educational background of getting three As or an A\* and applying to Oxford despite the prejudice that exists

against it, would have higher success rates because that is what you need to do to balance the fact that they do better at the end.

**Dr Hood:** You could promote that argument and you could promote around those statistics a number of arguments which I will not do at the moment, but our intent is to ensure that our admissions system is as fair and equitable and transparent as possibly it can be in assessing that which we take to be important in admitting students to our university, as I described a moment ago, and then the outcome will be the outcome. You are right that if we get significantly different outcomes in terms of degrees from different school backgrounds then that is something we have to think about very carefully in terms of any refinement of our admissions process, and that is a constant feedback loop at the institution, discipline by discipline.

**Q191 Dr Harris:** Can I ask Professor Beer about social engineering. What do you think is social engineering, doing nothing to prevent the current high proportion of students from the top end of the socio-economic classes getting into universities, or when it comes to a marginal decision between two preferring the one that has overcome educational background even though on a one-to-one basis you have got no other basis to do it, giving extra points as it were to someone from a poor educational background? Some people describe the latter as social engineering and others describe the do-nothing approach and allowing this imbalance to continue as condoning social engineering. What is your take on that debate?

**Professor Beer:** Social engineering is obviously a loaded term but we have a compact locally which means that students from the local area, particularly schools in difficult or more challenging environments, if they get the grades they have a place, i.e. they are not in competition for a place even in our hotly contested disciplines.

**Q192 Dr Harris:** Guaranteed places are reserved.

**Professor Beer:** For students if they make the entry grades. We also have community scholarships in every single school and college in Buckinghamshire, Berkshire and Oxfordshire where head teachers or principals nominate a student who is coming to Brookes for a bursary which is in recognition, not necessarily of academic achievement but of something exceptional that they have overcome in order to gain entry to higher education; so we are targeting particular kinds of students. We also do a lot of work in FE<sup>1</sup> colleges, both with mature and with conventional age students in order to encourage applications.

**Q193 Ian Stewart:** Good afternoon, both of you, now for the easy two questions. Tuition fees: as we know the maximum currently is £3,145 and most universities are taking that. You know the Government is making a review in 2009–10; what

would happen if the Government, say, put the maximum up to £7,000 for example? Would your university charge that amount?

**Professor Beer:** We would probably get there by gradations but we would also want to have a look at the complete student support package. That is the short answer.

**Q194 Ian Stewart:** Before I move on I will be asking you questions later about the existing stats between the two universities but that is for later. John?

**Dr Hood:** May I talk around the question? The cost of provision of the sort of education that we provide at the University of Oxford—that is a tutorial and small group teaching basis to the undergraduate education—is substantially in advance of the current fee plus HEFCE grant per student that we receive. Some calculations would indicate that that additional cost is as much as £8,000 a year. How do we fund that at the present time? We fund it by a combination of the following things: we fund it from the endowment income that the colleges provide and that the university provides, we fund it by some cross-subsidy from QR and related research monies, we fund it by asking our colleagues to work in terms of teaching norms substantially harder and longer teaching hours than their counterparts in what we would regard as our peer institutions in North America, and we provide them with less academic and administrative support than they would get if they worked in those institutions. That is effectively what is closing that gap. It is apparent from that that my colleagues would be minded to increase the fee, only provided we can have cast iron, needs-blind admission assistance by way of loan schemes, bursaries, hardship funds and so forth. The challenge here of course is the last bit of what I said. The question is will the loan schemes be able to be developed, will the bursary schemes be able to be funded and will the hardship schemes be able to be funded? That is a really challenging question because the Government is not going to want to have substantial additional indebtedness in terms of funding loan schemes, is my guess, so we may be looking at having to develop loan schemes as a sector or as institutions within the sector. If we want to provide bursary schemes that are going to ensure needs-blind admission in support of loan schemes as well then we are going to have to either raise it from benefactors or tax the increase, and it does not take complex mathematics to show that short of a very substantial loan scheme which is going to incur additional indebtedness on students in due course, given the income profile and the wealth profile of British families the tax you have to provide on the fee increment as you go up from £3,145 increases by every pound it goes up, so there will be a limit to the rate at which fees can go up. There will also be a limit because you can only do this with the acceptance of society and, as in America historically, there are going to have to be changes in savings patterns for tertiary education as well as secondary education and so forth, so I agree very much with what Professor Beer has said, that this can only be in gradations over time.

<sup>1</sup> Further education



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30 March 2009 Professor Janet Beer and Dr John Hood

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**Q195 Ian Stewart:** Let me ask you both the direct question: if you by gradation or any other method move to, say, £7,000 will this not act as a deterrent for the lower socio-economic groups?

**Dr Hood:** I do not want to hypothesise around the figure because I have tried to provide a context wherein this is an extremely complex and challenging problem for society, and the extent to which it provides a difficulty for lower socio-economic groups depends entirely on the quality of needs-blind support and the composition of the package that we can provide. In my view—and this is a personal view and not an institutional view—that is why you need a regulator.

**Q196 Ian Stewart:** Let us then move on to something more specific about a bursary system, which you say would be all-important amongst other aids. Currently there appears to be a discrepancy between the amount of bursary a student at Oxford can get—£3,000 odd—and what a student at Oxford Brookes can get, around £1,000 plus. Is that a good thing; why should there be a distinction between the two and is there not an argument for a national bursary scheme?

**Professor Beer:** Our average is £1,500 so it is lower but then our income from fees is probably lower. As you know, we have only had the full income this year, the third year of operation, and it was not zero to £3,000, it was about £1,200 to £3,000 that was the jump. The sector average is a 21 per cent spend from the additional fee income on bursaries and at Brookes it is 30 per cent because we are way above, and 90 per cent of our eligible students claim their bursaries, so we do very well in terms of encouraging students to have that take-up. The imbalance in terms of amount of money available is under a variety of different reasons and I am sure that one is income from fees, how much of it we can spend.

**Q197 Ian Stewart:** I will ask you the direct question, Professor Beer, does that put your students at a disadvantage?

**Professor Beer:** I am hoping not. We have put an additional half a million into hardship funds, we have also employed extra advisers in terms of finance and we do our utmost to make sure that those arrangements are put fairly to the students, within our means. Roughly 30 per cent goes on bursaries, 30 per cent has gone on necessary catching up.

**Q198 Chairman:** In answer to the national bursary scheme, do you support it or not, just a simple yes or no.

**Professor Beer:** It would have to be considered as a much wider review of student support arrangements.

**Q199 Ian Stewart:** Dr Hood.

**Dr Hood:** On the question of different institutions offering different profiles of bursary schemes this has been a good thing because it was new as a concept when top-up fees were introduced. We all

have a lot of learning to do about the impact of bursary schemes on affordability on the one hand and choice on the other hand. What the intervening period has allowed institutions to do is to understand far better what the impact of different schemes has been, and that is helpful in terms of any further development going forward, either of individual institution schemes or, indeed, of schemes once fees move, should they ever move, so I do not myself have a problem with this. The thing that we spend too little time talking about is the question of what is an appropriate level of total indebtedness for a student who comes through our degree programmes to graduate with? That is a discussion that very much should be to the fore when the question of any increase in fees is discussed, and it has to be to the fore in combination with what type of bursary programmes are going to complement the indebtedness, and in a way it then becomes a self-defining equation. Taking then your question about a national bursary scheme, a national bursary scheme is a possibility but it has to be addressed in that wider context of how we design it in terms of total indebtedness of students when they graduate, will it be something that fully complements that or will they have to be institutional and, in the case of Oxford, institutional and college-based schemes further to support it. You asked the question earlier that if a fee goes to a certain level are we likely to see a differentiated market or will all institutions go for the same fee? At some level of fee you will start to get a differentiated market and then you are going to need more than a national bursary system, you are definitely going to need national and institutional and other bursary systems in support. These are all interlocking points that need to be addressed together.

**Chairman:** I would like to leave that there. I have been very bad at managing time, Graham, so you need to get through a lot in the next five minutes.

**Q200 Graham Stringer:** Is a 2:1 from Oxford Brookes the equivalent to a 2:1 from Oxford University—say in the same subject, history—and how would you know?

**Professor Beer:** In the general run of things there is very little equivalence between Brookes and Oxford, there is not that much overlap. As it happens we both do history and you have a history student later on this afternoon that you can ask that question to, whether she thinks the degree is the same.

**Q201 Graham Stringer:** You are setting the exams autonomously and determining the curriculum; is your 2:1 in history equivalent to Oxford University's 2:1 in history?

**Professor Beer:** It depends what you mean by equivalent. I am sorry to quibble around the word but is it worth the same is a question that is weighted with too many social complexities. In terms of the way in which quality and standards are

managed in the university I have every confidence that a 2:1 in history from Oxford Brookes is of a nationally recognised standard.

**Q202 Graham Stringer:** That is rather avoiding answering the question, is it not?

**Professor Beer:** Yes indeed.

**Ian Stewart:** That is honest.

**Graham Stringer:** Are you going to answer it directly, Dr Hood?

**Q203 Chairman:** Sorry, I do not think we can let you away with that.

**Dr Hood:** Maybe Professor Beer could come back when I have had a crack at this, if she is happy.

**Professor Beer:** Sure.

**Dr Hood:** We teach in very different ways between the two institutions and I think our curricula are different between the two institutions, so the question really is are we applying a consistent standard in assessing our students as to firsts, 2:1s, 2:2s *et cetera*? What I want to say in that respect is simply this, that we use external examiners to moderate our examination processes in all of our disciplinary areas at Oxford, and we take that external examination assessment very, very seriously. The external examiners' reports after each round are submitted through our faculty boards, they are assessed and considered by the faculty boards, they are then assessed at the divisional board level and by the educational committee of the university. This is a process that goes on round the clock annually, so we would be comfortable that our degree classifications are satisfying an expectation of national norms.

**Q204 Graham Stringer:** The external examiners are satisfying the curriculum you have set, and you said previously—I think I am quoting you accurately—that the taxpayer should be satisfied that what money is received by the universities is well-spent, or words to that effect, but if the taxpayer is spending however many thousand pounds it takes to get a 2:1 student graduated in history should not both of you be able to answer the question directly that you have spent the taxpayers' money to an equivalent value and what has come out is of the same value both to the student and to the taxpayer?

**Dr Hood:** On the point of have we spent it to the equivalent value, I think it is a slightly different point from the question you are asking. I have already illustrated to you by answering a question earlier about the cost of our provision that we are putting an awful lot more cost into the education of each student than Oxford Brookes is. I do not say that to make judgment about that, I am just talking about value per se. I have answered your question quite correctly by saying that as a result of the quality assurance processes we have the taxpayer should be very satisfied that we are achieving the national norm in terms of the classing of our degrees.

**Q205 Graham Stringer:** I did not want to interrupt you but I do have a supplementary which is the external examiners will tell you that you are doing what you have set out to do to a standard you have set but my question is really slightly different. It is that that is fine for Oxford University but of the £12 billion to £14 billion, whatever it is, that we as taxpayers put into universities, we need to be able to be reasonably assured that if somebody from Wolverhampton University, not just your two universities, is saying that a student is getting a 2:1 it is roughly equal.

**Dr Hood:** Can I help you with that? That is the reason that the Government established the Academic Audit Unit, so that you would have an independent process of assuring the institutional processes, and that is exactly what the Academic Audit Unit does. It exists to assure that our processes operate to a certain quality and standard so that the outcome is an outcome that the taxpayer can be satisfied with.

**Professor Beer:** All the processes described by Dr Hood in terms of the way in which the students receive their marks and those marks are validated are identical in this institution and are monitored, as you know, by the Quality Assurance Agency.

**Q206 Graham Stringer:** On the quality assurance, when we have had the QAA before us they have told us that all they deal with is process and they reeled back in horror when we said "Are you looking at standards at all and comparability?" and they said, "No, each university is independent and they set their own standards."

**Dr Hood:** But we do it by reference to external examiners in the case of the gradation of degrees.

**Q207 Chairman:** May I just come in here? I am treating this conversation with incredulity if I am perfectly honest. If you are telling me that it costs roughly twice as much to educate a student at Oxford as it does at Oxford Brookes, in terms of the hours invested you invest significantly more time in your students than they do at Oxford Brookes, you are telling us that your admissions process is so rigorous that you are creaming the world's best students in order to get in and yet you are saying the outcome at the end of the day is exactly the same. Why do we bother?

**Dr Hood:** I did not say any of those things with respect. I did not say we were creaming the world's best students; on the contrary we set out overwhelmingly to find students in this country and, because of European legislation, the balance from Europe, who can come to Oxford with the potential to succeed at Oxford. Let us just get the facts correct.

**Q208 Chairman:** I will concede that to you. Can you come back to my central point?

**Dr Hood:** I did not say that we are teaching them to the same standard, the same content or by the same processes as Oxford Brookes University; what I said was that we are using independent assessors from other institutions by and large in this country

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30 March 2009 Professor Janet Beer and Dr John Hood

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to act as checks and balances on the quality of our examining and the quality of our certification of a student's degree.

**Q209 Graham Stringer:** We are tending to go round in a circle, are we not?

**Dr Hood:** Yes.

**Q210 Graham Stringer:** I do not want to repeat the Chairman's question but he is saying you are putting, in round terms, twice as much time and twice as many resources into a student who comes from the best academic background, some of the most able students in this country, and your external examiners are saying you are doing very well at that and they are validating what you are doing, but you then are saying that there is a read-across to 2:1s in other universities, that students are reaching the same academic standard; that seems highly unlikely does it not? If you take the brightest students and you put more effort into them, more tutorial effort, more teaching hours, more resources generally in a higher academic environment, do you not think that the world would look askance at you saying that at the end of that you are coming out with the same kind of qualifications as somebody from—

**Dr Hood:** I am not saying they are coming out with the same kind of qualifications.

**Q211 Graham Stringer:** It is a higher standard.

**Dr Hood:** I am not saying it is a higher standard, it is a different standard, it is a different education. One of the important things about the sector in this country is that you do have choice about the sort of institution. I also want to make another comment to you and that is that the University of Oxford as a number of other research-intensive universities in this country is aiming to provide a quality and a standard of education that is competitive with the very best institutions of the world; that is what we are attempting to do. Our examination standards are tough and they should be tough and we do have our gradations externally validated as I have described. I am not arguing that what a student at Oxford learns or the way they learn or the critical faculties that we train them to use are what happen at Oxford Brookes University; I am not arguing that at all.

**Q212 Ian Stewart:** Is it a qualitative difference in the number of ones and 2:1s or is it a quantitative difference?

**Dr Hood:** I do not know what Professor Beer's statistics are to be honest.

**Q213 Ian Stewart:** They are roughly half what yours are.

**Professor Beer:** Exactly; I would say that most other institutions would have a longer tail so the University of Oxford would be more likely to have more 2:1s and firsts than other institutions.

**Q214 Ian Stewart:** Is that because of resources?

**Professor Beer:** I would say no, although of course more resources are always welcome. We teach in a different way and the methods of teaching at Oxford University do not suit everyone; there are students who would find that kind of intensity—

**Q215 Ian Stewart:** I am perplexed at Dr Hood's explanation that it is a different experience without qualifying what is different about it.

**Professor Beer:** It is different between subjects within this institution. The six students you will see—

**Q216 Ian Stewart:** No, within the same subject.

**Professor Beer:** What I am saying is they are different experiences according to different academic disciplines and they are different according to the stage of people's lives at which they take up higher education, so I would not expect or indeed think it is desirable that a mature student in nursing would have the same experience as an 18 year old in history of art.

**Q217 Ian Stewart:** Let me just stop you there because I do not think we are asking about a comparison between different disciplines, we are really pressing you within the same disciplines. Implicit in Dr Hood's answer to Graham Stringer was that there was a different experience and what we are keen to find out is what is it that is different and what do potential employers recognise is different between the experience of Oxford and a different experience with the same degree in the same subject at the same level, one or 2:1, in Oxford Brookes.

**Dr Hood:** We are setting out to train our students how to think, we are setting out to develop their critical faculties, we are setting out to develop in a very sophisticated way their powers of analysis and synthesis.

**Q218 Ian Stewart:** Are we not doing that at Oxford Brookes?

**Dr Hood:** May I finish, please?

**Q219 Chairman:** Excuse me, Dr Hood, we are trying to have our questions answered.

**Dr Hood:** I am trying to answer it, sir.

**Q220 Chairman:** I do not believe you are because we understand exactly the point you are making about the quality.

**Dr Hood:** He just asked me how was the teaching different and I was trying to explain that.

**Q221 Chairman:** We are not asking you about the teaching, we have heard significantly about that.

**Dr Hood:** What are you asking me then?

**Q222 Ian Stewart:** The experience that you talked about.

**Dr Hood:** The experience is a teaching experience, it is the way they are taught, that is what I am talking about. It is the way they are taught to

develop their critical faculties, the way they are taught to develop their powers of synthesis and analysis; we are trying to teach them how to think. We are not trying to teach them—and I am not suggesting Oxford Brookes is—something else or in some other way and therefore we teach them socratically in small groups in tutorials.

**Q223 Chairman:** Universities UK have made a statement which you have emphasised again today that a 2:1 degree in the same subject is broadly equivalent—they are the exact words which Universities UK have used to this inquiry—and you are stating today that that is the same, that a 2:1 in history at an Oxford college is the same as a 2:1 from Poppleton University in Poppleton.  
**Dr Hood:** I am not competent to judge a 2:1 at Poppleton University, Chairman, I am sorry; I am not competent to judge that. I am comfortable that with the quality assurance processes we have at Oxford University in terms of external examiner input and our constant rigorous review of their input—

**Q224 Chairman:** We understand that, it is the comparators between your university and somebody else's, that is the point.

**Dr Hood:** To the employer question I think employers by and large find Oxford graduates extremely attractive, and that would be the feedback that I uniformly receive from the employers who employ Oxford graduates, not only in this country but all around the world for the sorts of jobs that they are wanting to employ them for.

**Q225 Mr Boswell:** Can I come to Professor Beer? It seems to me that out of this set of exchanges the one datum we can probably accept is that there is a higher level of resources per student at the University of Oxford than there is in yours. I wonder if you could give us a bit of a view on the tutorial system and your neighbour, and I am not asking you to be invidious in public about that but if, for example, you had the OU level of resources would you want to introduce a tutorial system or would you be producing a better class of graduate, or what would happen?

**Professor Beer:** You are asking me if I had more money to spend what would I spend it on?

**Q226 Mr Boswell:** It is clear that there is a difference in the money if nothing else, even if the standards are equivalent, so what is the difference, looking at it the other way round?

**Professor Beer:** We would probably reduce the SSR; we would not reduce it all the way down, we would not introduce the tutorial system that is in existence in Oxford colleges, there are other priorities: a better infrastructure for a start, better buildings, better IT, sports facilities that would match Loughborough, that would be good. We have got world class athletes in the institution, we would like to have better facilities for them and for the local community. We have got something called

the Reinvention Centre at Oxford Brookes which gives undergraduates special funding in order to carry out a research project as part of their undergraduate studies, and my colleague Dr Rust can talk more about that later. I would like to extend the life of that project, I would like to make sure that we seriously embed sophisticated research opportunities in the curriculum; probably more support for placement learning, more professional support and I would quite like to be able to buy some more research stars. Is that enough of a list?

**Q227 Mr Boswell:** Can I just see if I can distil one thing from that list? You think that the teaching of critical skills, critical thinking, is something that you both impart here and it is important that you impart it to all undergraduates.

**Professor Beer:** Absolutely, and we work very hard to make sure of that. To a large extent curricula is not important, it is the skills that Dr Hood has very eloquently described that are important. These students have got to be marketable for 50 years, so the knowledge may go out of date, you do not want somebody working on your computer who is applying the knowledge that they got as a computer science graduate in 1970, so knowledge goes out of date. Skills, capability, flexibility does not go out of date.

**Q228 Mr Boswell:** It is a platform rather than a level.

**Professor Beer:** The level is important but the platform is primary.

**Q229 Dr Harris:** Dr Hood, how do you deal with a brilliant researcher who is not a very good teacher—hypothetically?

**Dr Hood:** This assumes they have been appointed to a position which requires that they teach because I should actually say that only about 1,600 of our 4,700 academic staff are in teaching fellowships or statutory professorships and the rest are in research-only positions. If we assume your question applies to one of those in a teaching type of fellowship we do have a centre which exists to help our colleagues with their teaching skills and so we would expect that they would take advantage of the various programmes that are on offer there. The colleges, through which undergraduate teaching is delivered, have a very sophisticated administrative system with senior tutors who monitor these things and in association with heads of house and the like would be looking to advise colleagues where they can seek assistance for the challenges that they have.

**Q230 Dr Harris:** What would you do with someone who was a really good teacher but was not attracting research grants?

**Dr Hood:** We have quite a number of those in the university at the present time. You mean not so much research grants, you mean who are not particularly research-active.

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30 March 2009 Professor Janet Beer and Dr John Hood

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**Q231 Dr Harris:** Yes.

**Dr Hood:** They would tend to take up other duties within their college or within the university or within their faculty or department of an administrative or like nature in greater proportion than some of their other colleagues.

**Q232 Dr Harris:** Do you think it is possible to have—and I am going to ask the same question of you, Professor Beer—a department that is just full of good teachers but does not have any research where they are doing undergraduate teaching?

**Dr Hood:** No, not in our university, no.

**Q233 Dr Harris:** It is not possible to have that in your university—should it be possible is my question.

**Dr Hood:** My answer to that was no because it is not the nature of institution we are. We are a research-intensive institution where those who are involved in scholarship and research at the cutting edge of new knowledge are teaching the next generation, and they are imparting their understanding, their new discovery, their existing understanding to the next generation.

**Q234 Dr Harris:** If a university had a catastrophe in terms of research funding—not your university, I am asking you as a representative of universities—but the teaching as far as you knew was still good and the people were still keen to teach, that would suggest that a university that took that approach would need to close the course or prop it up from outside with subsidised grants.

**Dr Hood:** It is not for me to comment on what other universities should do—

**Q235 Dr Harris:** A hypothetical university.

**Dr Hood:** There are degrees of granularity in how I would answer that. I think in a university it is critically important that those who are teaching stay current with where their discipline is developing, so it is not a question of someone just becoming inert in terms of the development of their understanding of the discipline, they would have to remain very active in that if they were going to continue to be a teacher in a university.

**Q236 Dr Harris:** I understand that. We have had some written submissions to suggest that as long as people are up to date with their knowledge, even if they are not research-active, then some universities can actually have very good teaching departments even if they are not attracting much in the way of the research grant, which is quite cliff-edge anyway, and it actually allows them to focus on teaching—they are not falling behind, they are reading. Do you think that is a reasonable approach to take for some universities?

**Professor Beer:** It is not one that we want to take at Brookes; we do not think it is the business of a university for its academic staff not to be engaged in both research and teaching. We come from further back than Oxford University, obviously, in terms of our research, but we do have some

outstanding areas and we have a policy in terms of employing staff especially in the areas where the students are being given a licence to practise where staff need to be at the cutting edge of their discipline.

**Q237 Dr Harris:** If the two answers you have given, which are similar, are extended across the whole sector—and I am not saying that you are saying that they are, but I am seeking to ask you if there are any circumstances where this would be done—if there was just a subject where Britain did not have that much in the way of a research base, not none but there was a desperate need to train people in that subject for UK Plc, what would you do in that circumstance? In other words could you consider any circumstances where you could use universities for teaching alone with people who were up to speed but not research-active, either of you, even if it is not your institution, because I want you to look beyond your institution.

**Professor Beer:** I am sure that that is appropriate but, as you say, a rapid development in the subject would soon be followed by the need to do research in that area.

**Dr Hood:** What I would say is we should go overseas and find someone who is research-active or a whole team of people who are research-active, and one of the extraordinary trends in certainly our institution in recent years has been the internationalisation of the academic staff where fully 38 per cent of our academic staff today are non-UK by first citizenship.

**Q238 Dr Harris:** Brookes has a reputation not for necessarily being as research-active in every subject as Oxford University, if you see what I mean. That is not to say that there are not, as I know, major research-active departments which are getting very high marks, but it actually has a reputation for innovation in teaching and high quality teaching. Your previous answer could be interpreted—and if it is just me then forgive me—as implying that teaching as teaching is of less value than research as research, because good research is always lauded, but I am not sure about the teaching because there are people who are allowed to do just research. Are you aspiring to get away from the reputation of being more teaching than research in some subjects?

**Professor Beer:** No, absolutely not, we are research-informed rather than research-led. Our learning and teaching is something that we are extremely proud of. As you say we have a long and distinguished record in terms of what we think of as delivering a high quality student experience; however, we do not see teaching and research as mutually exclusive but as mutually beneficial, and often the best researchers are the best teachers and vice versa. You can talk to Dr Rust again about some evidence that we may have for that claim.

**Q239 Dr Harris:** But they are exclusive in terms of timetable; a person can be doing a lecture or doing research but not both.

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30 March 2009 Professor Janet Beer and Dr John Hood

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**Professor Beer:** I do not agree, it is a virtuous circle between research, knowledge transfer and teaching and the external dimension, whether it is research or knowledge transfer, is of value to the individual student.

**Q240 Chairman:** We will leave that hanging in the air. We have come to the end of this session; it could have gone on a lot longer, but we are very, very grateful, Dr Hood, because I know that you have reorganised your schedule to be with us. Thank you very much indeed Professor Janet Beer.

**Dr Hood:** Could I say one final thing, Chairman? One of the things that is worrying us a lot as an institution is postgraduate education and the need to prepare the workforce for tomorrow, and the lack in this country of any coherent structured policy around the provision of postgraduate education and the funding of students for that. I just want to leave that on the table.

**Q241 Chairman:** I have to say that is another inquiry.

**Dr Hood:** Fine, but I would encourage you to have it.

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**Witnesses:** Professor Margaret Price, Oxford Brookes University, Dr Chris Rust, Oxford Brookes University, Professor Roger Goodman, University of Oxford, and Professor Alan Ryan, University of Oxford, gave evidence.

**Chairman:** We welcome our second even more distinguished panel: Professor Margaret Price from Oxford Brookes University, welcome to you; Dr Chris Rust from Oxford Brookes University; Professor Roger Goodman from the University of Oxford and Professor Alan Ryan from the University of Oxford; welcome to you all. I am going to ask my colleague Graham Stringer to begin the questioning.

**Q242 Graham Stringer:** Dr Rust, in your evidence you have said that there are worrying differences in assessment of degrees across different universities. Can you detect that this is because of different methods that are used in assessing degrees or what reasons would you give for the different processes that there are in the assessment of degrees?

**Dr Rust:** There are lots of answers to that question. The work of both of the groups that I am connected with and representing here today suggests that you can see a whole host of reasons why—for example, very simply, the algorithms that the university uses to compute the marks into some final classification. The group SACWG has shown that you can have up to a degree classification difference with the same set of results from one student, simply by feeding them into a different algorithm used by a different institution. Beneath that we know there is other evidence that marks will vary depending on a host of factors. We know that students do better on coursework assessment compared with examination, we know that in certain disciplines—maths for example—you will get higher marks because you can get full marks for certain types of activity. What then happens of course is those numbers all get crunched together in I would suggest quite indefensible ways if you looked at them as a statistician, and a whole host of results can come out from that. Is that enough? Do you want more?

**Q243 Graham Stringer:** That is a start. Are these different methodologies the main vehicle for fuelling degree inflation or are there other reasons?

**Dr Rust:** Like my good friend Mantz Yorke I am going to try and avoid the notion of grade inflation on the grounds that that is a pejorative term. There are a host of potential reasons for why there are now more firsts and 2:1s. We can hypothesise about a range; it could be that teaching has got better—we certainly have more postgraduate certificate courses for new teaching staff and we have made a move towards professionalising academics as teachers—it could be that students are working harder, it could be that we are clearer with courses framed in terms of learning outcomes *et cetera*, so students are clear as to what it is they have got to do and can then perform to the task, or it could be that we have grade inflation. The fundamental point that I think I would want to make today is that we do not know. We can have those discussions but it is at the level of conjecture. As the QAA said in 2006 we have no system that will actually enable us to show whether it is inflation or not.

**Q244 Graham Stringer:** Could it be that different universities are choosing methodologies that give them better results because they are concerned about their position in the league table?

**Dr Rust:** I have never come across that or have no reason to believe that.

**Q245 Graham Stringer:** But you could not rule it out.

**Dr Rust:** I just do not know.

**Q246 Mr Boswell:** Could I just interpose on what Dr Rust has said? The way I read it is first of all, following what he said about the QAA, there is actually nobody sitting above this process as in the schools sector there is for example now with Ofqual who can moderate it or say what is happening—that is the first point. The second point is that whatever merits there may be in the external examiner system they are not actually effective in moderating these conceptual differences. Is that a fair account of what you are saying?

**Dr Rust:** I am not sure I want to encourage the creation of an Ofqual for higher education.

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30 March 2009 Professor Margaret Price, Dr Chris Rust, Professor Roger Goodman and Professor Alan Ryan

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**Q247 Mr Boswell:** That is a separate issue and an important one.

**Dr Rust:** Otherwise, yes, that is what I am saying. About external examiners, there are many merits to the external examiners system, it brings many positive outcomes, but it is certainly not a system that is going to guarantee your standards.

**Q248 Mr Boswell:** As we have raised the hare about having an Ofqual for HE<sup>2</sup> or whatever is it your view that that would be a less good or a better intervention than in effect saying you judge your own standards and you award accordingly either within a degree classification or without one?

**Dr Rust:** There is another possibility as recommendation one in the ASKe submission. There is a way that we could develop academic communities to take account of comparability of standards across institutions, and that is the way to go with a grassroots-up method.

**Chairman:** I want to return to that a little bit later so I do not want to pursue that. We are back to you, Graham.

**Q249 Graham Stringer:** It is a similar point really. If we are not going to have a higher education Ofsted what is the solution to getting comparabilities between different universities in degree standards, or at least knowing where we are?

**Dr Rust:** As I said, I would support ASKe's recommendation, but you wanted to leave that until later.

**Q250 Chairman:** You ought to come in here, Professor Price, because this is your work.

**Professor Price:** I would very much resist the idea that there can be a body sitting above to actually impose standards because standards very much belong and are created and are maintained within the academic communities. That does give rise to the issue of how you make comparisons between different disciplines and how those disciplines operate within different institutions. I have just come back from Australia so forgive me, I am not quite on the same time zone as you, but I had some very interesting discussions in Australia about the nature of a sort of chicken-wire network where you would group discipline communities, where there are sort of overlaps with them, and effectively create a network whereby you could have comparisons with close disciplines which then cover the whole of the discipline span.

**Q251 Mr Boswell:** Is that by institution or by sector or either?

**Professor Price:** It would be either, yes.

**Q252 Ian Stewart:** How do you do the sector one? I can understand it within the institution but how do you the sector one if you do not have a body that oversees the sector?

**Professor Price:** You would need to create those networks between institutions and many disciplines do have external bodies that they feel more affiliated to than necessarily their institutions, particularly professional bodies, and they take their standards from those, so you have already got networks. One of the things that we have also proposed is that within the UK there are subject centres that may create a focal point to allow the communication and discussion of standards right across the nation.

**Q253 Ian Stewart:** Would that show up this very elusive difference of experience that Dr Hood was talking about?

**Professor Price:** I suppose it depends on whether you are talking about outcomes or whether you are talking about the process, and you need to look at those in slightly different ways. If you are looking at outcomes one of the best ways of determining standards is to actually look at examples, so rather than ask people to talk about standards in the abstract, which is very difficult to do because standards are held both explicitly and tacitly, in order to create understanding between people you have to have concrete examples to look at, so we can look at outcomes. In terms of looking at processes you have to be careful about not just looking at the input measures but looking at the output measures from the students' experience as well, so we would need to gather evidence and data about that in order to do that. One of the things that will probably come out of the discussion today is that there is actually not a great deal of evidence on which we can draw conclusions.

**Ian Stewart:** That is honest, thank you.

**Dr Harris:** Before I bring in Professor Ryan I want to go back to something that was not quite picked up from what Graham Stringer was asking. Dr Rust—or anyone—we observe an increase in the number of firsts and 2:1s relatively speaking, we observe a variety of techniques in your work that are used to do marking, some of which, for what look like some quite small or innocent changes, can have significant impacts on their own, let alone in combination, to change marks—and they seem to be changing in an upward direction—yet you tell us that you cannot say there is grade inflation in a pejorative way, in other words you see no evidence that this is unjustified. That is my first question. Secondly, when Graham Stringer asked whether league tables might be an incentive to have directly or indirectly this impact you said you could not see that that was necessarily the case. I have seen no example of league tables where people do not want to be at the top rather than at the bottom and I have seen no example of league tables introduced by politicians without the point of blaming the people at the bottom and rewarding the people at the top by incentivising people. Putting those two questions together can I ask you to reconsider your response as an academic?

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<sup>2</sup> Higher education

**Q254 Chairman:** Could you do it fairly briefly?

**Dr Rust:** I am sure that league tables incentivise people; what I hope I said was I personally know of no evidence that a university has changed its system or even a department changed its system in order to artificially create higher marks.

**Q255 Dr Harris:** Human nature ends at universities, does it?

**Dr Rust:** I just do not know of any evidence; I have not come across that happening to my knowledge. The other point is—and in support of the argument that we just do not know what the reason for more firsts and 2:1s is—in fact it is not as simple as saying it has just gone up and gone up. The latest work that Mantz Yorke has done, which is on the Academy website, looking at 13 years, shows that for different subject disciplines in fact it has gone down, so within the same institution and using the same systems you will have had some places where in fact the grades have gone down rather than up, so it is just more complicated than to say it is just going up.

**Q256 Dr Harris:** Professor Ryan, can you first explain to me why universities are uniquely different from every hospital when it comes to the impact of league tables measuring their performance on their behaviour—if you agree with Dr Rust?

**Professor Ryan:** I do not, of course I do not.

**Q257 Chairman:** That was a leading question.

**Professor Ryan:** He is my MP.

**Q258 Dr Harris:** I said if you agree. It cannot be leading if I say “if”.

**Professor Ryan:** How would I disagree with you? To start at the beginning there once was a version of Ofqual for universities, it was the CNAAs. The non-old-fashioned sector gave CNAAs-validated degrees and nobody in the CNAAs believed that there was anything very clever to be said about whether a CNAAs degree in history was more or less demanding than a CNAAs degree in sociology or whatever. What was true was that you could not put on a degree course without getting it past the CNAAs, it did look at the syllabuses, it looked at your teaching resources and the external examiners came from the CNAAs and what they had going for them was they would have been deeply humiliated to validate and approve of courses that other people later thought were not up to scratch. It is not so to speak, therefore, an impossible state of affairs; to my mind the CNAAs was much more like the right animal than the QAAs. As to league tables it seems to me it just has to be an incentive. If you grade people on the number of 2:1s and the like that they get at the end the temptation is bound to be to smudge the 2:2/2:1 boundary. If you pay them through HEFCE in a way that penalises them for throwing people off courses if they are not up to it then there is bound to be a pressure to hang on to them at all costs. I just do not see how it can possibly work differently.

**Q259 Dr Harris:** Does anyone want to rebut that? Professor Goodman, you have kept quiet.

**Professor Goodman:** I have kept quiet, I have been listening with great interest. I do go back—I know we had an earlier conversation about this and there were doubts cast on it—to the external examination system, which is a system that we utilise as much as possible to get the feedback on our courses, because we are only as good as the world thinks we are and if we lower our own standards we are going to be the ones who are going to suffer the results. We use our external examiners and we call them critical friends—I have to say from my end they tend to be pretty critical about the things that they do not like—and then we review our processes in that light. They are only comparative of course between their own institution and our institution, there is not this kind of overview.

**Dr Harris:** But external examiners can only do what you ask them to do, so if they do not know whether the tutors told the students what questions are coming up there is nothing they can do about that. If they are only asked to arbitrate between two borderline cases they will do that very well no doubt in an external examiner way, but is not the whole question how you use external examiners, especially if you depend on them, and is there a variation in the way they are used between institutions?

**Q260 Chairman:** May I add to Dr Harris’s question, do you ever go outside the Russell Group for your external examiners, are they not friends first and then critical second?

**Professor Goodman:** I am pretty sure we do go outside the Russell Group for our external examiners but I could not give you a case here and now, and I myself have been an external examiner in non-Russell Group universities, including in fact this university here. In Oxford—I do not know how it works in other places—we separate our examining from our teaching, so the people who are doing the examining process are not the people who are teaching the course, they are the ones who set the programme and set the exam. I can tell you as an academic I am as nervous about the exams as the students are because I do not know quite what the questions are going to be or how my students will do.<sup>3</sup>

**Q261 Dr Harris:** And if they do badly and you fall in the league table there will be an impact on you.

**Professor Goodman:** No, I am nervous whether I have taught the students sufficiently well to answer the questions that I will not have been setting.

**Q262 Dr Harris:** It is a selfless nervousness rather than a self-interested one.

**Professor Goodman:** Possibly.

**Q263 Chairman:** Professor Price, can you come in?

**Professor Price:** You asked if there was a rebuttal. A short answer is given that the assessment standards exist within the academic communities, academic communities are very protective of their standards, and although the suggestion that there is an

<sup>3</sup> See also Ev 528



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30 March 2009 Professor Margaret Price, Dr Chris Rust, Professor Roger Goodman and Professor Alan Ryan

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incentive to push 2:1s into the class of firsts my experience, both as an external examiner and within my own institution, is that academics will resist that because they have a very strong view of standard. There are issues with the external examiner system and in our evidence we have pointed out that there are some inconsistencies in the standards that they apply, but they do have a critical friend role. Also in relation to the community issue, very often external examiners are operating as individuals rather than necessarily representatives of their disciplinary communities, and it is quite a difficult thing to do as an individual academic when you are asked to be an external examiner to actually do that, if the support mechanisms are not there in place to ensure that you are representing your community rather than your individual view of standards.

**Q264 Mr Boswell:** I just wondered if I might ask the head of my former college what I hope is a serious question, whether if CNAAs had certain merits he would have envisaged extending that kind of system to the University of Oxford, and if not why not?

**Professor Ryan:** In my rash youth I actually went on record as saying it would do us a whole lot of good.

**Q265 Mr Boswell:** But it is no longer your view.

**Professor Ryan:** Given that they abolished the CNAAs and in the name of the autonomy of the post-1992 group and the rest of them, it really is water under the bridge. I think, actually, some such body would do everybody good; being able to give a coherent account of why you do what you do to your peer group.

**Q266 Mr Boswell:** Is that with reference to the standards that you yourself have set for your institution?

**Professor Ryan:** What you teach, how you teach it, how you examine it, whether you have a coherent account of what you think you learn from these exams. After all, what I sent to the Committee was my usual bleat about the QAA dumbing us all into the middle because everybody now knows, in pretty good outline, what they are going to get examined on because they have been lectured by the course deliverers into what is going to happen, tutorials now match that and so, roughly speaking, it is very unsurprising that a university like Oxford, where the filtration mechanisms have been operating on the kids since they were six, gets 95 per cent firsts and 2:1s because if they cannot do that, what in heaven's name could they do.

**Q267 Dr Harris:** I suspect it is not six; it is probably minus nine months actually.

**Professor Ryan:** That is right, Mozart in the womb.

**Dr Harris:** What would you do to stretch them more if you are saying it is all moving to the middle, to stretch the better students?

**Q268 Chairman:** That is not what your Vice-Chancellor has just told us.

**Professor Ryan:** He said that we behave absolutely virtuously; we do behave absolutely virtuously.

**Q269 Chairman:** But with a preordained set of rules.

**Professor Ryan:** Within the constraints of a system which is locked in place by HEFCE and the QAA and whoever else. I do not think the QAA does no good because it means that you do not end up being catastrophically disorganised.

**Q270 Dr Harris:** With the current structures can you break out of this? If Ryan was in charge.

**Professor Ryan:** If I was in charge the place would not last three weeks, but that is rather different. What I would do would be to have, so to speak, a high honours paper—I would behave rather like the Ivy League and I would say if you want to get high honours—I am not wedded to our system.

**Q271 Dr Harris:** Like an A\*.

**Professor Ryan:** Yes, I am not wedded to our classification system particularly, but here is the thing: you have a question, you have a day in which to produce the kind of answer at which your tutor opens his eyes and says “My God, I could not have done that at your age.” There are ways of letting people rip and if they are good, they are very good at it. The best five exams I ever saw were at Hatfield Polytechnic, five married ladies in their early 30s who had all said to each other “Let us go get a degree” and they were amazing. Nobody else touched them for five years before or five years after, they were fantastic. It is not a question of where you are or where you come from, it is a question of being given the chance to break loose.

**Q272 Chairman:** I will leave that there. I am going to skip most of the next question but I really wanted, Professor Price, to ask you the very straightforward question whether you feel that the Higher Education Achievement Report will make a difference to the area we are talking about, so that if we have this broader report and forget the classification of degrees we will suddenly go back to Utopia and Professor Ryan will be happy.

**Professor Price:** I would say I think it is a shift in the right direction. Whether it is something that will have utility in terms of the way lots of different stakeholders use it is an interesting question.

**Q273 Chairman:** Any other views from the panel?

**Professor Goodman:** I do agree with Alan to some extent; I do think the 2:1 category perhaps has become too broad and we could divide it in the way we divided the second class degree 25 years ago into upper second and lower second. I do think a first class degree is still something that is spectacular.

**Q274 Graham Stringer:** Can you define what is the difference between a first, a 2:1 and a 2:2 so that we can understand it as a Committee?

**Professor Goodman:** The criteria that we use in our university which we ask people to mark against is a 2:2 shows you have done the work, you have understood the work and you are quite comfortable with the work, a 2:1 is somebody who is actually able to use the work and show that they can unpick the question and work around the question and use it in

a critical way, and a first class examination answer is something that really takes you to another level. It is a pleasure to read, you know that there is something going on there, that it is doing something very, very interesting with the work. Examiners very rarely disagree about that 2:1 and the first class category. I find elsewhere as well—I taught briefly at the University of Essex and the very best students at the University of Essex were definitely as good as the ones here in that first class bracket.

**Q275 Graham Stringer:** Sorry, I do not mean to interrupt but some of our evidence is saying that actually part of the reason there are more firsts now is that students who used to get good 2:1s are now being put into the first category.

**Professor Goodman:** I would agree with my colleague here, we are very, very protective about that first class category and we would much rather go under it than go over it. That has generally been my experience, both as an internal examiner and as an external examiner in schools.

**Chairman:** Can we move on to the last section, please? Dr Harris.

**Q276 Dr Harris:** I want to talk about plagiarism and its threat. You said in your submission, Professor Price, that so-called bespoke writing services represent a threat to generic coursework-assessed courses. To what extent is there evidence to back up that suggestion that there is this problem of plagiarism?

**Professor Price:** There is a variety of evidence, some of which suggests there is a problem and some of which suggests that it is a problem of the design of the assessment—in other words you can largely design the opportunity for plagiarism out of assessment processes.

**Q277 Dr Harris:** You can.

**Professor Price:** Yes, you can.

**Q278 Dr Harris:** A keen student is going to come and ask you how; I am trying to gauge the extent. What is the evidence to suggest that it is endemic, in brief, in coursework? I am sure there are things you can do, but how far has it got in this country?

**Professor Price:** You might need to step in and help me here. It varies from subject to subject. Where there are large student numbers some students feel that they are less supervised and therefore attempt to “get away with it” I suppose is the phrase. It largely depends on the extent to which the institution has moved its dealing with plagiarism on. If they have done very little I would say there is a risk that it is quite high; where they have integrated systems, where there is an attempt to prevent plagiarism and there are means by which there is detection of plagiarism it is less of a problem.

**Q279 Dr Harris:** What you are arguing is that if you put in systems it deters because deterrence is extremely effective, otherwise if you put in systems that did not deter you might reduce plagiarism but

you would have a lot of convicts, and I do not know of any place where there are lots of convictions as it were where these systems have been put in.

**Professor Price:** I am not saying it is just deterrent that you put in, in fact just deterrent does not work at all, we need very much to get students to understand the role of academic integrity in the work that they do.

**Q280 Dr Harris:** Can we be certain that we know how much there is when we are not picking much up, because I am not sure we are picking that much up.

**Professor Price:** The processes of investigating these are still developing.

**Q281 Chairman:** Dr Rust.

**Dr Rust:** On the one hand at one stage you used the word endemic and then we are saying we are not picking much up; if we are not picking much up, maybe it is not endemic and maybe it is not the problem that some of the newspaper headlines suggest.

**Q282 Dr Harris:** I used the word endemic in a question, is there evidence to support the assertion?

**Dr Rust:** I appreciate that. I think some of the reactions have gone over the top, that it is an academic plague and those sorts of headline. It is yet another thing where it is the standard academic answer, more research needed.

**Q283 Dr Harris:** More research grants.

**Dr Rust:** Yes, just give us the grant and we will do it. This has come about for a variety of reasons and clearly one of them has been technology. There was a concern that the internet made it much easier to cut and paste, but of course technology has also made it easier to identify plagiarism, so in fact it may be that we are just identifying more easily and in fact there is no more plagiarism now than there was in the past, it may just be easier to detect. The crucial answer is exactly what Margaret said, that there is not one kneejerk answer, you need a holistic answer to this and that is training the students so they know about academic integrity, having detection mechanisms and reasonable penalties that are known across the institution—standard penalties which will be imposed if necessary—but also course design that designs out as much as one can the possibilities of plagiarism in the assessment tasks being set. A 15-minute viva is very difficult to plagiarise.

**Mr Boswell:** And resource-intensive.

**Q284 Ian Stewart:** Luckily for me as a registered PhD student I was supposed to ask you how it happens—I mangle the English language so much my supervisors would know immediately. You answered the question that I was supposed to ask you, how do you deal with it, but in a strange sense how it should be dealt with you have just explained, but is that the way you actually deal with it currently?

**Dr Rust:** I am not going to claim that Brookes is perfect but we have got a bit of a reputation in this area. One of our colleagues is currently seconded in

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30 March 2009 Professor Margaret Price, Dr Chris Rust, Professor Roger Goodman and Professor Alan Ryan

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Sweden—she is internationally known in this area—and we have had a cross-university system developing academic conduct officers and so on. We are trying to apply what I said; we are working towards that.

**Q285 Ian Stewart:** Is there any cohesion in trying to apply these principles to stop this across institutions and who is checking that?

**Dr Rust:** Across our institution we have in place what are called academic conduct officers in every school. That is part of getting a common tariff so that you have a common institutional treatment rather than different tutors treating similar cases differently. We have put money into the Turnitin software and currently there is training going on across the whole institution for that; so, yes, we have taken an institutional approach. Clearly the most difficult is the staff development around designing it out in your assessment tasks.

**Q286 Mr Boswell:** Is there a network across different institutions too so that there is a counterpart who will tip you off if something is going on, who will say “Have you noticed this piece on the internet that seems to have got rather popular?”

**Dr Rust:** I believe there is something at JISC, the joint information group.

**Q287 Chairman:** Can I just ask, Professor Ryan and Professor Goodman, your views on plagiarism before I bring this to an end?

**Professor Ryan:** Because we still stick to the old-fashioned, three-hour, unseen exam there is just a lot less scope for it getting into the assessment system. There is plenty of scope for it getting into the tutorial system and it is not uncommon for the occasional miscreants to be told that it is better if they read a lousy essay of their own than a rather good one done by their girlfriend which she happened to have read

the previous week. There are interesting difficulties in that of course some people do not really have an idea of what is and what is not plagiarism for a start; some people think that what it is all about is cut and paste. They have had A-level teachers who have told them to use this word, this word and this word so they find a nicely crafted essay and they put it in on the grounds that it has got the words in that they have been told to use. There is a very large culture, but the fact that Brookes has as it were academic conduct officers pushing the idea that if this is your work and it is your degree then it had better be yours—that you just need to keep pushing.

**Professor Goodman:** One of the curious features is the fact that we do, as Alan said, find the occasional first year undergraduate is plagiarising their tutorial, which is not examined, it is not part of the degree per se, suggests that it is a lack of comprehension about how you do use sources properly. There is a need to educate them and, clearly, the follow-through from the school system has not really worked properly there, we need to spend time at the school end explaining to them how you use sources and how you put your project work together as well.

**Q288 Ian Stewart:** In a higher degree how do you plagiarise in a literature review as distinct from plagiarising in fieldwork?

**Professor Ryan:** The really horrid cases actually tend to be people handing in somebody else’s PhD and I have had a colleague who said he was sorely tempted to say to a candidate “Why did you change the title of chapter 3?”

**Chairman:** On that note we will leave that hanging in the air. Why did we change chapter 3 could be the title of our report. Can I thank very much indeed Professor Margaret Price, Dr Chris Rust, Professor Roger Goodman and Professor Alan Ryan; thank you very much indeed. We will reconvene in ten minutes.

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*Witnesses:* Mr Gregory Andrews, student, Mr David Child, student, Ms Victoria Edwards, student, Ms Meagan Pitt, student, Mr Jun Rentschler, student, Ms Sally Tye, student, Oxford Brookes University, gave evidence.

**Q289 Chairman:** Can we come to our final session today in Oxford on this Innovation, Universities, Science & Skills Select Committee’s inquiry into students and universities. We have with us a panel of students who will introduce themselves because I am going to give you a couple of minutes each to basically say what you are studying, why you decided to come to the university you have come to and why you chose the course, and in particular whether it was the course you chose first or the university you chose first and then the course. Can I just thank you all very much indeed and I hope you have enjoyed the rest of the session today. Could I start with you, Jun, if you tell us who you are and why you are here?

**Mr Rentschler:** My name is Jun Rentschler, I am half German, half Japanese and I am in my second year at Oxford Brookes studying major in economics,

minor in business. Besides my uni work I am also vice-president of the Brookes Business Entrepreneurship Club. I did choose my course before I came to the university; I was looking at economics especially in Germany and I decided to come to an English-speaking country so I was looking at universities in England and I had a couple of choices. In England there is obviously a huge list of universities and it was quite hard to just choose a university because all you get to know is just information on the website.

**Q290 Dr Harris:** Why did you choose Oxford Brookes in the end?

**Mr Rentschler:** I did come to the UK and I had the chance to visit about three universities. Brookes was one of them because I knew somebody who was studying here already so it was probably some accident and some random.

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30 March 2009 Mr Gregory Andrews, Mr David Child, Ms Victoria Edwards, Ms Meagan Pitt, Mr Jun Rentschler and Ms Sally Tye

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**Q291 Chairman:** A bit of accident and a bit of design. Meagan.

**Ms Pitt:** My name is Meagan and I am originally from South Africa and I moved to England when I was 15, so I did my GCSEs and my A-levels. I decided to do law because I did law as an A-level and I really, really enjoyed it, it was something I thought was a respectable job. Basically where I come from there are not many people who do law, I would be the first lawyer in my family basically. I chose to come to Oxford Brookes because it had one of the best reputations for law, even though it was not my first choice.

**Q292 Chairman:** What was your first choice just out of interest?

**Ms Pitt:** UCL.

**Q293 Mr Boswell:** And it is a vocational course, you are not doing it just because you have an interest in law, it is because you would like to be a qualified lawyer.

**Ms Pitt:** Yes, I would.

**Q294 Chairman:** Sally.

**Ms Tye:** My name is Sally Tye, I am a third year history student. I am also student representative for history and have been for the last three years, and I also sit on the recruitment sub-committee for history. I chose history before the university; my first choice was actually Cardiff but I did not quite get my grades, but I am really glad I am here and the course suits me down to a T. It is very, very varied, I can do the most diverse history course that I have found and I absolutely love it.

**Q295 Chairman:** That is a great recommendation. Victoria.

**Ms Edwards:** My background is slightly strange. I had my first baby when I was 16, I met my husband at 15 and left school with only a handful of GCSEs. We then went on to have a second baby and then somebody said to me while I was working in a bar “Why don’t you do a degree?” I thought okay, what can I do, and I came to Brookes and did a teaching degree. I taught for eight years in primary school, had another four babies, but all the while from my first baby I really wanted to be a midwife but ended up teaching because it seemed very sensible. After my sixth baby, having gone down to two days teaching a week, I decided that it was now or never in terms of making the change. I would love to say that I chose Brookes because it is the best university, I think it is wonderful, but actually my family would not let me go away and be a student anywhere else so I had to stay here.

**Q296 Mr Boswell:** You live literally up the road.

**Ms Edwards:** I live in Witney.

**Q297 Mr Boswell:** That is still some distance actually.

**Ms Edwards:** Yes, but Brookes is the nearest.

**Q298 Chairman:** Okay. David.

**Mr Child:** My name is David Child, I am in my fourth and final year doing MEng motor sport engineering. I considered several universities—Bath, here and Coventry as my three main choices—and I picked this university on the grounds of the industrial relevance and the relationships and links to the industry. The course at Bath to me appeared to be more academically-focused, and although I am not saying the course is not academically focused here there are better industrial links and at Coventry basically I was offered £3,000 a year bursary if I took the course. Any student obviously would love that kind of money but I am very glad I turned that down and came here.

**Q299 Chairman:** It has lived up to expectations.

**Mr Child:** Definitely, yes.

**Q300 Chairman:** Okay. Gregory.

**Mr Andrews:** My name is Gregory Andrews, I am in year two architecture. I chose architecture to do first before I chose my university but I chose Brookes because it was the only university of the ones which I applied to that had a 24-hour access pass that you could get, it had a proper studio environment where the work was done at Brookes as opposed to the other universities where you came in for your tutorial or came in for your lecture and then you went home and did your work where you lived, in your accommodation and so forth. Brookes has a studio work environment and it puts that first before anything else. There is also quite a large input, there are 120 students in first year, 20 in two years and 100 architects so there is also quite a large year to learn from. It was more the studio work environment that I chose first.

**Q301 Chairman:** This is a question really to those of you who have come to Oxford Brookes straight from school, which is four or five of you.

**Mr Rentschler:** I had a gap year.

**Q302 Chairman:** If I start with you, Gregory, what sort of careers advice did you get which helped you make your decision about (a) the course and (b) university? Be as frank as you can.

**Mr Andrews:** We used to have a careers lesson once a week in that they assessed the current subjects that you were studying for A-level and then pointed you in the direction of which courses were suitable. We also used certain internet websites to help us make a choice.

**Q303 Chairman:** Was it good enough?

**Mr Andrews:** Yes, I think so.

**Q304 Mr Boswell:** Can I just ask if I may, in these answers can you factor in a comment about whether anyone gave you exposure to the alternative routes,

30 March 2009 Mr Gregory Andrews, Mr David Child, Ms Victoria Edwards, Ms Meagan Pitt, Mr Jun Rentschler and Ms Sally Tye

either to vocational education or straight into work. Was it just seen as you must go to HE and this is where you could go or was it a balanced choice?

**Mr Andrews:** My school definitely chose HE first.

**Q305 Chairman:** Did you get any vocational advice?

**Mr Andrews:** No.

**Q306 Chairman:** David.

**Mr Child:** To answer that question the school I was at definitely pushed towards higher education for the majority of students; in the cases where they saw it was not appropriate or there was a sensible other route they would push other people that way, but certainly as far as I was concerned they never really pushed any other options. As far as selection of the university and the school pushing me towards one or the other, there was not really any help, if I am frank. They misunderstood what I was going to university for; they thought I wanted to become a mechanic and not an engineer, so consequently tried to push me away from that. What actually made the decision for me was my father really. He did electronic engineering for his degree quite a few years ago and he always wanted to do what I am doing, but at the time was pushed away for exactly the same reasons as the school tried to push me away from it. I am very glad that he stepped in and told me this is actually what you want to do.

**Q307 Chairman:** Sally, what about you?

**Ms Tye:** We had an enrichment session every week where they had lots of different people come in and talk to us. It was mainly geared towards higher education but we also had a lot of the Forces because where I live is quite a Force-based area—the Army, the Air Force and things would come in. If you were a student of a certain grade band you were very much pushed to go into higher education. My younger sister is just going through it at the moment; she does not want to go to university, she wants to get a job, but because of her grades the school has actually been very difficult and her form tutor has not been very good with her at all about trying to get her into other things. In terms of doing more vocational subjects, if you have a certain grade area you are not really encouraged—not at my school anyway—to go and do vocational things or even things at college, it is all university, university.

**Q308 Chairman:** Meagan, can I just say on this last round you had obviously made the decision to do law, you fancied a career in law and you applied to Oxford Brookes and had a place at Oxford Brookes.

**Ms Pitt:** Yes.

**Q309 Chairman:** Was it laid out to you who would be teaching you, how many contact hours you would have, what would be the nature of the programme, and has it lived up to expectations, or did you not even bother about that?

**Ms Pitt:** They had a broad overview in terms of what they would be teaching us and what the outcome of that would be, so skills and in terms of the

knowledge that you would gain, but in terms of the amount of hours you would be studying or who would be lecturing you, I was not aware of any of that.

**Q310 Chairman:** Was it important to any of you who you would actually be having as a tutor, as a lecturer, who would be guiding you, how many hours you would have? Did anybody say that was important?

**Ms Tye:** I actually chose history at Brookes because of the research rating, the department is very highly rated for research and I have actually seen the benefit of that throughout my degree.

**Ms Edwards:** Getting a clear idea of the hours involved and when lectures would be was incredibly important to me because of child care, and even more so in my second year as my mother who was doing most of my child care passed away in the summer, so it has become more difficult for me. I do not know whether partly it is because the tutor team for midwifery is very small at five main tutors who are in a lot of contact with us, they are easily contactable all the time, they do their best to address any queries and are as flexible as they can be with us. All of that was very important to me and I felt that Brookes did all they could to give me the information I needed.

**Q311 Mr Boswell:** Did the others get that sort of exposure at any stage? When you got here was there a statement of what you would be expected to do and when you would be expected to be here?

**Ms Pitt:** Yes.

**Ms Tye:** Yes.

**Q312 Mr Boswell:** And that was reasonable. If you had any particular need, one might have had a religious need or something else, would they try and accommodate that as well?

**Ms Tye:** Yes, I would say so.

**Q313 Chairman:** I want to move on now and bring in my colleague Ian Stewart about the quality of teaching. We have been running an e-consultation during this particular inquiry and this is what one post read: “At the university I am attending the courses are pitched at a level that ensures the least intelligent in the class is able to pass. We are frequently ‘taught the exam in tutorials. Assignments and practicals are poorly conceived. Feed back is rare. I believe this is a product of the department having to meet pass rate targets in order to secure funding.” Does that ring a bell?

**Ms Pitt:** Not at all.

**Ms Tye:** No.

**Q314 Chairman:** If not, Jun, what is the quality of your teaching here? Nobody is listening so you are all right.

**Mr Rentschler:** I am in two different fields because I am doing business and economics. I am very happy with my teachers and my lecturers in the economics field but in business it is more that I do not like business that much.

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30 March 2009 Mr Gregory Andrews, Mr David Child, Ms Victoria Edwards, Ms Meagan Pitt, Mr Jun Rentschler and Ms Sally Tye

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**Q315 Chairman:** You are not engaged as a student.

**Mr Rentschler:** I am engaged but I just prefer economics, so I am majoring in economics, I am taking the majority of my modules in economics and I like my economics teachers. Business is not really mine and I do not like the teachers that well either.

**Q316 Chairman:** How would you describe good teaching?

**Mr Rentschler:** You can really tell a good teacher when he actually knows what he is talking about and has all the background information but still can bring it together and just give you a framework of what to study at home, just give the important framework, the basic main points of what the subject is about and then you can go home and you know what to do, you know which gaps to fill. Obviously you cannot cover everything in a lecture.

**Q317 Chairman:** Does it matter that they are world-class researchers?

**Mr Rentschler:** It does not matter to me at all. We have quite a lot of international teachers in the economics field which is quite interesting because some of them teach economics in their home country—economics in Asian-Pacific countries for example—which is very good, but then again we have some problems with language, some of the lecturers are quite hard to understand, especially for me, because I am not that familiar with English.

**Q318 Ian Stewart:** Your English is better than mine.

**Mr Rentschler:** Talking and understanding it is different.

**Q319 Ian Stewart:** Absolutely. Universities are taking a lot of trouble to train lecturers but are there areas where you would like to see developments in lecturers' training, perhaps to meet needs that are not met for you?

**Mr Andrews:** I see particularly in architecture that there are a lot of two tutors to one student; every Monday and every Thursday it is one tutor to one student, so you have one-on-one tutorials and although they only last 15 minutes as far as design work is concerned you learn more in that than you would at any other time. My tutors also contact me on Facebook and by email on a regular basis too.

**Q320 Mr Boswell:** And it is well-prepared when you do meet them.

**Mr Andrews:** Basically I submit my work and they comment on it, but I get a precedent study every week, at least one, so they have done their research on my project. They also communicate between each other so if one person was not there they would know how far I have progressed in between.

**Q321 Ian Stewart:** That is in architecture studies; is that the same experience across other studies?

**Ms Tye:** In history we get voluntary tutorials and they are working to implement it more within the department. I did not realise for my first year and a half that I could go with my essay question and have

a tutorial on it; however, once I did my grades improved dramatically. I actually pushed this in a meeting and they are actually working now to implement it. Basically you have the option of a tutorial for every single piece of work you do, and that is one-on-one for as long as you need the help. Also you can email them and they email you back and things like that, so they are very accessible.

**Ms Pitt:** In terms of law you are welcome to go and see any tutor, in particular if you email them during office hours, and that is something I found very helpful in terms of one-to-one. However, in terms of seminars, because there tend to be quite a few of us in a seminar—

**Q322 Chairman:** Give us a number, ten, 15?

**Ms Pitt:** I would say between 15 and 20, not that everyone always comes, but it is around that number. It would be more beneficial if it was more than an hour because I often find myself not being able to ask all the questions that I want, and even though I could go to them at a private time I would just forget the question. It would be more beneficial if they extended that hour seminar.

**Q323 Ian Stewart:** Is that because you are stimulated by the larger group?

**Ms Pitt:** Yes, it does encourage discussion which does bring up more questions so I think we need more time.

**Q324 Ian Stewart:** Are you taught by research students, higher degree students or part-time tutors?

**Ms Pitt:** All of them are lecturers in the seminars and they are very good at their jobs I have to say, especially considering that coming from school to university it is a big step between independent study and being spoon-fed. That was the most difficult thing for me, I think, so it is important to have a teacher that has the right balance between knowing what they are saying and being able to say it in a way that I understand. In terms of that balance they are quite good.

**Mr Child:** I would just like to comment that the staff in the school of technology are very approachable; if you need to speak to a lecturer you can just go to their office and speak to them, they are more than happy to let you stop them during a lecture and ask questions and have a discussion. The thing that probably stands out for me the most is that my twin brother did an undergraduate degree at Bath doing electronic engineering and he was very much surprised that when I refer to a lecturer I refer to them by their first name. This is something that was quite alien to him, you do not do that; the classes were a lot bigger for him and you just did not have that one-to-one contact and that personal relationship with the lecturers, which I guess I have taken for granted because I assumed that was the norm, but clearly that is not the same everywhere.

30 March 2009 Mr Gregory Andrews, Mr David Child, Ms Victoria Edwards, Ms Meagan Pitt, Mr Jun Rentschler and Ms Sally Tye

**Q325 Chairman:** Victoria, what is your experience?

**Ms Edwards:** We are a small cohort; we were 14, we are now 13. We have five tutors and because midwifery is such a practical subject half our course is spent in practice hours either at the John Radcliffe, the Horton or in the community. They are all tutors who have a long background in midwifery, they are all practising midwives themselves and also they have the whole academic side of it to bring to us as well. Out of our cohort of 13, ten of us are mature students so the midwifery tutors are particularly tuned in to our needs as mature students—the majority of us have children and families. It is not that that means we are asking for special treatment constantly, but we bring something different to the course and our needs are slightly different as well. We have a personal tutor who is responsible for all of us through the whole three years, so we can approach her at any time, and because we are a small group with a small group of tutors we know the tutors very, very well and we can contact them via email, we have their mobiles and we see them and only them in our lectures so it is good.

**Q326 Chairman:** Can I just follow up on that really across the piece, but you do not all have to answer this. When Glen and I visited a university in London a number of the students expressed concerns to us about the feedback they got in terms of their academic work, and this was an issue I raised this morning with some students from Oxford University and from the colleges. How do you get feedback to know on your examined work whether you are making process rather than just getting a mark or a few ticks, which is what I used to do? What do you get in terms of feedback that actually improves your performance? Jun?

**Mr Rentschler:** I have to say that I am quite dissatisfied with the feedback. I do not know how it works in the other schools but in the business school in the first year I submitted some work and I got I do not know how many per cent but it was quite good, say it was 72 per cent. The lecturer told me it is a good piece of work so I said “There is one-third missing, where is it?” and she said “You cannot score better than 80 in the first place” and I said “All right, what is missing then?” She said it was just the general impression or something like that and so I could not improve anything; I did not know what I did wrong, I did not know how to improve my work, and that has been similar throughout the last two years. Compared to my school education at home in Germany I think it is quite surprising that you have hardly any real possibility to see your exam work, for example. If you do not know and you cannot do your exams afterwards where is the point in doing exams if you do not know what the mistakes are and what to learn from them?

**Q327 Chairman:** Any other comments on that?

**Ms Tye:** I have had a very different experience. On every single piece of work—we usually get a piece of work midway through the semester and then at the end of the semester and we get the cover sheet

marked with all the different requirements and what mark we have got with comments at the bottom. Usually on an essay we have to go for a tutorial to pick up our work and they go through it with us as to what we need to do. If we have done a presentation then usually at the end of the presentation we get feedback on exactly what we have done wrong and why we have got the mark we have got. With exams and things that are right at the end of the semester we usually get an email saying if you want to come back in and pick up your work and discuss your grades you are welcome to in the following semester, so that is even when they are not teaching us.

**Ms Edwards:** I have had a mixed experience. The two exams that I have sat have not been midwifery-based—one was a physiology exam and the other was a research exam and they were generic across all the healthcare professions. Those two I have had no feedback from, just a mark, but all the essay assignments that we have handed in for midwifery they tick on the criteria sheet where you came on that but then there is an A4 page on the front and through your work you will find numbers, one to whatever, then you look at the A4 sheet and it is number 1 “You could have expanded this point a bit more”, “How about discussing this . . . ” or number 2: “Don’t use colloquialisms” or whatever it is. You can go through the essay and they will give you lots of feedback.

**Mr Child:** I would say it is varied, it depends which lecturer it is to be honest. Some are absolutely brilliant, you get reams and reams of paper back telling you everything you could have done better and even highlighting the points that you actually got right and making a deal of the fact that you did it this way and that is a very good way of doing it. That is a positive, but with other lecturers you just get a mark back but in all fairness for the lecturers who just give you a mark you can go and speak to them, you can arrange to go and see them and discuss the work, so there is always the option for feedback if you feel you need it.

**Q328 Chairman:** Do most students take advantage of that or if the mark is good enough they do not?

**Mr Child:** It depends what your mark is to be honest. If it is a good mark people are quite content with that, if it is a low mark they will be more insistent on finding out what went wrong.

**Ian Stewart:** Unless you are Jun and you want the other eight marks.

**Q329 Mr Boswell:** Can I just ask a separate question about your interaction with other students on a course. You were talking about relatively small seminar groups which all of you have experienced at some stage, although you, Gregory, said you had one-to-one tuition on an intensive basis for a quarter of an hour at a time. People often say the tutorial as practice down the road is the apogee of learning and the supreme test. How much value do you attach to having your peers in the room, people doing the

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30 March 2009 Mr Gregory Andrews, Mr David Child, Ms Victoria Edwards, Ms Meagan Pitt, Mr Jun Rentschler and Ms Sally Tye

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same course as you and being able to bounce ideas off them as well? We might start with Victoria because she is on a specifically vocational course.

**Ms Edwards:** It is hugely important because a lot of what we come across in practice is very emotive and can be quite distressing or can be really thrilling, and when your emotions are going up and down like that and you are dealing with those situations that we are it is really, really important in a safe and confidential environment to be able to discuss those things.

**Q330 Mr Boswell:** Would anyone else like to comment?

**Ms Pitt:** In terms of law the fact is that there is debate and disagreement in itself, so it is important to get the other person's opinion because what they think I might never have thought of but it is a valid point. That is quite important so I would agree with that.

**Mr Child:** Two things on this one. Tutorials being optional, the number of people turning up varies depending on which subject it is. They are useful for improving your understanding and helping with the specific coursework, but one point I would like to make is that the former student project that runs is a non-marks based project so you do not actually get any academic grades out of that, it is purely you wanting to be involved to learn and to work with your peers, which is something the school pushes very hard and is certainly an invaluable experience.

**Q331 Mr Boswell:** Just for the record the Chairman and I would say it was a remarkable outcome and—I know you could not be there, David—that presentation at the Commons was really worthwhile, it was brilliant. I would acknowledge everything you say, that you do not have to get marks to do good work, perhaps we should say that. Can I just probe briefly the link between research and teaching? I do not know for a start whether any of you know how research-intensive your tutors are, whether you looked them up on the internet before you decided to honour the university with your presence or whether you have views as to whether their being research-strong is good for you as a pupil or not; any views on that?

**Ms Tye:** I am a big fan of research and the history department has a particular strength in research, which you do see in your lectures a lot; you are consistently getting figures or analysis or theses coming—we have not quite published this yet but we just thought we would throw it at you, see what you think. History is a research-based subject so if you did not have people right at the forefront it would be a serious detriment to the level of learning you are getting.

**Q332 Chairman:** Can I just check on that? If I am researching Henry VIII and the Tudors—I am not, but let us say I was—and I am a real expert, I know everything about the Tudors and Henry VII's ships et al, but you are being set work on 19<sup>th</sup> century

social and economic history, how does that help, having a researcher working in a totally different area?

**Ms Tye:** You would not, you are taught by people who are researching in that area.

**Q333 Chairman:** You are stuck with whatever they are interested in.

**Ms Tye:** No, because they are very good, they tend to encourage you to actually challenge their ideas. I am doing a module at the moment with a guy called Roger Griffin who does fascism and he has got a very definite idea of fascism, but he is still outlining what everybody else thinks and he is there, "Does anyone want to challenge me, does anyone want to give anything different to this?" and a lot of time they are asking you does anybody want to do an independent module, does anybody want to do research and work with them, challenge their ideas. I wrote an ISM for someone and totally challenged what they believed in and they were totally okay with that.

**Q334 Mr Boswell:** Is that pretty well true across the various schools in your experience?

**Ms Pitt:** It depends for me personally on the area of law that we are talking about because for theoretical subjects like legal method and constitutional law I prefer someone that is more research-based and knows what they are talking about. In terms of areas like contract, tort, commercial I would prefer someone who has actually practised in the field so they know the nitty-gritty of it and not just the whole theoretical side, so it depends.

**Q335 Dr Harris:** You really want the person who is writing the exam paper, do you not?

**Ms Pitt:** Yes, probably.

**Q336 Dr Harris:** To what extent do you think you are going to get that? Obviously you have not taken your exams yet but to what extent do people know which of the lecturers to have particular regard to, depending on whether they are on the exam board this time, or whatever the equivalent is?

**Ms Pitt:** I tend to look at past exam papers. I am only an undergraduate so you can see who did the previous year's and if they are still there that tends to be the person who is doing the exam, so from that I kind of listen to what they say.

**Q337 Mr Boswell:** There is some game theory in this. Can I just ask you—my final question—about we hear from perhaps other institutions that sometimes people complain and they say we have got a really good tutor in this department, the only trouble is it is a five-rated department and we never see them and the whole thing is in the hands of graduate students or whatever who teach us. Do you ever get that sort of a problem, of tutors never around to teach you? On the whole I must say you have described situations where your tutors are accessible; is this because they are not very research-intensive or are they super-people?



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30 March 2009 Mr Gregory Andrews, Mr David Child, Ms Victoria Edwards, Ms Meagan Pitt, Mr Jun Rentschler and Ms Sally Tye

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**Mr Child:** Certainly the point on research, from your previous question and this one, there is a mix. Some lecturers are research-intensive, some have apparently no interest, but that is only from what we see. However, I suspect it is rather different in engineering to what it is in other subjects in the fact that although people doing research are pushing the knowledge and understanding we also have a fair few lecturers who have had many years of industrial experience and certainly within the automotive and motor sport sectors any developments in technology and general engineering practices are not necessarily published and do not necessarily have research as such to go with them in the traditional sense, so you do learn from lecturers who are doing current research and are aware of current research, but equally and just as important, if not more important, you are learning from the people who have been there, done that and understood the fundamental engineering principles of the situation they are applying, which has not necessarily been made aware to the general community.

**Q338 Mr Boswell:** It seems to me that there is a germ of an agreement with Meagan on that in that you are saying there are some people who will be great on materials science or aerodynamics in principle and somebody else who will fix you up a new diffuser overnight if that is what the Braun team needs.

**Mr Child:** Yes, exactly, there is the academic side to the research and the lecturers who are recognised as good researchers and for the work they are doing, but equally there are other people who are not interested at all in publishing research or having any recognition for it; they are more interested in the final result and how to do things, so to be able to learn from both types of people is invaluable.

**Q339 Dr Harris:** Meagan, what is your feeling about law students at the other university in Oxford? I ask the open question first and then I have got a few follow-ups.

**Ms Pitt:** In what context?

**Q340 Dr Harris:** There is another university in Oxford and there are students doing law there. Do you see them much, are you aware of them?

**Ms Pitt:** No. We saw quite a bit of them in Freshers' Week because all of us were out and I met a couple, but they were not really that keen to stick around and talk to us.

**Q341 Dr Harris:** How do you and your colleagues feel, do you feel that they are going to have some advantages over you?

**Ms Pitt:** Definitely.

**Q342 Dr Harris:** What are they?

**Ms Pitt:** In terms of law, as far as my interpretation is, it is all about prestige, is it not? Even if I have a first from Oxford Brookes and another person has a first from Oxford, the person from Oxford is going to get the job because it is the whole prestige. I have been told that Oxford calls us the ELC—which is the

Early Learning Centre. There is definitely that prejudice against people from a lesser university so they have an advantage.

**Dr Harris:** That is right.

**Ian Stewart:** It is funny the V-Cs could not tell us that.

**Q343 Dr Harris:** That is an allegation made about students at Oxford.

**Ms Pitt:** Yes.

**Q344 Dr Harris:** Or is it employers?

**Ms Pitt:** It is employers as well, it is with any university, because they have a ratings system of the best universities for certain subjects so they assume they have higher requirements,

**Q345 Chairman:** What is it based on?

**Ms Pitt:** Higher requirements for getting in. I do not know what you need to get in to Oxford.

**Q346 Dr Harris:** It is about three As so do you think it is justified on average that if the entrance requirements to get into that course are significantly higher—three As say compared to three Bs—the products of that course, assuming that it is not badly taught, are likely to be rated more highly by prospective employers on average, all other things being equal?

**Ms Pitt:** That is unfair because they do not take into consideration the way that you got there basically; to them everything is on paper, three As is three As and three Bs is three Bs but they do not take other things into consideration.

**Q347 Dr Harris:** These are the employers who are offering the training contracts do not take it into account.

**Ms Pitt:** Yes.

**Q348 Dr Harris:** Obviously there are no architects there to give you trouble as it were, but there is presumably history. Do you have a history perspective?

**Ms Tye:** I actually applied to Oxford. I did not actually like the course as much although obviously if I got the opportunity to go there I am not going to lie, I probably would have gone there. However, I do not know, maybe with prospective employers it works both ways; if you have an Oxford graduate applying for your job and it is not necessarily what you think—maybe that thing about being over-qualified and things like that, or some sort of prejudice towards Oxford. If you have got someone who did not necessarily go there and went to a different university who has got something against it, Oxford is kind of a big thing and you are going to get lots of different opinions.

**Dr Harris:** It can work both ways. I want to talk money now, if I may.

**Chairman:** May I, just before you move on to money—

**Dr Harris:** Of course you may, you are the expert in fascism. I am joking.

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30 March 2009 Mr Gregory Andrews, Mr David Child, Ms Victoria Edwards, Ms Meagan Pitt, Mr Jun Rentschler and Ms Sally Tye

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**Q349 Chairman:** This is the trouble with Oxford students you see. We heard from the two Vice-Chancellors that a 2:1 in history from Oxford was the same as a 2:1 from Oxford Brookes; is it in your view?

**Ms Tye:** To be quite honest I have not done history at Oxford so I do not know, I have never experienced the teaching.

**Dr Harris:** They said it was the same, they said it was not better—

**Q350 Chairman:** Just leave me to it a minute.

**Ms Tye:** Unless I have been taught by an Oxford professor—a lot of the history lecturers at Brookes are actually Oxford graduates but I do not think I can answer that question because I have never been taught, I do not know.

**Chairman:** That was absolutely the right answer by the way.

**Ian Stewart:** The V-Cs should have listened to you first!

**Q351 Chairman:** I move on subsequent to that, do you think it is important that there is some objective measure which says that a 2:1 degree from university A is of a similar standard to a 2:1 degree from university B? Is it important?

**Ms Tye:** For employers, yes.

**Q352 Chairman:** Is it important for you as well?

**Ms Tye:** Yes, I think it is because whenever you go through school you are measured against your peer group, A-levels are across the board and things like that, so it seems strange that universities are on a different measurement and I think for your own personal sense of how well you are doing—

**Q353 Mr Boswell:** If Meagan is right though that there is an implied discrimination by employers, the danger with that situation is that you look as if you have got the same and you probably believe that you have, and indeed you may actually have, but if other people will not buy the currency you are in trouble.

**Ms Tye:** Yes.

**Q354 Chairman:** Which is why we are asking the question should there be an objective assessment in your view, and you seem to agree on that.

**Ms Edwards:** I think so, definitely, because anybody in my situation, if they are living in Newcastle or Stockport or wherever it is, and they have got their family there and children in schools there, you do not have a choice about which university you apply to, so you need to know that your 2:1 from that university is going to be exactly the same as far as employers are concerned. There are lots of reasons why people choose their university and sometimes you do not have a choice. If I had not got a place at Oxford Brookes I would not have gone on the course because there is nowhere else I could have commuted to.

**Mr Child:** Certainly engineering is a bit different because my degree is accredited by the Institute of Mechanical Engineers; therefore, wherever you go to get an engineering degree, if it has accreditation by the same board that takes away any difference.

**Chairman:** Thank you for that, they were very, very good responses. Back to you, Dr Harris.

**Q355 Dr Harris:** On this question there is this research institute called Henley and they looked at law across loads of universities. I have got the figures for the University of Oxford and Oxford Brookes and, as you implied, Meagan, the UCAS tariff to get into Oxford is about 500, to get into Brookes it is about 350, and therefore there is an implication that more students will do better at Oxford—and indeed that is reflected, in fairness, in the percentage obtaining a first or 2:1 which is 90 per cent in Oxford and 36 per cent at Brookes. Does that fit your experience, that just over a third of you get a first or a 2:1?

**Ms Pitt:** Yes.

**Q356 Dr Harris:** It also reveals this interesting figure, that by asking the students very clearly how much work they do in terms of both teaching and private study, 40 hours per week, obviously in a shorter timescale at the University of Oxford, and 21 hours per week in total of teaching and private study at Brookes, albeit over a few more weeks. Does that finding surprise you?

**Ms Pitt:** I do not think so. From what I know the people who go to Oxford have been from a young age indoctrinated into a system of working, so to them it is almost second nature, whereas for me personally, coming from South Africa and then doing my A-levels which I did at a sixth form college, it was not like a boarding school basically where you stayed there, you knew when you had to work, it was very independent. The differences for Oxford Brookes students and Oxford students are bridging the whole independent study thing to getting a good output in their exams and in their coursework. It is all down to the personal effort you put in and how much you want it and your background, how much you have been taught to have a good work ethic.

**Chairman:** Can we just do a question on finance, please; we have three minutes left.

**Q357 Dr Harris:** On the money side to what extent is debt or income an issue for you in terms of carrying on studying now as opposed to getting a job? Do you have jobs outside?

**Ms Pitt:** I work during the holidays if I can because the maintenance grant that I have now is not enough so I need to bridge the gap to pay for my accommodation, but other than that I see university as an investment really because I know I am going to do well and I will be able to pay back what I owe in the future. That is not a problem for me.

**Q358 Dr Harris:** You are not worried about your debt.

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30 March 2009 Mr Gregory Andrews, Mr David Child, Ms Victoria Edwards, Ms Meagan Pitt, Mr Jun Rentschler and Ms Sally Tye

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*Ms Pitt:* No.

**Q359 Dr Harris:** As long as you do not have to repay it until you are ready.

*Ms Pitt:* Yes.

**Q360 Dr Harris:** Do you have a view, Sally?

*Ms Tye:* It was a pretty big consideration for me because obviously I was coming up just as the top-up fees were coming in, and one of the reasons Cardiff was my first choice was because they had not yet introduced the higher fees. It was a big consideration but I do not think it would have stopped me going to university and I am actually going to go on to do a masters. Obviously I am applying for funding for that but I have worked out that I can pay for it myself and the money is not going to deter me from doing it. However, it has made me think a little bit more than I would have done before.

**Q361 Dr Harris:** You are paying for it yourself with?

*Ms Tye:* By working.

**Q362 Dr Harris:** Right. Does anyone else have a view on this?

*Mr Child:* It might have been different if I had come into the system now but given that I started four and a half years ago I am on the old tuition fee system; consequently my debt is not nearly as bad as someone starting now. It would have been more of a

consideration but ultimately I decided this is the career I wanted and I knew that eventually I would repay it.

**Q363 Dr Harris:** Clearly you are a selected sample of people who have not been put off by debt by definition, but you are not yet a selected sample in terms of your future careers. Is the fact that you have, those of you who do, some debt an influence on whether you might be interested in a less well-paid job that really interests you—I do not know if it applies to you, some people are interested in more research or teaching—or a well-paid job that maybe does not interest you that much except for the fact that it will be better paid to pay off your debt and that sort of thing. I know this does not apply to you.

*Ms Tye:* I am doing history anyway so it is not directly into a vocation, so that kind of says a little bit about the sort of person I am, but one thing that my father taught me—he has a job that he absolutely loves and he said you spend most of your life working, therefore you might as well do something you enjoy. That is kind of what I have always gone by. The debt is always going to be at the back of your mind but I am much more interested in doing something that I get a lot out of and that I enjoy.

**Chairman:** That is a fantastic place in which to finish this particular session. Can we just thank you all very much indeed for giving a splendid effort this afternoon and demonstrating just what a good university you are at.

**Ian Stewart:** Well done.

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Wednesday 29 April 2009

Members present

Mr Phil Willis, in the Chair

Mr Ian Cawsey  
Dr Evan Harris  
Dr Brian Iddon

Mr Gordon Marsden  
Graham Stringer

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*Witnesses:* **John Crompton**, Head of R&D Recruitment for Europe, Procter & Gamble for the CBI, **John Harris**, Higher Skills/Education Manager, SEMTA, **Mike Harris**, Head of Education and Skills Policy, Institute of Directors (IoD), and **Andrew Ramsay**, Chief Executive Officer, Engineering Council UK (ECUK), gave evidence.

**Chairman:** Good morning. I would particularly like to welcome our witnesses from the world of business and industry and say how pleased we are to see them. For the record, we welcome John Crompton, the Head of European Recruitment at Procter & Gamble for the CBI, John Harris, the Higher Skills and Education Manager for SEMTA, Mike Harris, the Head of Education and Skills Policy from the Institute of Directors, and Andrew Ramsay, the Chief Executive Officer from the Engineering Council UK. By way of introduction, gentlemen, we are particularly interested as far as this inquiry is concerned to get an employer's view on the employability of undergraduates but, also, on some of the problems which we foresee going through this inquiry which we think affect graduate employment. I am going to ask my colleague Evan Harris to begin this morning.

**Q364 Dr Harris:** Thank you. I just want to keep it within the Harrises to start with. Mr Mike Harris, are you a graduate yourself?

**Mr Mike Harris:** I am indeed.

**Q365 Dr Harris:** What degree and from where?

**Mr Mike Harris:** A history degree from Birmingham University.

**Q366 Dr Harris:** What class, may I ask?

**Mr Mike Harris:** First class.

**Q367 Dr Harris:** I am not suggesting that your degree was not worthy of a first class, but there has been an increase in the number of first class degrees obtained. Just like with A-level qualifications, some in industry have suggested that that is grade inflation. Is it your organisation's view that the same applies to university degrees?

**Mr Mike Harris:** I think that is quite a complex question to answer. As a general base, our members are quite upbeat about the quality of education delivered by universities but do recognise that the rising number of first class degrees and 2:1s awarded can make it more difficult when recruiting to distinguish between the top candidates. I do not think they would support the view that this is representative of grade inflation, although grades have risen, in the same way that 'A'-level grades have risen.

**Q368 Dr Harris:** It is strange, because I understand that the IoD—I have vivid memories of Ruth Lee and, I think, her successors—complain every time the A-level results improve, but you are saying—and I think this is consistent with your evidence—that the follow-through of those better qualified A-level students into getting better degrees is not a problem. Is the IoD happy with that apparent inconsistency in its position?

**Mr Mike Harris:** Our members are most dissatisfied with early years education, because we still see people with very good quality degrees with basic skills deficiencies. The other target is employability skills. I do not think there is an inconsistency in saying that there is a problem to distinguish between candidates but still to say that there are weaknesses.

**Q369 Dr Harris:** I will put it in stark terms: the A-level results come out and there are more and more grade As. "Dumbing down," says the IoD. I am not arguing with you, I am just saying what you say. You accept that. The degree classifications also have seen an increase in the number of first class degrees. You say, apparently, in your evidence verbally now and in written evidence, that that is grade inflation. That is the potential inconsistency I want you to address, because if you take A-level improvement at face value, you would expect degree improvement, would you not? You do not accept the A-level improvement but you do not seem to object to what some people would say is the consequential degree improvement. That is illogical, arguably. Please explain why it is not.

**Mr Mike Harris:** We do not say that standards have "dumbed down" at A-level; we say that it is difficult distinguishing the best candidates. The same is true at university level. Our members are genuinely upbeat about the quality of education delivered by universities but perceive there to be problems right throughout the education system, beginning in schools and also in further education colleges, so that when you get your ultimate employee there are particular skills weaknesses.

**Q370 Dr Harris:** I thought that the IoD did complain about grade inflation at A-level.

**Mr Mike Harris:** No, we point out that there is a gap between our members' perception of quality and the figures that say "Three As".

**Q371 Dr Harris:** There is no such gap for graduates. That is interesting to note. Your view that you do not think that the current degree classification system is broken appears to be at odds with Peter Williams, the former Chief Executive of the QAA, who said that he thought it was “arbitrary and unreliable” in the press last year, and he stuck to that view in oral evidence to us some time after that. You disagree with him.

**Mr Mike Harris:** We do disagree. We do not argue the system is perfect but it is a very useful and very simple metric very early on in the recruitment process to give an indication of the overall calibre of an applicant. There are problems with comparability of degrees from different institutions that can present difficulties to employers and there are difficulties with the overall number of top degrees awarded, but the system itself is a very useful one. I think where the Burgess Group went wrong is that it made too much of a play on it being distracting and detracting from other information about an applicant’s abilities.

**Q372 Dr Harris:** It is strange. The QAA, you would think, would know. You are basing your view, I think—and there is nothing wrong with that—on the subjective views of your members.

**Mr Mike Harris:** I think we have a legitimate input into that inquiry. When we were asked, “What do your members think of that system? What do you think of that system” they are broadly happy with it, because they are familiar with it, they understand it, but they do not ever pretend that it can distil into a single grade the entire breadth of somebody’s abilities and skills.

**Q373 Dr Harris:** My colleague is going to ask you and the rest of the panel about the issue of comparability between different institutions, perhaps Birmingham and other universities, but leaving that aside, does anyone else from the panel want to comment on that first question?

**Mr Ramsay:** I think that the issue is really that British degrees/UK degrees have to exceed a certain standard. If you have an honours degree, you have an honours degree. The classification after that is really additional information to help an employer or a user of that graduate’s services in due course to understand a little bit more about the person. To that extent, it is probably not a big deal to compare firsts from different universities: if somebody has a degree, they have a degree, and that is a pretty comparable standard as a minimum across the British university system. I think Peter Williams was saying that that system of classification was broken, not that the quality of degrees was at fault. I think there has been widespread misunderstanding of that.

**Mr Crompton:** The CBI and also my company P&G would like to see them marked; in other words, you have a 2:1 but the different courses within that would be useful. How good is your maths? How good are your engineering and manufacturing skills? I think we have to get more involved in individual course marks.

**Q374 Dr Harris:** Why have they not given you that information? What possible reason could there be for withholding that?

**Mr Crompton:** It depends. Say you get a 2:1 and your average mark is 68%, you would normally put that on your CV and you will list some of the courses, but some people will just put 2:1 and not the list. With CVs, if you put that on, it gives employers a chance of reviewing the CVs in more detail before they bring people in for interview. I think individual course marks is very different. Germany do it, as you know.

**Q375 Dr Iddon:** Mr Ramsay, are you saying as employers that degrees are equivalent between universities in terms of standards but different in terms of content?

**Mr Ramsay:** More or less. From the point of view of the Engineering Council, we accredit degrees in engineering and we effectively set a minimum standard. If degrees meet that standard, then as far as we are concerned that is a good starting block for becoming a professional engineer. We do not say that particular universities provide better degrees than other universities. Precisely the point that I think you are making is that the content of degrees varies hugely in terms of the various modules, the extent to which particular branches of engineering are taken to a particular level, and that is inevitable. In fact that is one of the benefits of the British degree system, that there is such a variety of degree that you can match horses for courses.

**Q376 Dr Iddon:** Does everybody on the panel agree, because that is what universities have been impressing upon us, that between all the universities a degree in engineering of any kind and a degree of chemistry will be equivalent but there will be different course content. Is that generally accepted?

**Mr Ramsay:** Yes.

**Mr John Harris:** Yes.

**Mr Crompton:** Yes.

**Mr Mike Harris:** Yes.

**Q377 Dr Iddon:** We are agreeing with what the universities are telling us. Why is it that some universities find it very easy to get their engineering or their chemistry graduates into employment because they come from Oxford or Cambridge, but some of the universities, which might not be as well-known as Oxford and Cambridge, with an equivalent degree find it very difficult to place their students?

**Mr John Harris:** Employers are looking for other things, other than a degree. They are looking for attitude of the individual and they are looking for certain skills and attributes that individuals may or may not have, so that will determine whether an employer employs a graduate from this university or that university. It is not driven by the name of the university or necessarily the degree classification. It really is a lot of other things that are measured by employers in the recruitment process.

**Q378 Dr Iddon:** When the “milkround” is active—and it is perhaps not as active this year for obvious reasons—why does it miss some universities out and go to Oxford and Cambridge and Manchester?

**Mr Crompton:** I think companies target certain universities because they contribute to the courses, they give sponsorships, sometimes scholarships, and work with PhDs with some of the students. You cannot cover all the universities, so I think most companies focus on, say, ten/15, and I think that will vary from university to university and also on what the needs are of the different companies. For engineering you will tend to go to some, but for humanities you will probably go to others.

**Q379 Dr Iddon:** It is nothing to do with managers in industry who have come from Oxford and Cambridge going back to their own university?

**Mr Crompton:** Definitely not.

**Mr Mike Harris:** There is also a resource issue. Seventy per cent of our members represent SMEs, and it is simply not practical for them to operate a “milkround” recruitment in the same way that it would be for a larger company. They would tend to have much closer relationships with probably a more local university, and probably have input into the course and take people on work placements or internships, and operate recruitment like that rather than seek to go around the country, because they could not support such a programme.

**Q380 Dr Iddon:** We have heard quite strong views while we have been hearing this inquiry that the degree classification is probably out of date—John Crompton was hinting at this a moment ago—and that really we ought to have a complete academic record and, perhaps more than just the academic record, as you have been saying, the more rounded education should be included: Did the guy row? Did the guy play for the rugby team? and so on and so forth. So that, instead of just looking at the degree classification, we should have a completed form with all this evidence on, for employers to be able to employ the right people. What is your view on that? Should we abandon the degree classification and replace it with a diploma and lots more information?

**Mr Ramsay:** We go along with the Burgess Report, which is to say that the Higher Education Achievement Record would be more useful for employers and people who are selecting graduates if they need to drill down and find the particular skills and abilities of the graduate, but, as a broad rule of thumb, most employers still use the classification system to decide between different potential employees. I think the issue really is that it is unwise to move too fast in these sorts of areas. The Members of this Committee will be very familiar with the issues involved in Burgess and the whole situation with regard to the university system, but for a lot of employers, particularly SMEs, it takes a very long time for them to catch up with changes to education. From the Engineering Council’s point of view, we constantly have problems with employers still expecting to find people with HNCs or with O-levels, because 20 years of educational change had

passed them by. I think it is important to move not desperately slowly, perhaps, but sedately towards a better system, so that employers can keep up, otherwise they will not know what they are getting.

**Q381 Dr Iddon:** So degree classification with a bit more information than at the moment.

**Mr Ramsay:** Yes.

**Mr John Harris:** I would support Andrew’s view. Employers do not say to us they have a problem with the current classification of degrees. They understand it, they use it, and they do not flag it up as a problem, but the record of achievement and current classification running together for a time would be very interesting and useful, I think.

**Mr Crompton:** I agree with that.

**Mr Mike Harris:** I think the real issue is a question of balance and getting the Higher Education Achievement Report, including some judgment of the overall grade, is useful. I think that where we have got to with the Burgess Group is a useful endpoint. We would not want to see that summative judgment phased out. We think that would be a mistake. It would be particularly bad news for SMEs, I think, to distinguish between all of the information you get in here. I think it is important to challenge this underlying assumption that employers just use 2:1 and above, because they do not, particularly within the SME end of the market. They are interested in getting the best candidates, and it is often just a starting point and not a finishing point. All the research we have done—and I think this is echoed by the work that the CBI has done—is emphasising wider skills, employability skills, looking at degree subject, way before you get to overall degree classification. I think we need to challenge that there is some artificial cut-off point and everything else is not taken into account. That is not our experience.

**Q382 Dr Iddon:** We have been getting the argument from some of the professional organisations—and John’s SEMTA is one of them—that the whole system would work better if professional organisations like SEMTA, or the Royal Society of Chemistry, or the Institute of Biology, accredited degrees in their subjects from the different universities. I remember when that was done in chemistry. You could rely on the Royal Institute of Chemistry, as it was then, to accredit chemistry courses across the universities. What do you think about professional accreditation of the same degree courses across all the universities?

**Mr John Harris:** In the engineering profession we value the accreditation of courses. It gives us confidence in certain degree courses that have been accredited by professional institutions. It is not a role for the SEMTA as a sector skills council to do that. It is not in our remit, but certainly we do value that and our employers value that. It is very useful.

**Q383 Dr Iddon:** What about Engineering Council UK?

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29 April 2009 John Crompton, John Harris, Mike Harris and Andrew Ramsay

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**Mr Ramsay:** Obviously we are fully committed to accreditation of degree programmes. The graduates of those programmes and the employers who employ them value the information, the evidence that degrees are accredited. We are aware that there are a number of degree programmes that call themselves “Engineering” or “Something Engineering” around the university system in the UK, and that is not necessarily a bad thing. In engineering, we have a long and—as you probably know because you have been looking into it recently—unhappy history of deciding that engineering is this and anything that is not inside it is not, and new societies and new organisations then spring up as a result. The example I have in mind is computer games. The University of Abertay in Dundee established an international reputation for the quality of their teaching and their graduates who were studying, effectively, how to design computer games. At the time it seemed a very trivial branch of engineering. Now it is well-established as an important contributor to the economy. People who can design computer games, not only in the games industry but also in other industries, are highly sought after. It is not necessarily so that accreditation is the be-all and end-all, but from the point of view of the mainstream engineering profession, it is bound to be very helpful.

**Q384 Dr Iddon:** What is the view of people like Procter & Gamble?

**Mr Crompton:** The accreditation is very important. I think the important thing about it is that a lot of it is done by the institutions or the institutes but it is people from industry who are going in there to do the accreditation. P&G supplies people to the Institution of Chemical Engineers to go and do the accreditation. The Royal Society of Chemistry as well.

**Q385 Dr Iddon:** It is valuable.

**Mr Crompton:** Yes, it is.

**Q386 Dr Iddon:** What is the view of the IoD?

**Mr Mike Harris:** I do not think we have an established view. My instinctive reaction is that where it makes sense is where both parties gain and establish credibility. Then it is perfectly welcome. Of course there will be a multiplicity of subjects which do not have a professional institute for which that would be appropriate, but I can see how both sides gain out of that arrangement where it works well.

**Q387 Mr Cawsey:** Good morning. I would like to ask a few questions about skills and what people should be looking at if they are going into their graduate education now. On the *BBC News* this morning there was a report from high-flyers showing that final year students were quite gloomy about their prospects of finding employment, with 52% saying that they thought the prospects were very limited and 36% saying they did not expect to get a graduate job this year. On from that, I am interested in what you think you would be looking for from graduates as they move into the employment

market. The IoD memorandum stated that, increasingly, employers were looking for the wider employability skills rather than the specific, although lots of people in this study were studying for specific careers. As well as that, should people be looking at high-level technical skills, here and now graduates that can move straight into the employment market like you are saying, or those who just prove that they can respond well to problem-solving in the complex and changing world that the future is going to hold? If you were advising people about to begin graduate education now, where do they go?

**Mr Mike Harris:** From our members’ point of view, it is employability. I appreciate that can be a bit of a woolly term, but they take it to mean a mixture of basic skills, personal qualities, good attitude, genuine employment skills, meeting deadlines, being reliable, and personal qualities. That really means, aside from the technical skills and the academic knowledge that you have picked up during the course of your degree, what is it that makes you function particularly well in the employment situation? It is that professionalism, it is getting on with people, it is being flexible and it is being reliable. That is what we have found to be valued above all other things when our members are recruiting graduates. It is that emphasis on employability and fitting into the workplace. The technical skills and the technical knowledge acquired through a degree have a much lower profile when they are recruiting. In terms of the message for what to do, I would focus on work experience, getting greater exposure to the workplace, even bringing your professional skills to bear in a work setting. That is what employers are using to distinguish between some very able candidates.

**Q388 Mr Cawsey:** We have also heard from other people saying that we do not have enough people training to be engineers and scientists for the future, which is kind of at the other end of that scale.

**Mr Mike Harris:** Both are true.

**Q389 Mr Cawsey:** Where is the balance in all of that?

**Mr John Harris:** As a sector skills council, our Sector Skills Agreement has indicated that up until this recession we have had serious shortages of engineers and scientists. I think that may be caused by the pipelines into higher education and not enough people with STEM backgrounds coming into the universities, so the output, therefore, is not enough to meet our employers’ needs for engineers and scientists. The issue about the actual skills that employers are looking for is an interesting and a complex area, because employers recruit different types of graduates for different types of roles, so there is not one role model that will fit every kind of graduate. The argument goes on and I think the argument that is winning is that more employers are saying that they want graduates who have a really good understanding of engineering principles and scientific principles—that is very important—and who then are able to apply those principles. So it is that, coupled with some practical skills to solve

problems and go into the workplace and do their job without too much on going training. It is a real solid education of engineering and scientific principles, with lots of hands-on experience in the university laboratories and workshops to turn that understanding into practice. On top of that, as you have rightly said, employers also want the other things as well. They want people with a good attitude, they want people who can communicate.

**Q390 Mr Cawsey:** They want their cake and eat it.

**Mr John Harris:** They do. One of the best ways of doing all of that, as we do with some courses, is sandwich degree courses, where undergraduates go out into industry for a summer placement or a year's placement and they do a real job of work for an employer and they acquire a lot of these employability skills. They learn how to communicate, they learn how to work with other people, they learn how to put their education into practice. That is very valuable.

**Mr Crompton:** I think each company knows the skills that are needed for people to be successful in that company, and they will vary from company to company. When they go on campus they will check people's skills coming in versus those criteria. At P&G we have nine criteria that we look at. I do not want to go into it in too much detail, but we know that if people are going to have those criteria they will be successful in the company. On top of that, especially for STEM, we need the basic academics. So we are after having cake and eat it.

**Mr Ramsay:** We take regular surveys from employers and we also rely on surveys by organisations such as SEMTA and the Royal Academy of Engineering. We use these to try to determine what particular selection of skills employers seem to be looking for. We also are able to triangulate this because we are members of two major international protocols where we are developing and adopting graduate attributes for engineers that are comparable around the world. We have an insight into what other countries are looking for from their graduates. As John was saying, no two employers are the same. Employers have a variety of jobs where they require different skill sets. They may be looking for engineers—and what I am talking about is engineering alone—but quite what they want to do with them will vary across disciplines. As you have said, often engineers are sought after simply because of their problem-solving skills, they are not looking for a particular technical content. But in other cases, really specialised industries are looking for a particular technical understanding of metallurgy or fluid dynamics or something.

**Q391 Mr Cawsey:** Mike, in your answer you alluded to the work experience that people may have done before they come out of university. We were in Washington last week looking at their universities and the student experience. One of the figures we got there was that an average American student works 30 hours a week alongside doing their degree course. Is it taken across all four of you that a graduate

improves their employability by doing work experience through their student years or even perhaps before they get to university?

**Mr Mike Harris:** I think probably there is a distinction between part-time employment, which might be bar work or something like that, and having the opportunity to have a two-week or three-week internship with a company and trying to apply more of your knowledge and skills in a way which takes that from an academic setting into a real world setting. This can be demanding, to ask students to subsidise their studies and then to have to take greater periods of work experience. That is why I think it is important to emphasise that employers are very willing to play their part in that. When we have done our research studies, we have had almost overwhelming results saying, "Yes, universities should be actively seeking to cultivate these skills" but almost exactly the same percentage saying "Business has to play its part in helping to develop it." I think there is that distinction between a routine job and having an opportunity in a much more structured fashion to do an extended project in an employment situation.

**Q392 Mr Cawsey:** Do people generally agree with that?

**Mr Crompton:** Yes.

**Q393 Mr Cawsey:** Okay. In your memorandum to us, Mike, you said that employers are generally happy with the quality of graduates and the standards they have achieved. That was something that Evan picked up with you earlier. Is that a consistent message over several surveys or is that showing signs of improving in more recent times?

**Mr Mike Harris:** It is a mixed bag. We asked absolutely "What do you think the quality of education delivered by universities is?" and they were broadly supportive. We also asked them to give their opinion on what had happened over the past ten years, and there they were slightly more negative. Interestingly, that tallied very much with a simultaneous poll we did of admissions tutors, asking for their experience, over the course of their experience in university admissions, of what had happened to the quality of their undergraduates at the beginning of their courses. It was the same sort of picture: some said it had improved; a body in the middle said it had stayed the same; and some said it had deteriorated. We see maybe a very slight slide over time but, broadly, the core product is still a good one and valued and respected.

**Q394 Mr Cawsey:** That is almost a bit inconsistent with what you said to Evan before about an increasing number of first class honours and no problems with that.

**Mr Mike Harris:** I hope I have not been inconsistent. Perhaps I did not get the opportunity to expand on what I said. The overall picture is positive but there are caveats. There are caveats in particular skills and there are caveats in particular subjects.

**Mr Cawsey:** Thank you.



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29 April 2009 John Crompton, John Harris, Mike Harris and Andrew Ramsay

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**Q395 Mr Marsden:** I would like to ask one or two questions about the changing nature of higher education and how that is perceived by them, particularly in respect of issues around admissions and wider participation. Perhaps I could start with John Harris and Andrew Ramsay. In the written evidence from your respective organisations you have queried the sense that we can carry on with the status quo. John, in the SEMTA evidence you talked about the process necessarily having to change with the incorporation of flexible learning and part-time and vocationally-related learning, and of seeing little value in simple expansion of existing provision in the traditional model. Andrew you have also made the point, which I think is widely recognised, that the demographic changes mean that we are going to have a far smaller number of 18-year olds from 2007 onwards, and, therefore, that again puts a premium on a more flexible range of applicants. All of that I absolutely agree with, incidentally. John, perhaps I could ask you to start with: Do you think universities have caught up with this or, indeed, some of the HR recruiters in the employment world?

**Mr John Harris:** Universities are responding because there has been a lot of activity around the Leitch Review on the need to upskill the current workforce. When you talk to employers, they are generally very supportive of that view but are worried about losing employees for periods of time from the workplace. When universities are able to deliver the learning in a flexible part-time way, that is obviously to the advantage of the employee and the employer. In fairness to universities, they are responding to that. There is a big change going on.

**Q396 Mr Marsden:** Is it fast enough?

**Mr John Harris:** Nothing is ever fast enough. It takes time. These things take time. But they are responding. I do not know of one university that I go to that is not trying to promote the needs of employers. They are trying to respond, but it takes time. It does take time.

**Q397 Mr Marsden:** Andrew, could I ask you the same question. While I am not asking any of you to name and shame particular universities, if you do feel that there are particular areas where a university is not moving fast enough in this respect, we would be grateful to hear from you.

**Mr Ramsay:** I wish I could help you there. I think the issue is probably that engineering has a long tradition of accepting mature students, and, indeed, having work-based learning alongside higher education.

**Q398 Mr Marsden:** Women mature students?

**Mr Ramsay:** Women? Mature students, yes.

**Q399 Mr Marsden:** I have asked the question about women because another body I am associated with, the National Skills Forum, has produced a report recently and I think there has been a lot of evidence that there are still far too few women going into these kinds of subjects, either at a younger level or at a mature level.

**Mr Ramsay:** I absolutely agree. We are involved in various fora and various initiatives to try to do something about that, but we have not found the magic bullet. What is disturbing is that amongst developed countries Britain does seem to under-recruit women into STEM subjects, engineering in particular, but a lot of effort is going into trying to encourage more young women in schools to consider these professions. Their A-level scores in things like physics and maths are improving, sometimes ahead of their male counterparts, and yet—

**Q400 Mr Marsden:** It is an attitude. When I say attitude, it is a role model issue.

**Mr Ramsay:** I suspect there is a tipping point that we have not reached. Heavily male industries like manufacturing or construction are not that encouraging for young women. You have to be quite feisty to get on in them.

**Q401 Mr Marsden:** Could I come back to John Harris and then I will move on to the other witnesses. In its written evidence, SEMTA has talked about the issue of co-funding courses. You said, “where employers are co-funding courses the university may not be able to stipulate strict entry requirements in terms of prior qualifications” and “the employer may wish to nominate employees who have a wide range of prior achievement”. I know there is always a bit of push and pull in these things, but you seem to be saying there that employers should be able to nominate students even if the university does not find them suitable or passing their initial entry requirements. Do you think that might be problematic?

**Mr John Harris:** I do not think that is the issue we are making there. The point we are making there is a simple one. It is that where employers are co-funding a course, they obviously have a say in which of their employees attend that course. I think that is the point we are making.

**Q402 Mr Marsden:** That is an existing issue.

**Mr John Harris:** Yes.

**Q403 Mr Marsden:** That is an existing situation.

**Mr John Harris:** Yes.

**Q404 Mr Marsden:** Are you pressing for an extension and an expansion of that process?

**Mr John Harris:** No.

**Q405 Mr Marsden:** John Crompton, perhaps I can come to you, again along this line of acceptance of higher education which comes via non traditional means and perhaps, particularly, acceptance by employers of these universities. There is an increasing amount of higher education which is being delivered by further education. In my own constituency, Blackpool, Blackpool and the Fylde College is an associate college of Lancaster University. Students of Blackpool and The Fylde

College get their degrees from Lancaster. You were a former FE<sup>1</sup> college governor, I gather, for a number of years.

*Mr Crompton:* Yes.

**Q406 Mr Marsden:** Is that message getting through to employers, that the HE<sup>2</sup> degrees that come via an FE experience can be as valid and valuable as ones that come via traditional higher education universities?

*Mr Crompton:* I think it is a change that is happening. I think the industry as a whole is beginning to accept it, whether they believe that it is horses for courses in the type of people coming out of those courses and coming to a certain area, rather than, say, going to a university—

**Q407 Mr Marsden:** Are you making a distinction there between vocational courses and non-vocational courses? In terms of Procter & Gamble's recruitment, would that mean that if you were not looking at someone who had done a vocational degree but perhaps a more standard degree, you would look more askance at someone who had come to that degree via FE than via a traditional university?

*Mr Crompton:* We would look at both. The vocational degree from further education and universities is more in a mix, and you have the other less vocational and more theoretical degree which is a different thing.

**Q408 Mr Marsden:** Mike, you quoted in your evidence that 64% of directors in a June 2008 poll said that “employers took A-level results into account when recruiting young people because they were a good guide to ability.” In view of the discussion we have just been having and, indeed, changing demographics, is it not going to be more sensible in future for some of your members to cast their net a bit more widely than just looking at A-levels as the gold standard, if that is what they do?

*Mr Mike Harris:* You are absolutely right, and they were and they do. That particular result was drawn from a study that was particularly looking at A-levels and GCSEs and perceptions of them, and not: What do you look at to the exclusion of everything else? We are going to need to meet our skills needs via the non-traditional methods within HE, whether that is in FE or whether it is in the workplace—which is a very difficult thing to get right, particularly for small businesses—and I think a huge amount of credit has to go to quite a number of institutions that have really picked up the baton on that. It is much easier to identify those who are doing it well than those who perhaps have not got there yet. But that is something which our members support and we would just like to recognise the effort that has been put in already.

**Q409 Mr Marsden:** Obviously the new boys on the block in terms of alternatives to A-levels—and obviously we have the IB<sup>3</sup> which has been around for some time—is this whole issue of apprenticeship expansion and diplomas. There are key questions there about whether universities will accept them as a higher education qualification. There is perhaps a sub-question about whether some of your employers will accept them in the same way. John Harris, do you have any views on that?

*Mr John Harris:* It is an interesting point. Two of our large engineering companies, which I will not name, say that 50% of their professional engineers have come through their apprenticeship programmes, so they have come to FE, on to HE, and probably through professional institutions to become chartered engineers. That is an interesting situation. I think that goes on in smaller companies but it is not so visible, but certainly in larger companies it is very visible. Going onto the diploma, we see the diploma as a real opportunity to give young people an opportunity to learn about, in our case, engineering, and, when the science diploma comes on stream, about science, and to find out at a fairly young age if that is what they want to do. We are confident. I do not work directly with the diploma team but they have worked very closely with the universities and we are confident that advanced diploma graduates will be able to go into the university and continue their studies. It is a real opportunity for us.

**Q410 Mr Marsden:** Andrew, from your perspective, are you equally sanguine about this?

*Mr Ramsay:* Yes, we worked very closely with SEMTA and a number of other sector skills councils to improve the diploma. Our concern—which is not so different from the concern we expressed in our written evidence about the quality of maths of students entering university—was redoubled in the case of the diploma, but we have been able to establish additional learning which will be part of the diploma which will make it perfectly acceptable as an entry requirement, and we will be very pleased to see people come through that route because it will have given them some hands-on experience before they go to university.

**Q411 Mr Marsden:** John, given your role for Procter & Gamble and the CBI, you must see an enormous amount of different attitudes in universities to the sorts of people recruiting. What is your experience through the universities to qualifications other than the gold standard A-levels? Also, there is a lot of talk, certainly from government, about employers paying significant sums of money for co-funded places. Is that going to be a realistic option for increase in an economic downturn?

*Mr Crompton:* The diplomas are new. The big thing about the diplomas, when somebody gets to 18 with a diploma, is do they go into higher education or do they start work. That has to be shaken out, because there will be quite a few opportunities for people who leave with a diploma at 18 to start work and use

<sup>1</sup> Further education

<sup>2</sup> Higher education

<sup>3</sup> International Baccalaureate

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29 April 2009 John Crompton, John Harris, Mike Harris and Andrew Ramsay

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their practical knowledge, operating equipment or working in a science lab. I am unsure how many of those are then going to go on to further education and what the design of it is. When they move from practical learning to some theoretical learning, how they are going to handle that with the maths is of concern.

**Mr Marsden:** A very interesting point. Thank you.

**Q412 Chairman:** In response to this co-funded issue, do you think it is going to be more difficult to get co-funded places now, given the economic recession, or are smart employers still going to say, “We want to support and get the best graduates into our business”?

**Mr Crompton:** Employers are always going to want to get the smart people. They will work with the smart people and they will do that by making payment in kind, I would guess, which is going and giving courses at universities, going to schools, encouraging people to go through, and giving up time. I think they will continue to sponsor people through university. They will continue to do PhDs. It will not increase, that is for sure, over the next couple of years. I think you will find that a lot of it will be payment in kind.

**Mr Mike Harris:** It is almost certain they will come under greater pressure, but I will be in a better position in about a week’s time to give you further details, because we are just launching a survey to try to get a better grip on what exactly is happening to companies’ training budgets—not with an intention to maintain investment in training in this coming year, but what kind of courses are now being

considered and what is there any focus on. Is it things like degrees, or is it much more needs intensive, customer service skills or something like that for business? I do not have any data I can share with you now.

**Q413 Chairman:** It would be useful if you could let us have that, because that would be very useful to enforce. A thought from you, Andrew, in terms of pressure on co-funding?

**Mr Ramsay:** Obviously the recession will make a difference but there is an interesting article in this week’s *Economist* about the extent of private as opposed to public funding going into higher education in a variety of countries and it draws the conclusion that the high standard in the United States of universities and their graduates, and to some extent in the United Kingdom, is due to the extent of private funding going into education, and that European universities have fallen behind because they rely almost exclusively on public funding.

**Q414 Chairman:** John, do you have a comment?

**Mr John Harris:** Employers do put an enormous amount of their money into universities. The research that goes on, funded by employers, is colossal, and sometimes it is not visible, it is not known.

**Chairman:** I would like to thank you all very much indeed for coming this morning. What has struck me very much is how positive you are about the product you are getting from our universities. All of you seem to be making that point. I thank you very much indeed.

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*Witnesses:* **Ricky Chotai**, student, University of Salford, **Carrie Donaghy**, student, Northumbria University, **Alasdair Farquharson**, student, University of Wolverhampton, **Gemma Jerome**, student, University of Liverpool, **Anand Raja**, student, University of Birmingham, and **Ed Steward**, student, University College London, gave evidence.

**Q415 Chairman:** We are delighted to have our panel of students with us who have been following events with great interest on their Twitter sites, their Facebook sites and, indeed, in their own universities. We welcome Ricky Chotai from the University of Salford, Carrie Donaghy from Northumbria University, Alasdair Farquharson from the University of Wolverhampton, Gemma Jerome from the University of Liverpool, Anand Raja from the University of Birmingham, and Ed Steward from University College London—who has had to come the least distance this morning. We thank you very much indeed. One of the things we asked people during this inquiry was to keep an eye on what was happening in terms of evidence presented to us, and you have heard some this morning from leading business organisations. Ricky, you expressed a number of very strong comments when we met you first of all.

**Mr Chotai:** Yes.

**Q416 Chairman:** Given the fact that you have said you have some thoughts about the evidence we have received and you have some comments on top-up

fees, on research, the quality of teaching, the National Student Survey, the platform is yours. But you do not have an hour; you have two minutes. Launch forth, and perhaps other students would respond as we go along—because we like to get a dialogue going here rather than a very heavy evidence session.

**Mr Chotai:** First, I will tackle the issue top-up fees, which is controversial at the moment and is still ongoing. I was looking through the evidence, especially from the vice-chancellors. There was a survey recently where two-thirds of the vice-chancellors agreed they would, if the fee was to be lifted then they would look to raise top-up fees. But one of the points I would like to tie in with this morning’s evidence—the employers were looking for sandwich courses and things like that—is that most universities—in fact Salford University is the only exception—charge fees, some half, some full, during the placement year. Academically, the universities do provide support services, but I think that from a student point of view £3,000 is a lot of money for two visits and just the support that is

given. That was one of the reasons why I chose Salford, because there were no fees. One area of concern is that if those fees were to be increased, how that would impact on the sandwich degrees and what line universities would take. Would they still be charging the full amount? Would they be charging 50%? Fifty per cent of £9,000 is £4,500, which is a lot of money for a year in industry. Obviously the wages during that year in industry are pretty much minimum wage, and taking into account fees as well, it is a deep consideration for students when they are looking to apply. Top-up fees is one of the issues that obviously we are still strongly opposed to because, at the moment, especially at Salford University, we do not feel that we are getting value for our money for £3,000, let alone raising it to anything further. The next was the National Student Survey. Reviewing the evidence again, I cannot remember directly who was discussing this. I am sure it was academics and also the vice-chancellors as well. They were expressing how important it was, but from a student point of view I wanted to let the Committee know of some of the tactics that universities are using to encourage students to fill in the survey. We hear comments such as “Ensure you don’t put bad things because it will affect Salford in the league tables” or “your university in the league tables” and “that will have an effect into your employability and how employees see that in the future.” They are using tactics such as that. I would say that the NSS can be useful but it is an area of concern as well.

**Q417 Chairman:** You have raised two big issues. We will park the first one, but on the second one I really would like to get some views from the rest of the panel. Basically you are saying there is pressure put on students in terms of filling in the student survey.

**Mr Chotai:** If the university spent as much time as they do putting pressure on getting students to fill in an NSS on other areas, such as giving feedback and organisation within degrees, I think we would have a better student experience in the first place.

**Q418 Chairman:** Are there any other comments on that? Do any of you share those views?

**Mr Farquharson:** I cannot say I really share the view that academic staff were deliberately putting pressure on students to give a positive opinion. Certainly at the University of Wolverhampton, in the school I am at, which is the School of Legal Studies, I am and have been for the last two years the student rep for the entire school, and we have made it very clear at the Student Union level that the opinions of students have to be completely independent. As far as I am concerned, they have been. We have not held back on criticising things when it was necessary and praising things when it was also necessary. I do not really think that in every case right across the board, at every university, academic staff have pressured the students to give a good opinion of their experience in order that the university would go up in the league tables.

**Ms Jerome:** I am slightly concerned with regards to the NSS, and the student experience being measured by indicators. Along those lines, some of the

transcripts of evidence suggested that we are experiencing the highest levels of satisfaction with higher education through the NSS results. I am aware that if we are measuring student experience by empirical indicators but simultaneously having a debate about whether we should change the classification system, there is some discrepancy there as to how we should be taking students’ opinions about their experience at university.

**Q419 Chairman:** Carrie do you want to say something?

**Ms Donaghy:** No, not on that.

**Q420 Chairman:** I want to try to get from you on this issue of the National Student Survey whether you feel generally that is an effective way of surveying students or whether there are other measures which are more important which are not included?

**Mr Raja:** I really do not think that the NSS is a very good way to measure real student satisfaction. I must confess that I have not looked at many of the questions that the NSS puts up to its participants, but to measure student satisfaction we need to look at more hard indicators of what the good student experience would be like. For example, I was reading through the evidence taken with some vice-chancellors and I think you yourself, sir, pointed out that the university that ranks the highest in student satisfaction is perhaps Loughborough. One of the vice-chancellors pointed out that that is because that university has an intimate and personal environment which makes students feel satisfied about it. I do not think that if such variables are affecting student satisfaction we should take it very seriously.

**Q421 Chairman:** Right, okay. Alasdair?

**Mr Farquharson:** The student survey in principle is a very good idea. The problem is though that there is a great deal of apathy amongst the student community throughout the country. A lot of students—and the statistics show this—simply do not respond or bother and the student unions up and down the country have a great deal of trouble trying to persuade students to actually fill these surveys in. Another problem with the survey, of course, is the timing with regards to students in their final year because many students graduate at a time just before the survey is to be completed, and therefore you are not getting necessarily the final opinion from third year or fourth year students with regards to their experience at university in that survey, and that is a critical time really. Once you have completed your courses and sat all your exams you are then in a position really to comment on the entire experience but the timing is not sufficient to enable all the students at that point to comment accurately.

**Q422 Mr Marsden:** I wanted to come to you, Carrie, because you had indicated that you wanted to say something about degree classification and we can obviously bring in other people’s comments as well. Most of you were in the previous evidence session so you will have heard from the employer panel on whether they felt the current situation was

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29 April 2009 Ricky Chotai, Carrie Donaghy, Alasdair Farquharson, Gemma Jerome, Anand Raja and Ed Steward

satisfactory or not, but perhaps you would like to share your views on it, Carrie. The other point that occurred to me while we were listening to the previous session—and I just throw this open for people to think about while Carrie is speaking—was that there are issues about percentages and all the rest of it, and it did occur to me as an inveterate non-scientist that actually some of these issues about percentages and that are a good deal more difficult in the humanities and some of the social sciences than they are in the sciences. However, that is a separate issue and I just leave that for now because we have obviously got a mix of people here in terms of their own degree backgrounds. Carrie, do you want to say a few words about that?

**Ms Donaghy:** After reading the evidence something that I really found particularly interesting and new was the proposed changes to the degree classification, and it was clear that some universities are piloting the new HEAR scheme. I do believe that the current degree classification is a little bit outdated and rigid. It does bear no reflection of students' contributions to sport and volunteering and things like that, so after I had read the evidence I spoke to some fellow students about it and they believe that the HEAR project is excellent, it is going to be an excellent way to keep the traditional elements of the degree classification that employers do recognise but also gives something further for employers to consider, because the ideal candidates think for jobs are often those who are involved with things like volunteering and sport, they are more social, they are team-players and team-leaders and the HEAR pilot will really see this through. Northumbria University is the university that I go to and it is currently trialling the system. I am not sure how it is going but I think the students have responded well to how it is going to fit in, and it is great to hear that it is going to be free and that it is going to be transferable for the whole of your professional career.

**Q423 Chairman:** Are there any other comments on the issue of degree classification?

**Mr Raja:** I would like to take contention with the idea that co-curricula activities like sports and joining societies should be considered in degree classification because I think there is a certain amount of, if you like, sanctity to education and to going to university. University is a place where you go to learn, just as a hospital is a place where you go to get treatment, it is not a place where you go for entertainment. Our universities are for learning; that should be kept in focus. Also the idea that including such variables in the degree would help employers make better sense of what a person is like is a good idea but it is not necessary to include those variables in the degree because you can always write about them in your CV. If you have participated in sports, if you have participated in societies then it will reflect in your personality as well so you already have it in you. I think in the status quo we achieve both aims; we achieve the sanctity of education, of the fact that university should be about learning and we also give

people an opportunity to develop themselves generally, and that gets carried forward without it being included in the degree itself.

**Q424 Chairman:** Ed, do you have a view on degree classification?

**Mr Steward:** I was actually going to say broadly similar to what Anand said. I have been involved in my union quite heavily for three or four years and certainly when I graduated I was in no way bitter that it was not on my degree. My degree is my academic achievement in my time at university and what I did with the union was wholly separate, and while the union and university together provide the full university experience, students certainly appreciate them being kept separate and doing union activities very much as enjoyment, not because they are a part of their degree. The entire point in union activities is that they are not part of their degree, it is an escape from the degree. Your degree is very much academic and from the university rather than the union.

**Q425 Mr Marsden:** Chairman, just before you bring Evan in can I just make one point which I think is quite an important one and I wonder if we are slightly losing track of it now. The issue about the statement, at least in my understanding, is not simply an issue about, as Anand said, things that you could put on your CV; it is fair to say that it arises from some concern that the mere fact that you get a 2:1 in geography or a 2:2 in psychology without any accompanying narrative of the sorts of courses you have done or, for that matter, how you might have fared between one course and another, is also a legitimate issue, so I wonder if people in their responses might want to look at that aspect of it as well.

**Mr Chotai:** I strongly disagree that a degree should purely be academic. So many activities encourage enterprise and things like that, all the soft skills that just the previous panel said they were looking for, and they were not just looking for an academic experience, they were looking for a rounded individual who had a lot of key skills, so definitely it should be included. In regard to the question about whether marks should be included to show the weaker and stronger subjects, definitely it does need to be included. If somebody who is scoring 61 is achieving a 2:1 and somebody who is scoring 69 is achieving a 2:1, yet they are only a 2:1 in the eyes of employers, it is quite important because there is quite a big separation that needs to be identified, especially if somebody is stronger in, say, mathematics and science-based subjects in comparison to written subjects and that also needs to be identified. It will be useful for employers to see where they may need to provide additional training or additional resources to help that individual grow within an organisation.

**Mr Farquharson:** I tend to agree really with everything that Anand and Ed have said with regards to extracurricular activities and academia, you cannot really blend the two and if you do you are likely to devalue the degrees that we are getting from

universities really, so we have to be very cautious there. With regards to the comments you made, Mr Marsden, concerning evidence as to what you studied, you do have the transcripts from your degree so if you have a 2:2 or a 2:1 then attached to that you do have access to the transcript of all the subjects you have studied. I should have thought that that would suffice.

**Mr Marsden:** That varies from university to university.

**Q426 Chairman:** It is not always the case.

**Mr Farquharson:** I have been to two universities now, the University of Wolverhampton where I am at the moment and the Open University,—and they are completely different types of organisations—and in both cases you can apply for a transcript.

**Q427 Chairman:** You would agree with Ricky that that level of transparency should be made available to employers.

**Mr Farquharson:** It should be made available to employers, yes, it should, but we are just concerned that students end up doing a lot of extracurricular studies and other activities and less academic work and therefore devalue overall the degree they are getting.

**Ms Jerome:** With regard to some kind of review of the classification system the potential benefits are that there are aspects of the degree that are not assessed. For example, I have to attend seminars which do not attract any degree of assessment, even though they are considered part of my personal development in my degree subjects, so some extra detail in an alternative classification system would allow people who have come through strongly in conversational skills or maybe public speaking, which would come out of a seminar, to show that, which might be appropriate to their chosen employer as well.

**Q428 Chairman:** Ed, you wanted to come back quickly and then the last word on this is to you Carrie.

**Mr Steward:** I was just going to say broadly the same. It seems from what I can gather that Ricky's arguments are based on the assumption that when you apply to firms for graduate employment you just say your degree and your degree classification, but I know when I apply I will be attaching a transcript of my three years of university which I have access to, because my university has to keep all those grades in order to come to my final degree classification. I will also be writing down everything that I did outside of my academic life there on a side sheet. On a separate note, the only thing I am cautious about here is that we do not get to a point where the transcript of university ends up being a short synopsis of every course you have done and you end up handing a booklet over to your employer outlining every skill you have ever learnt from every course and all of it says the same for every single course—the transfer of skills, essay-writing skills, and we end up with far too much information for employers.

**Q429 Chairman:** Carrie, you have some support and not some support.

**Ms Donaghy:** I have to totally agree with Ricky and disagree with the others. I do agree that you go to university to learn and it is one of the most fundamental things but to go to university and be involved in societies, volunteering or whatever and for it not to be recognised I think is silly. It is how you gain most of your interpersonal skills and that is what is needed most in the workplace. You go to university to learn how to be part of a team, not just to learn from a book.

**Chairman:** Okay, that is very powerfully put.

**Q430 Dr Iddon:** Can I just follow this conversation up before we move on—I want to look at plagiarism in a minute—but what about the equivalence of degrees. You heard us discussing with the previous panel and we have discussed it elsewhere in this inquiry, as to whether a degree in a given subject from Salford or Wolverhampton is the same as from Oxford, Cambridge, Imperial College or any other university. What is the view of the panel on equivalence of degrees; are they just different or are they equivalent?

**Mr Raja:** They are not equivalent at all; there is a massive difference in quality that universities provide. Across disciplines and across universities there is, I would say, a hierarchy in quality and that needs to be taken into account. Universities are different from schools because in schools you have a general course that everybody has to follow and the only difference between, say, a private school and a public school is how they are taught. Universities are very different because universities decide their own course and the quality of the staff that teaches students is massively different. If you have a teacher at Oxford, all other things remaining the same he would be better than a staff member in university XYZ. He would have different ideas about what to teach and how to teach and all that will be reflected in the quality of the degree. There is a great amount of hierarchy in this respect.

**Q431 Dr Iddon:** It is not just the reputation of the university, there is a difference.

**Mr Steward:** In terms of the quality of the degree a lot of how employers see degrees is dictated by the university league tables, so you have Oxford, Cambridge, UCL and all of that straight down the line. Employers will say a degree from Oxford, perfect, the top university in England, but there is a lot more to it and not enough employers drill down on that data enough to see that in fact a degree in history may be fantastic at Cambridge but a degree in sport sciences may be better from Loughborough. Depending on who you are employing and the background you want them to have, employers need to drill down on the data more and see that even though Loughborough may be further down in the league tables specific degrees from that university may be better than those offered at Oxford. It is a flaw.

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29 April 2009 Ricky Chotai, Carrie Donaghy, Alasdair Farquharson, Gemma Jerome, Anand Raja and Ed Steward

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**Q432 Mr Marsden:** I accept entirely what you have just said, Ed, but do other members of the panel not think that that is beginning to happen already? Certainly the evidence we have had from other students elsewhere would suggest that people do make choices—they make choices about going in, not just on the university but on the actual course. I am just wondering if it works the other way round.

**Mr Steward:** I am aware of that but it is only beginning to happen.

**Q433 Dr Iddon:** Let us go to Alasdair because I have accredited a degree course at Wolverhampton in the dim and distant past so I am interested to hear your view on Wolverhampton today.

**Mr Farquharson:** I am from London and I moved up into the Shropshire area many years ago before I went to work out in the Far East because of the cheaper property prices there at the time—and the availability of a direct rail route in those days under British Rail—hence I ended up in Shropshire. I chose the University of Wolverhampton really because it was very close to where I am, it was for financial reasons primarily—but I found it to be an excellent university really. It compares equally with Aberystwyth and Birmingham and the College of Law with regards to the law studies there, so I do not think necessarily that a university in a former heavy industrial area like Wolverhampton is necessarily a lesser university than, say, one of the colleges at Oxford. But there is a problem of course with regards to the fees now. Since students pay fees for their courses students regard themselves as customers and there is a tendency because of the league tables for universities to worry about how can they make ends meet; if they aim at too high an academic level they are going to lose students and therefore lose funding, so it is not such an easy situation to grapple with really. If students did not pay fees then all universities could aim to have a very rigid, high academic standard, but that is not necessarily the case now because of the fee structure and the way universities have to survive. If they cannot attract sufficient finance from industry for research projects *et cetera* then there is a slight problem there. Yes, the University of Wolverhampton is as good as any other university really and we have some excellent staff there in the department that I am with.

**Q434 Dr Iddon:** Let us have a look at Salford next. Certainly when I taught at Salford we had no trouble placing our chemistry students but of course the university did the smart thing, it closed that department down. What about the rest of the subjects at Salford, are they equally rated to the rest, Ricky?

**Mr Chotai:** We discussed it in the last session in February and said that there was a football league within universities; there clearly is and employers clearly are aware of it. A degree in business management from Salford is not comparable to a degree from Manchester because employers perceive a degree from the University of Manchester as being so much higher and it is a higher and more worthy student from there.

**Q435 Dr Iddon:** I am sorry to interrupt you but let us drill down into this; is it because of the reputation of the other universities with employers or is there really not an equivalence in the teaching quality which Anand was referring to, which I find difficult to believe.

**Mr Chotai:** It is a mixture of both. There is so much emphasis put on league tables and how the university is performing as a whole. Employers do know; when they are looking for specific subjects, employers are aware that in some universities a degree in, for example, military history may be so specific that only five institutes offer it. Salford may be one of those, Salford may be the leading player in that and if they are looking for someone with that degree they will know that Salford is the best place to recruit from, but in respect of general degrees which a lot of students are studying now—business management and things like that—employers perceive Manchester as much higher with better teaching and a better standard of students than at Salford.

**Q436 Dr Iddon:** I just want to give the other guys a chance to comment on this. Carrie and Gemma have not had a comment on this particular aspect.

**Ms Jerome:** Universities are necessarily branded and there are positive and negative implications to that. It is helpful for students to be able to navigate their way through the application process and have the league tables there to compare institutions but from an institution perspective there seems to be a trend that is appearing where universities are attempting to brand themselves in a more specialised manner. For example, I am at the University of Liverpool and we have three institutions in our city which obviously creates quite a competitive market for student applications. Currently the University of Liverpool is experiencing the throwback from an RAE assessment and because of that there are certain things for students to regard as to what they are looking for from an institution, whether it is a civic institution or whether it is an institution that specialises more in non-vocational subjects. It is not as simple as to say that league tables are not helpful or they are, the issue is quite a complex one and obviously funding comes into that with regard to whether it is a strong research institution or a strong teaching institution. It is quite a difficult arena.

**Q437 Dr Iddon:** We will hear from Carrie and then I will move on to plagiarism.

**Ms Donaghy:** The main issue here—I am going to agree with Ricky—is perception. People will probably look at more traditional universities and see that the degrees are maybe better but that is down to perception really. In Newcastle there are two universities, there is the traditional University of Newcastle and then there is Northumbria; employers are swiftly moving away from the traditional universities where everything is read from a book to go on to the more hands-on universities which lets the students experience life almost.

**Q438 Dr Iddon:** Alasdair is bursting to make another comment.

**Mr Farquharson:** You need to bear in mind the social and economic area that the majority of the students come from at a particular university. If you are a student at Oxford then generally you come from a more affluent background and, therefore, where people probably have a poor perception of some universities is because of the students' attitude. If students are given work placements and simply do not turn up because they are from a background where not turning up to work or being late *et cetera* is not exactly frowned upon, and people around them act in that way, then that can impact negatively on that university and affect the prospects of all students from that university with regards to how students from that university are regarded, and this is something that the students union at the University of Wolverhampton has had to bring up, where people have been given work placement opportunities and not even bothered to turn up or let the employer know. Next time of course that employer is not going to look necessarily favourably on another student from the same university.

**Chairman:** I am going to stop you there because we really want to move on to other issues.

**Q439 Dr Iddon:** I want to move on to plagiarism and if I remember we discussed this with you last time, Ricky, Anand and so on. We have looked at this a little further since we last met those of you who were on the panel previously so let us turn to the people who were not here before. Who was not here last time?

**Mr Farquharson:** I was not here last time.

**Q440 Dr Iddon:** Let us choose Alasdair and Ed and we will start with Ed. Do you believe that in your university plagiarism is a problem or not?

**Mr Steward:** I believe it is a problem in that it exists.

**Q441 Dr Iddon:** When you went to the university were you given any advice on plagiarism?

**Mr Steward:** Yes, as soon as you turn up you have huge amounts of guidance on plagiarism. In every single book that you are given there is guidance on plagiarism, it is given out on separate sheets, it is sent out before you even arrive at university, it is on the website, it is absolutely everywhere because it is so crucial that you understand plagiarism in order not to commit it. I sit on some disciplinaries for students who have been accused of plagiarism and the two types of students that I see are those that panic and have not done the work, and plagiarise in order just to submit the work on time, and those who genuinely do not understand that they have plagiarised. It can be as simple as referencing, not putting things in quotation marks; that counts as plagiarism, so the university is keen to ensure that every student fully understands every aspect of plagiarism.

**Q442 Dr Iddon:** Where does the plagiarism exhibit itself the most, is it in essays, is it in modular coursework, is it in the laboratory notebook? We used to give compounds out for analysis in our

chemical laboratories and if we detected a student was coming with a perfect result we handed polo mints out, and if the next result came perfect as well we had obviously detected that they were fobbing their results from somebody else. Where do you see it occurring in your university?

**Mr Steward:** From my experience it is coursework.

**Q443 Dr Iddon:** Coursework. Let me turn to Alasdair next—there were three questions there, if you can remember them.

**Mr Farquharson:** I can vaguely, yes. Plagiarism is a problem—we have noticed this being a problem particularly in subjects where there is a lot of reading, and law lends itself to that of course; it tends to be a problem because of the sheer volume of material that people have to cover. Part of the problem—and it is mainly amongst the younger students—is because of their levels of English language ability which are pretty poor today, people speak in a different way. I speak to a lot of the younger students and sometimes I struggle to understand what it is they are talking about when they start to use colloquialisms. I am not talking about a Wolverhampton accent, I am talking about this LA gang-style of speech that a lot of people use these days. That makes it difficult for these students, therefore, when they are producing a piece of written work and submitting it to their tutors, to avoid plagiarism and what they tend to do of course is just copy and paste copious amounts of material from the internet and then submit that as if it is their own work, so it is a problem. It is also a problem with some postgraduate students with regards to the fact that a lot of the postgraduate studies, certainly in law, are of an open book examination format. The coursework tends to involve students working together if you are doing a professional course for example, as if you were in an actual office, and in that instance, where people start to work as a team, then you might have one member doing all the work and the others just copying up from that member of the team.

**Q444 Dr Iddon:** Do you think we can ever stop plagiarism?

**Mr Farquharson:** For postgraduate students you could probably put an end to it by having more closed book examinations, that would go a long way towards it, and not having so much emphasis on teaching people how to work together. Certainly as a postgraduate student you should know by then how to work together and if you have worked outside of university in a company or in any sort of environment you ought to know how to co-operate with other people, it should not be something that should be taught at that level at university, it should be something that people pick up at secondary modern school or grammar school.

**Q445 Chairman:** Ricky, you have been dying to come in.

**Mr Chotai:** In Salford we have seen an increasing trend in plagiarism, it is sad to say, with international students and where the students union has picked



29 April 2009 Ricky Chotai, Carrie Donaghy, Alasdair Farquharson, Gemma Jerome, Anand Raja and Ed Steward

that up from is that the university is using agencies to recruit students from abroad and they are just not explaining about plagiarism. We have had some really shocking cases of a lot of students in a single class plagiarising and being simply unaware of it. It is in the coursework area and we are seeing an increase in general in international students, less so from the home students nowadays.

**Q446 Dr Harris:** From the people we have spoken to previously, students in particular, there has been a mixed picture of how much awareness there is. Your comments just now, Ed, were at the extreme end of how much students are told, you said you are getting it drummed into you on the very first day and in every course, whereas others have said they are personally aware of it of course and they never plagiarise but it is not something that is very high level. I just wanted to ask each of the others briefly which end of the spectrum your own experience is on. Can we work along from Anand?

**Mr Raja:** At the risk of sounding a bit *avant garde* I would say that I do not take the way plagiarism is dealt with very seriously because the reason why plagiarism is nauseating is because it indicates that a particular person is unable to think originally, he is not able to make sense of the words—

**Q447 Dr Harris:** I understand why it is bad but I asked you a specific question. You are answering another question which is you do not think it is taken seriously enough, is that what you were going to say?

**Mr Raja:** I just wanted to point out that the way people deal with plagiarism now is that they have computer software and they detect if somebody has copied or not, but once that detection has happened what people do is that they start plagiarising with talent so they change the sentence structure.

**Q448 Dr Harris:** They get round that, I understand.

**Mr Raja:** They get around it, so I do not think it really solves the originality problem.

**Q449 Dr Harris:** You say enforcement is not effective. Can you just deal with my question: you personally have an interest in this but when you first arrived was your experience the same as Ed's, that you got it drummed into you on the first day, was this something you picked up or was it something that was hardly mentioned to students, what was your personal experience?

**Mr Raja:** It was mentioned. In our few introductory lectures we were told how to not plagiarise which means how to plagiarise but plagiarise with talent.

**Q450 Dr Harris:** Right. Gemma.

**Ms Jerome:** Absolutely, I think it is impossible to not be aware. Personally it is something that you are made aware of as a first year undergraduate—that is the only experience I have got—and you have to put a signature to forms and every time you submit a hard copy document part of that submission is that you sign to declare there is no plagiarism. The software exists as well.

**Mr Farquharson:** At the University of Wolverhampton they take it very seriously. There is an induction when you first enter the university and in every year this subject is brought up by the academic staff and it is made very clear to all students that plagiarism will not be tolerated, plus of course there is plenty of information from the students union, so there is no excuse really.

**Q451 Dr Harris:** I know there is no excuse; I asked a simple question and I need to move on. Carrie, can you just briefly answer the question I asked?

**Ms Donaghy:** I do a law degree and Alasdair said earlier that there would be quite high plagiarism within law degrees. I totally disagree; I would never plagiarise and I do not know how you could get away with it. At my university there would just be no way.

**Q452 Dr Harris:** Because of the software.

**Ms Donaghy:** Because of the software, because of the experience of the staff, they would know a plagiarised piece of work.

**Mr Chotai:** Resources are made available to make sure you do not plagiarise. I do not think enough emphasis is put on the structure, do we use the Harvard system, and then some academics are also somewhat lax—as long as you are putting references down and as long as it is not the strict system—other academics are very strict as in you must use a specific system.

**Q453 Dr Harris:** I understand that.

**Mr Chotai:** In Salford that varies across.

**Q454 Dr Harris:** Did any of you have any of this at what the Americans call high school and Alasdair quaintly calls secondary moderns and grammars but others might call comprehensives? At secondary school did any of you have any of this drummed into you?

**Mr Farquharson:** Yes.

**Mr Chotai:** I attended a grammar school and no, not very much.

**Q455 Dr Harris:** Carrie?

**Ms Donaghy:** No.

**Mr Farquharson:** We were told not to cheat. Obviously you are not doing the same sort of level of work that you do at university but—

**Q456 Dr Harris:** I understand that, everyone is told not to copy and cheat.

**Ms Jerome:** I was not even aware of the concept of plagiarism until university.

**Q457 Dr Harris:** Was it a shock to any of you to get this message, to quote Ed, drummed into you from the very first day and then at every course when it had not been mentioned when you were sitting public exams at high school, at secondary school?

**Mr Chotai:** It is very daunting; there is the prospect of being thrown out of university because you have plagiarised, especially if you just make an error in the way you write down your references. It scares a lot

of students and there needs to be more given before the university system about how important it is not to plagiarise.

**Q458 Dr Harris:** Do any of you agree with Anand—this is my last question on this—that it is possible to get round some of the policing, or feel you can get away with it, by paraphrasing stuff that you are cutting and pasting, if I can put it in those terms? Do any of you disagree with that?

**Mr Farquharson:** Can I just correct one comment that Carrie said? I did not say earlier that students studying law were more likely to be involved in plagiarism than any other students, but obviously because of the volume of work that is involved we have found, certainly at Wolverhampton, that across the university overall law students tend to be involved in this to a higher degree than some of the other schools because of the sheer volume of bookwork that they have to do. If your English is not up to scratch then in a last minute panic the temptation to plagiarise is pretty high.

**Dr Harris:** It is not a shock in this place that lawyers break the law.

**Q459 Chairman:** In the nine minutes that we have got left can I return to this issue of quality of teaching because it is absolutely central to the whole issue of the student experience. We were in Washington last week and we were looking at the way in which the university system is very much categorised into research intensive universities through to teaching-only universities. I wonder if I could start with you, Ed, because you have been right through the whole process. We posed the question to you some time ago as to whether it was essential for a good teaching experience for your teachers, your academics, to be involved in research. Do you feel that that still is the case or does it not really matter provided that the teaching is of a high quality?

**Mr Steward:** Coming from UCL which is heavily research-intensive I would say, yes, and that is based on my experiences where my friends who did science subjects, a lot of the teaching actively engaged them in the research so their final year dissertations were on the research that their lecturer or teacher was doing, so they were actually engaged in discovering new approaches to science and new ideas—new sciences within that. My background is an arts background and, yes, because my lecturers and teachers were the lecturers and researchers who were at the top of their field the information we were given, the things that we were taught were at the cutting edge, they were the brand new, this has just been discovered a week ago, looking at sources in books that had not been published, that sort of thing.

**Q460 Chairman:** You think that that is essential for a good student experience.

**Mr Steward:** Yes, definitely.

**Q461 Chairman:** Okay. Anand.

**Mr Raja:** I would firstly just like to agree that it is, yes, an essential complement and I am glad that this question was asked because this was what my submission today was about. A lot of people in the e-consultation by the Committee are saying that they do not get good teaching, they do not get good teachers, they do not get assessed by people outside the classes *et cetera*. The reason why I think this is happening—and I think it is a very important point—is that as a department gets more and more research intensive it has to put in more people, more time, more effort, more energy into research, and as that happens teaching automatically has to take a back seat. I do not know how actually to address this conflict because if it is a very good researcher who is doing very good research and is getting a lot of funding, he will not want to teach and nor will the department because if a department has to keep up it has to be at it and not focus on teaching. That is the real conflict.

**Q462 Chairman:** Okay. Gemma.

**Ms Jerome:** Like Anand this has really been the focus of what I want to bring up today. In the first session I suggested that there was no particular tension between teaching and research from a student point of view but I would like to say that my neutrality on that issue has changed as I have come to understand the tensions between teaching and research. I do not think it is as simple as to say that students who choose to join a research-led teaching institution are fully aware of the implications this may have on the quality of teaching they experience during their degree. It is now time to ask the wider student population what research-led teaching means to them, and I think up to now the collection of evidence has been prescriptive and rhetorical; it is really seeking to qualify the recognition of research benefits within higher education without acknowledging the consequences of this. Personally I come from a university which considers itself a research-led teaching institution and my particular department has recently had three or four star qualified as research leaders by the RAE, so I understand the benefits of that but I would implore the Committee to take note that the current situation at Liverpool is an indication that there continues to be a tension between research and scholarship, and I would argue that in spite of the rhetoric for the benefits of research-led teaching, like attracting world class researchers and facilitating a culture of original enquiry this does not necessarily correlate to a positive student experience. For example, we are proposing to double the tuition fees so should we not be putting more of a focus on these active consumers as we call the students. There needs to be much more focus on teaching.

**Q463 Chairman:** Thank you very much indeed. Alasdair.

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29 April 2009 Ricky Chotai, Carrie Donaghy, Alasdair Farquharson, Gemma Jerome, Anand Raja and Ed Steward

**Mr Farquharson:** I more or less agree with much of what Gemma and Anand have said about this. In principle the research is good because it can add to the status of the university of course, but then there is the funding issue and care has to be taken to not draw too many academic members of staff, as far as the students are concerned, away from the teaching side of matters and into research. It is a difficult one really because universities are struggling now for funding so the attraction of research work is obviously very high.

**Q464 Chairman:** Carrie.

**Ms Donaghy:** I definitely think that research complements teaching, a teacher who does research will be top of their subject, but I do think that it is not 100% essential, there needs to be a balance struck between the two.

**Q465 Chairman:** Where do you think that balance is at the moment?

**Ms Donaghy:** In my experience the balance is probably more on the teaching side and less research but if there was a balance between the two it would be excellent.

**Q466 Chairman:** Okay. Ricky.

**Mr Chotai:** Research is definitely needed, some of my best lecturers and academic staff are those who have participated in research. Looking at the divide of just having a teaching-only university essentially, are they just going to have a standard curriculum, is it just going to be an extension of high school? What makes a university experience unique is that a lecturer can stand there and say “I have been undertaking research in this; this is how it relates to the theory”—that is what brings a lecture alive, otherwise lecturers are just reading from textbooks and that is not stimulating, stimulation is the key.

**Q467 Dr Iddon:** Can I just refer to the e-consultation and the evidence in general because that is why we have got them back today and I do not think we have posed the question. I do not know if you have had the time to read much of the evidence that was on the internet for you but is there any other outstanding point that you want to make a comment on this morning or that anyone else has said during this entire inquiry, or have we covered most of the points this morning?

**Mr Raja:** I might be repetitive but I would just like to emphasise this point because this came out very strongly in the e-consultation that has been run by this Committee. Basically a lot of students are complaining that contact hours are less than enough. Quite a few lecturers are teaching with extreme distaste for the job, also reflected in negligible contact outside lectures and poor feedback on written work. A lot of teaching is outsourced to postgraduates who often miss the mark. The group tutorials are extinct. I think this problem with teaching is very highly prevalent in

research-intensive universities because naturally people who have to move their department forward and want to move their careers forward would want to do research and get funding and move on, rather than spend their time with undergraduates. That is precisely what is happening and that is reflected in this problem with teaching. That strongly comes across to anybody who reads the e-consultation.

**Mr Chotai:** Universities have got to focus on the feedback and the quality and standard of teaching; that is what has come across from reading the notes on the inquiry, that is what students want. We are now paying £3000 in fees and if that is going to be lifted, students are consumers and they want to ensure that they are getting value for money for the amount they are paying for their education.

**Q468 Dr Iddon:** Has any lecturer at Salford handed out to you a sheet saying, you know, measure the quality of my lecture or lecture course?

**Mr Chotai:** Yes, module evaluation is standard practice across all modules and across all degrees, they do look at that and they do improve year on year.

**Q469 Dr Iddon:** Is that true of all the universities that are represented here?

**Mr Farquharson:** Yes.

**Ms Jerome:** Yes.

**Mr Steward:** Yes.

**Q470 Chairman:** Gemma, the last word from you.

**Ms Jerome:** Ricky and Carrie pointed out that of course it is brilliant that if your lecturers are strong in their research it does add to the experience of being a student, but we are missing the point that particularly members of the Russell Group, if they are pushing for most of their funding to come from research, then that is having a very negative impact on some students. For example, some departments are potentially being closed at Liverpool because of the perceived disproportionate emphasis on research against teaching, so even if your teaching is strong if your research is not then that is having a negative impact on the student experience.

**Mr Farquharson:** There is another element to this as well and that is the fact that many lecturers now when they reach a certain age are being forced to retire. The Open University has suffered from this and so has Wolverhampton, and you are losing therefore very good academic members of staff with a lot of experience, who like teaching, but are not in research. They are being lost to the student body.

**Chairman:** As someone who is being forced to retire I have a lot of sympathy with that, but could I thank you all very much indeed for coming back, for being part of our inquiry and indeed for taking such a close interest. Throughout our inquiry one of the most exciting elements in terms of our witness sessions has been with students. After all, this was an inquiry about students and universities so thank you all very much indeed.

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# Written evidence

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## Note of informal meeting with staff at Imperial College London on 19 March 2009

### PARTICIPANTS

*Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee*

Mr Phil Willis MP, Chairman

*Imperial College London*

Sir Roy Anderson, Rector

Ms Michelle Coupland, Director of Planning

Professor David Lloyd Smith, Dean of Students

Professor David Nethercot, Head of Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering

Mr David Robb, Chair of Admissions Committee

Ms Melanie Thody, Director of Access and Head, Imperial Outreach

*Mr Willis put a number of questions to the Rector and staff and this note records the points made in reply.*

### GRADE INFLATION

Mr Willis pointed out that applicants for places in higher education were coming forward with better A-levels than previously and more potential students had grade A's than any other grade. He asked what effect this had had on Imperial College's admission policies. In reply it was pointed out that although the number of A grades has increased in state schools, fewer pupils were studying mathematics and the science subjects necessary for admission to Imperial College. The Rector and the staff were clear that Imperial College could not adjust its entry criteria as the College had to maintain the standard of its degrees, which had international recognition and prestige, and that it was essential to attract the best students. After a fall in the number of applications to the College in the 1990s the number of applications had increased in recent years. It would be in no-one's interest to admit students who could not cope with courses. Imperial College did, however, have a clear and successful strategy for making access as wide as possible. The Rector said that the key was to ensure that teachers in state schools encouraged and inspired pupils to study mathematics and science and to challenge those who encouraged the study of softer options. The College had underpinned this approach with its Inspire programme to improve the quality of science teaching in schools. It had a number of schemes which placed students in London schools, concentrating on schools that were under-represented with pupils going to university.

Mr Willis asked whether Imperial would follow Cambridge and introduce a requirement for an A-star grade for admission. The staff explained that Imperial College had introduced a requirement for A-star for mathematics in a number of its departments. This was because grade inflation in mathematics had been disproportionate to that in other subjects; a table was circulated to illustrate the difference between mathematics and other science subjects. The Rector commented that the requirement on applicants to have proficiency in mathematics acted as a break on over-expansion and ensured that standards were maintained.

### TEACHING AND RESEARCH

Mr Willis asked what difference the research programmes undertaken in the College made to teaching undergraduates. The staff explained that the most able researchers wanted to carry out teaching and that researchers such as Professor John Burland, who had corrected the Leaning Tower of Pisa, were an inspiration to undergraduates, enabling teaching to be informed by the latest research developments. The College would not be able to attract the academics if they were restricted only to teaching. The Rector said that in his experience the best researchers were often the best teachers. Staff were required to undertake training and qualifications in teaching, which was underpinned with a review of teaching performance.

The Rector said that staff listened and took note of students' views. Student surveys had identified a need for more tutorials and a perception that feedback needed to be improved. These were matters which the College was examining and would be addressing. All staff were required to have the PGCE qualification, which was underpinned with a review of teaching performance which had an external element. The Rector said that one of his top strategic objectives was to improve the student experience at the College. On feedback, the Envision 2010 project in the Faculty of Engineering, which was examining how the Faculty could improve its educational ethos, its facilities and infrastructure and its level of educational innovation, had identified the need to challenge students with more feedback and less activity. The outcome would be more discourse between staff and students.

#### DEGREE CLASSIFICATION

Mr Willis asked whether there had been degree devaluation at Imperial with greater numbers of firsts and upper seconds awarded than a generation ago. The Rector said there had been none and that consistent standards had been applied. He said that the performance of the Russell Group had been distorted by Oxford and Cambridge. Other staff pointed out that the lower second was still frequently awarded at Imperial College. Some academics at the College had noticed that masters students who graduated from other universities with first class honour degrees sometimes struggled at Imperial College. When staff from Imperial College acted as external assessors for other institutions that did not have a previous history of producing first rate students they often found within these institutions a small band of excellent students who were the equal of the best at Imperial but the profile of students' abilities, in contrast to Imperial College, often fell sharply.

No one agreed with UUK's view expressed to the Committee that the level of understanding required between different universities was broadly equivalent.

#### EXTERNAL ASSESSORS

Mr Willis asked what value external examiners provided to the assessment of degrees. The Rector said that they were good at identifying potential issues and bringing them to the attention of the Colleges. For example, while students from Imperial matched the intellectual abilities of those from Oxford and Cambridge, additional support was often needed to enhance and develop their presentational skills. Most of Imperial College's external assessors came from institutions in the Russell Group, though they also included industrialists who had a clear view of the requirements and standards expected by employers. The staff at the meeting believed that external assessors should be trained.

#### PLAGIARISM

Mr Willis asked whether plagiarism was a problem. The staff said that, to ensure that standards were maintained, it was essential to bear down on plagiarism. The College used a number of IT programmes to assist in the detection of plagiarism and that, when detected, punishment was swift and severe—for example, for a first offence all examination and course results for a year would be cancelled. To avoid the risk of inadvertent plagiarism students were given guidance during induction and staff in the library were on hand to give additional advice during the year. Often differences in cultural attitudes to plagiarism needed to be addressed.

#### PRE-ADMISSION INFORMATION

Mr Willis asked whether prospective students were given an indication of who would be teaching them if they came to Imperial College. In reply, it was pointed out that some departments in the College had over 50 members of staff each with a particular specialism and so it was impossible to say who would be teaching individual students until students' elective modules in the fourth year, when they could select which module to study.

#### FINANCIAL SUPPORT AND DEBT

Mr Willis said that the students he had met earlier had been concerned about the costs of studying in London and about the level of debt that they would be incurring. The staff said that they were aware of students' concerns. The staff pointed out that the College had taken steps to ease the transition to university—for example, by guaranteeing a place in a hall of residence during their first year. The Rector commented that it was the pattern in the US for students to work and that universities there employed students where possible on campus—for example, in garden maintenance. Both outreach and financial support were noted to be advanced by the fact that Imperial College employed over a thousand students to act as role models for outreach into schools and other organisations. In addition, about 100 students each year volunteered to go to classrooms in primary and secondary schools to assist teachers, share specialist knowledge and to provide positive role models. There were also benefits to the students: some were paid for these activities and they could refine their communication skills. The schools benefited with extra tuition and the pupils found out what it was like to go to university. Mr Willis asked for a note setting out the work done by Imperial College as outreach giving details of the projects.

Mr Willis then asked whether Imperial College was likely to increase its tuition fees to the maximum if the Government raised the cap on fees next year. The Rector pointed out that, unlike Oxford and Cambridge, Imperial College had no endowments and therefore had a greater dependence on state support and income

from fees. He said that the College hoped to expand its income from international students as there was a large pool of students with high proficiency in mathematics and science subjects looking to come to universities in Europe or North America.

Mr Willis thanked the Rector and staff for taking the time to meet him and to answer questions.

March 2009

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### Note of an informal meeting with students at Imperial College London on 19 March 2009

#### PARTICIPANTS

*Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee:*

Mr Phil Willis MP, Chairman

*Imperial College London students:*

Mr Mark Chamberlain, Medicine, 3rd year

Mr David Charles, Biology, 4th year

Mr Alex Grisman, Aeronautics, 4th year

Mr Mark Mearing-Smith, Mechanical Engineering, 3rd year

Mr Ali Mozaffari, Physics, 4th year

Ms Hannah Theodorou, Medicine, 3rd year

*Mr Willis put a number of questions to the students and this note records the points made in reply.*

#### SELECTING AND APPLYING TO UNIVERSITY

Mr Willis asked what factors had influenced each student's decision to apply to Imperial College and about the quality of advice available from the school careers advisers and from the College.

Several students said that university was seen as a natural progression from school both by the school they had attended and by their parents. One student added that there was also peer-group pressure at his school to apply to university; and another pointed out that in the absence of such pressure he knew of students obtaining three As at A-level who could have gone to university opting instead to become electricians.

Several said that for those interested, and proficient, in science subjects and wishing to go to university Imperial College was a prestigious choice in the top rank of UK universities. In deciding to which institutions to apply three students said they had consulted university league tables, though one conceded that with hindsight the tables did not provide an adequate basis on which to make a decision. Another commented that the tables were of limited value to prospective undergraduates as they focussed on universities' research activities rather than on the extent and quality of teaching. One student said that Imperial had been his second choice to Oxford.

Experience of careers advice varied: one said it had been comprehensive and set out all the options; another said it had been too old-fashioned; and another said it had focused on a too narrow a range of careers, mostly in the armed services.

On pre-application open days, one student had attended an open day at another institution which had influenced his decision not to apply to that institution. Those who attended open days at Imperial College said that they had been given a good impression of the atmosphere of the College but they lacked information about contact time or, one added, how much work they would have to do in comparison to other universities.

#### TEACHING AND RESEARCH

Mr Willis asked whether in their experience the quality of teaching was enhanced by research carried out at Imperial College. The students saw some advantages in that they had access to leading researchers and first rate facilities. They also had the opportunity to work on projects informed by the latest research which was stimulating. On the negative side, undergraduates were sometimes left behind as resources were concentrated on postgraduates. The comment was also made that Imperial was striving for the model of teaching used at Oxford and Cambridge but was unable to underpin it with one-to-one tuition.

#### FINANCIAL SUPPORT AND DEBT

Mr Willis asked the students about financial support and the part that debt played in their decision to study. All agreed that debt incurred in studying at university was a matter of concern. They pointed out that rents in London amounted to more than the annual student loan. The group said nearly all students worked during the summer and estimated that about 10% also worked during term time. As a consequence many

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students were unable to become involved in the full range of activities in the College. The scale of debt was a particular problem for those studying subjects such as medicine, which took six years. Several said that it was common for parents to fail to make up the parental contribution which exacerbated their problems.

On the positive side, it was commented that the support system at Imperial College was good and that its bursary system was unrivalled, though one student said that the support system was not fully adequate for those in lowest socio-economic groups.

#### STUDENT SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

Mr Willis asked what made for a good university experience. The students said that it was important to have a good group of friends and that Imperial College attracted like minded people who fitted into Imperial and would not at other institutions. One described the atmosphere as all geeks together.

#### QUALITY OF TEACHING

Mr Willis asked about the quality of teaching. The students said that the quality of teaching varied. One said that many younger lecturers put in much effort to prepare their material and to engage with students which was sometimes lacking in older staff. Several found lectures attended by up to 300 students to be less value than smaller groups of up to 30. One said it was almost impossible to ask questions in larger groups but another disagreed. The group identified two areas of concern. First, postgraduate students who taught struggled to explain basic concepts cogently. Second, medical students were often taught by NHS staff, some of whom appeared to have had no training in pedagogical skills, and they often left students standing around in hospitals without any work.

Several students expressed concern about the quality of feedback from academic staff. While acknowledging that some academic staff gave detailed and useful criticism, others gave terse and uninformative feedback. It was frustrating to be given a relatively good mark or a single word comment such as good or fine without any indication of what parts of the work were strong and what needed improvement. The result was that students were unclear how to improve their performance and they were not being stretched sufficiently. Some work was also marked by postgraduate students who lacked proficiency in providing feedback. The students said that the College system of personal tutors was supposed to ensure that adequate feedback was given with each personal tutor reviewing and adding comments before work was returned to his or her students. Their experience, and that of other students, was that the extent and nature of personal tutors' comments varied and that the system needed improvement.

Mr Willis asked about the use of IT in teaching. Several said that, while IT was useful, its use in the College did not address the absence of interface between students and staff as it flowed in one direction, from teaching staff to students. One commented that rather than send an e-mail to a tutor it was better, in some cases, to speak to him or her.

#### PLAGIARISM

Mr Willis asked whether plagiarism was a problem. The students said that the College had made clear what it was, that is the intention to deceive the marker. The group said that they were aware that it went on and said that particular areas were prone to it, for example, laboratory reports which followed a set pattern. It was pointed out that some international students without a detailed knowledge of technical and scientific terms in English could struggle to produce such reports from scratch. They pointed out that a number of factors could foster plagiarism. The College set too much work without indicating which should be given priority. The impersonal nature of some teaching and marking meant that academic staff did not develop knowledge of a student's style and could fail to notice plagiarised work in an unfamiliar style.

#### DEGREE CLASSIFICATION

Mr Willis asked whether they were aware of degree inflation. The students said that they had detected no degree inflation at Imperial College. They pointed out that they were expected to work very hard for their degrees. One said that he had advised people to go to other universities if they wanted an easier time. The group was clear that the quality of degrees varied between higher education institutions in the UK but pointed out that degrees from Imperial had considerable international standing. It was noted that many of those responsible for recruiting graduates attached greater weight to applicants with a degree from Imperial College.

Mr Willis thanked the students for taking the time to meet him and to answer questions.

*March 2009*

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## Note of an informal meeting with students at Liverpool Hope University on 23 March 2009

### PARTICIPANTS

*Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee:*

Mr Phil Willis MP, Chairman

Mr Graham Stringer MP

Mr Gordon Marsden MP

*Liverpool Hope University students:*

Ms Amanda Dalzell, Education

Ms Claire Frost (Student Union Vice President)

Mr Javed Munshi, Human biology and education

Mr Simon Parker, Film & creative writing

Ms Belinda Shaw, Human biology and psychology

*University of Liverpool student:*

Ms Danielle Grufferty (Guild President)

*Committee Members put a number of questions to the students and this note records the points made in reply.*

### SELECTING AND APPLYING TO UNIVERSITY

Mr Willis asked what factors had influenced the students' decisions to apply to a university in Liverpool and about the quality of advice available from their schools' careers advisers.

Several students said that university was seen as a natural progression from school with teachers encouraging them to apply to university. One student added that attending university was "cultural", and that students attended university for the life experience rather than for the qualification that they may or may not attain. It was also suggested that university was a "breeding ground" for creative thinking and a place to meet like-minded people and be inspired. One student had come to university following redundancy in mid-career.

Experience of careers advice varied: one said it had been comprehensive; another said it had focused on highlighting the skills needed to undertake a degree course; and another said it had focused on advising on science courses and that subjects in the Arts "fell by the wayside". One student identified a need for career service advisers to inform Level 3 NVQ students that this qualification provided an access route to university.

Several students said that family encouragement had been the principal motivation for their application to university. Three of the Liverpool Hope University students were the first members of their family to enter into higher education.

### FINANCIAL SUPPORT AND DEBT

Mr Stringer asked about the impact of variable tuition fees and the part that debt played in their decision to study. Several said that they had started before the new variable fee regime had been introduced. It was generally agreed that the current fee of £3,000 was acceptable, although several students remarked but that if it had been any higher they may not have had the financial resource to have entered into their degree course. One student said, however, that, if the new arrangements had been in place when she applied, it might have deterred her application. Another said that the fees were a struggle, particularly for mature students with family commitments. One student commented that working and studying habits had been affected by the need to have a part-time job. It was noted that Liverpool Hope had good support arrangements in place which included offering jobs around the campus to students and that it was often possible to provide employment opportunities with relevance to an individual's programme of study. Several students considered that education should be free.

The Guild President of the University of Liverpool said that the operation of the fees arrangements would be improved if the Government worked harder to remove the misconceptions about the system—for example, that fees had to be paid up-front. In her view there was no financial barrier to entry into university, rather barriers were "cultural", and she noted those in the lowest socio-economic groups had their costs covered.

### TEACHING AND RESEARCH

Mr Marsden asked about the quality of teaching. All the students considered that university teaching staff were approachable and enthusiastic and that lecturers were happy to speak with them on an individual basis to provide fuller explanations of the taught material. It was estimated that between 20 and 40 students were present in 2nd and 3rd year undergraduate lectures at Liverpool Hope University.



All the students understood that at least some of their lecturers were research active. Several of the students from Liverpool Hope University were assisting on research projects and two were delivering research papers at a conference. It was noted that Liverpool Hope was developing a reputation for, and expertise in, research. One student believed it was unnecessary for lecturers to be research active and that non-research active staff were better teachers as they had more time to get to know their students. The others believed, however, research active staff to be the most enthusiastic and best equipped lecturers.

#### PLAGIARISM

Students were asked whether plagiarism was a problem. They all said that their university had made clear what plagiarism was and that this information was embedded in the student handbook. One student felt that lecturers would easily pick up plagiarism as the style of any copied text would be different to the rest of an individual's written work. The Vice-President of Liverpool Hope University's Student Union explained that the institution's student services department provided tutoring on what did and did not constitute plagiarism together with tutorials on "how to write".

*March 2009*

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#### **Note of informal meetings with groups of students at the University of Oxford on 30 March 2009**

##### PARTICIPANTS

*Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee:*

Mr Phil Willis MP, Chairman  
 Mr Tim Boswell MP  
 Dr Evan Harris MP  
 Mr Graham Stringer MP  
 Mr Ian Stewart MP

*Students from the University of Oxford:*

Mr Terrance Ayebale (3rd Year, Engineering Science, St Anne's)  
 Mr Alex Bulfin (2nd Year, English, University)  
 Ms Orla Byrne (Finalist, Law, St Anne's)  
 Ms Rachel Cummings (OUSU<sup>1</sup> Vice President—Women)  
 Mr Pieter Hermans (4th Yr, Maths & Philosophy, Worcester)  
 Mr Ben Hemingway, (Finalist, PPE,<sup>2</sup> St Anne's)  
 Mr Ramandeep Kaur (Finalist, Law, St Anne's)  
 Mr Martin Lennon, (Finalist, PPE, St Anne's College)  
 Mr James O'Connell-Lauder (2nd Year, PPE, University)  
 Mr Conan McKenzie (Lady Margaret Hall)  
 Ms Diamanto Mamuneas, (2nd Year, Biological Sciences, St Anne's)  
 Mr Jack Matthews (2nd Year Earth Sciences, St Peters and OUSU)  
 Ms Ellen Maunder (Finalist, English, St Anne's)  
 Mr Jonathan Medland (3rd Year, History & Politics, Queen's)  
 Mr Laurence Mills (2nd Year, History & Politics, Magdalen)  
 Mr Sanjay Nanwani (2nd Year, PPE, St Peter's)  
 Mr Zim Nwokora (4th Year D Phil, Politics, St Anne's)  
 Mr Robert Ritter (D Phil, English)  
 Ms Portia Roelofs (2nd Year, PPE, Queen's)  
 Ms Helene Suttle (3rd Year D Phil, Materials, Oriel)  
 Mr Joseph Wales (2nd Year, Maths, St Hugh's)  
 Mr Matthew Watson (Queen's)

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<sup>1</sup> Oxford University Students Union.

<sup>2</sup> Philosophy, Politics and Economics.

Mr Adam Whitley (MSc, Mathematical & Computational Finance St Anne's)

*Committee Members put a number of questions to groups of students and this note records the points made in reply.*

#### FACTORS INFLUENCING APPLICATIONS TO OXFORD

Mr Stringer asked the students what and who had influenced their decision to apply to Oxford. Several students in one group had found that the experience of visiting the university—for example, on open days—very helpful. In particular, the opportunity to spend several days staying in college and meeting “real” students already at the university was important and had helped them to “like the environment”.

Although one student in another group had originally decided to go to another university, his teacher at school had convinced him to look more closely at Oxford. When he was offered a place, he said that it was very much a case of “you don’t say no to Oxford”. Another student had originally targeted Cambridge, having been encouraged by his teachers at school from year 9 onwards. However, when the student learned more about the Oxford course he realised that it was the best for him so he changed.

A student in another group explained that both his parents had been to Oxford so he knew all about it before coming. He acknowledged, however, that he had not given it much thought, had not expected to get a place and so had also looked at other universities. He liked the tutorial system at Oxford which he found beneficial. In the case of another student, one parent had been to university and a large proportion of students from his school had also gone on to university so he also expected to go. Although he had originally applied after an Opening Evening at school, he did not gain admission on his first application. However, he had been very certain that Oxford was where he wanted to go and had found it unique all the way through in terms of the kind of English course he was studying. Another student pointed out that, when he was making choices, he realised that not that many universities did History and Politics. When he looked at Oxford he knew he wanted to go there because of the atmosphere he experienced.

One student in another group explained that advice from his school teacher that Oxford offered the promise of a world class education had been very influential. He had also valued the opportunity to engage with academics in tutorials.

Another student explained that the fantastic library system at Oxford and the teaching style was important to him, because he liked to talk and it matched his preferred way of learning. The college system was seen as beneficial as was the bursary system, which some students described as world class. One student found he was more comfortable with the Oxford tutorial system because he had been frustrated in the 6th form where he had not been able to give his point of view and get the kind of personal attention Oxford gave. Another student had specifically wanted to do PPE (Politics, Philosophy and Economics) and, although some other universities did it, the Oxford course was the most appealing.

Mr Stringer asked about specific influences such as school or careers guidance. The students in one group explained that their teachers had suggested they look at Oxbridge and they had visited as a consequence. In one case, the school now organised a general visit for pupils, which was very helpful. One student had been encouraged by being involved in his school’s “Gifted and Talented” scheme and because the former head of sixth form at his school also had contacts at the university.

The students did not consider that the careers service had, in general, been very influential when making their university choices, although in some cases they were made aware of the benefits Oxford offered in relation to postgraduate and employment opportunities. Although parents, friends and tutors had been more influential than careers contacts for the majority of students, one student had a good careers adviser at school who had encouraged her to apply. Overall, all the students in the group considered that the key influence was not careers advice but the opportunity to visit the university and meet students and tutors.

Students in another group had mixed experiences of specialist careers advice. One student had received good careers advice at school but once he had gone to the local further education college he found less advice was available. Another student found that careers help was provided when he was making his subject choices at A-level and for university, but advice in relation to the specific university was seen as a personal preference.

Students in another group said that the university’s prospectus had been useful in giving basic information about colleges and also the lifestyle. The “Alternative prospectus” (ie one produced by students in each college) was also praised because it offered a refreshing take from the students. One student commented that schools differed substantially in the approach they took to applications and visits: some were very much more proactive in bringing or sending their pupils to open days.

Several students considered that they could have been given more detailed information. For example, one student had found it hard to find sufficient information and guidance about the college and university before coming for interview. Another had found the fact that he already knew someone studying at the university before coming for interview was invaluable. Although there was general agreement in the group that more information could be provided, there was also agreement that only so much information could be published and it was important to combine it with a visit.

One student said that the interview, which had lasted three days at the College, was seen by several as a great opportunity for the university to test a prospective student out as well as assist him or her to decide whether the university was suitable.

Students in one group considered that it was up to the university to get out and to engage with students who might not usually apply. One explained that Oxford was a welcoming and diverse university and that many myths that Oxford was posh were untrue. Another had come to Oxford thinking that private school students would not like him but had found this was not true and the tutors treated all students the same. Several students considered that it is important to target teachers in schools and colleges because their knowledge of universities was often 30 years out-of-date or based on the “History Boys”, which promoted the wrong idea about Oxford.

#### EXPERIENCES AFTER STARTING AT OXFORD UNIVERSITY

Mr Stringer asked the students about their experience after they came to Oxford. Students in one group commented that, once at the university, the Freshers’ Week guide was useful, giving information about the kinds of workload to expect—for example, hours and numbers of tutorials.

One student said that he had focused on a particular course he wished to do and had been unconcerned about the different teaching environment, which was in marked contrast to that he had experienced before coming to university. He commented that it had come as a bit of a shock to find that he had to attend four different tutorials each week, with each tutor reviewing progress. A student in another group had been shocked at the level of work involved and the amount of pressure placed on students. Another explained that his college was pretty strict if a student was not at upper second honours standard. He had been surprised at how many “posh kids” there are and commented that Oxford was a bit of a bubble and that the bubble was not representative because even the state school kids appeared “really posh”.

In contrast students in another group considered that there had been no major surprises. Each of them had, in general, been told what to expect when they arrived including, for example, the likely number of contact hours each term, which one student explained was, in his case, between eight and fifteen hours. Several agreed that it took time to get used to the self-motivation needed to be successful at Oxford.

Another student described how the college “parenting scheme” had been very helpful to him. Before he started, students in the year above became his “college parents”, got in touch and helped the incoming students with information and informal guidance. The benefit was that they provided copious information.

When asked what would happen if a student missed going to tutorials, the general comment was that students did not miss them and that everyone went to tutorials.

#### BURSARIES

Mr Boswell asked students whether the Oxford bursary system worked well and if bursaries were fairly allocated. The students considered that “Oxford Opportunity” bursaries were very good, generous, quickly administered and that the application process was non-intrusive. In contrast, those applying for individual college bursaries found the process intrusive requiring a detailed breakdown of a student’s expenditure. It was suggested that this could put off potential applicants for bursaries.

One student said that he did not understand the bursary system. Another stated that study at Oxford without a bursary would not be possible but noticed that there was a disparity of up to £1000 depending on which year a student started his or her degree and considered that this was unfair. The students in another group agreed that in the case of a student who required financial help during term time it was a matter for the student to seek help from his or her college—in such a case a student would go to the domestic bursar. One student commented that at the college level decisions about financial help could be personal—in other words, team players were more likely to obtain help and more quickly.

#### STUDENT DEBT

Mr Boswell asked if students had been concerned about debt before coming to university, especially given the job prospects for graduates since the start of the recession. One student answered that, although he had been just above the threshold for claiming a bursary, he was not worried about paying off an estimated £20,000 student debt on leaving university because the loan was not like a bank loan and could be paid back when creditor could afford it. When and how a student would pay off the student loan was more of a concern than the interest rate on the loan. The group agreed that how much a student was concerned about debt depended on his or her friends and family—if everyone in a student’s peer group was in the same position debt was not an issue. One student commented that the student loan system assumed that a second child going to university was not an additional financial burden on a family and was slow to take this factor into account.

Students in another group were not overly concerned about debt. One student had a training contract lined up after graduation and was therefore not concerned about paying off a loan.

A student in another group was, however, concerned that the issue of debt was on students’ minds because of problems with graduate jobs, but conceded that that it was not necessarily a “day-to-day worry”. The same student thought that the extra cost of studying at Oxford (because it was an affluent city and because of the collegiate structure) might put students off applying. Another student added that in his experience (coming from a relatively affluent background) potential students were not put off applying to Oxford by debt but by the perception that Oxford was full of toffs. A student working with groups of potential students

from less affluent backgrounds considered they were concerned about debt and that this was a problem across the board and not just for Oxford applications. One student in this group commented that the level of interest on student loans was a concern because loans accrued interest even if they were not at the earning threshold to start to pay the loan back.

This group confirmed that paid employment in term time was strongly discouraged by the university. One student said this meant he had to work very hard in vacations to earn money.

Mr Boswell asked the students how much costs varied between colleges, and whether this was clear before students applied. The students in one group considered that costs varied massively between colleges. A student in another group, who had been involved in asking colleges to publish their costs for potential students, considered that colleges had been slow to respond.

The students in another group examined what factors might lead to a student dropping out of a course. It was suggested that finance alone was rarely the cause, but that different colleges might be more or less academically harsh and, if students were required to repeat a year because of personal problems, this could be a huge financial burden. One student pointed out that financial support varied between colleges, but there was also a central funding office. The students in this group considered that different colleges had very different costs and this could be a surprise to new students.

#### STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Mr Stewart asked what constituted a good student experience at university. All the groups which considered the issue began with academic considerations, in particular they considered that the quality of the teaching available, the availability of staff, staff who could explain themselves and help the students to develop intellectually, were at the heart of a good university experience. A number of students referred to the need to feel challenged and to develop academically as individuals. Several students considered that the tutorial system was important because it not only allowed tutors to identify problems and help to develop students, but also because it ensured a challenging environment.

As well as academic considerations the students identified the existence of a community environment, as manifested in the college system. Most—but not all—considered that the Oxford collegiate system was a huge plus because it enabled students and their tutors to know each other and also because the small environment meant easier and closer relationships and friendships.

Mr Stewart asked the students to identify items that they would like to change or improve. The following were listed. First, some identified better connections with the local community. Second, others suggested more support for external activities. Third, it was suggested that better support for mental health problems among students was needed. It was noted that colleges could not afford to employ mental health experts individually, yet pastoral care was a college responsibility. Fourth, some called for better integration between the senior members of the college and the junior common room. Fifth, there was a call for better support—particularly funding—for postgraduate students.

Some students also said that there needed to be more emphasis and support for study skills. Several said that the initial support given to students arriving at Oxford was inadequate. There appeared to be an assumption that because these were clever students they could be thrown in at the deep end. More emphasis on study skills at the beginning of their time at university would have been welcome.

There was also criticism of the hours of study. All the students considered that they worked much harder than students at other universities, but nearly all were happy to do so because they believed that the degree that they would obtain from Oxford would be of considerable benefit through their subsequent careers. They believed that employers recognised students at Oxford were stretched more than students from elsewhere.

Several students thought that the reason they worked so hard was in large part because of the intimate tutorial system where there was nowhere to hide if the student had not done sufficient work. But the students recognised that the tutorial system was expensive, and that it would take an increase in the funding of the university to be able to maintain it. Several of the students said that they were involved in seeking alumni donations and that maintenance of the tutorial system was one of the benefits that they had to secure by obtaining more donations from alumni.

One student identified the collegiate system as an issue. It was pointed out that colleges varied in the amount of tutorial support they were able to give students and that this appeared to depend on the relative wealth of the college. But it was noted that even relatively poor colleges were able to provide ad hoc support to students as they needed it.

#### TEACHING MODEL AT OXFORD UNIVERSITY

Mr Willis asked about the teaching model used at the University of Oxford. The students in the groups he questioned liked the teaching arrangements at Oxford, with appreciation for the tutorial system cited in particular. However, one group said that they recognised that it was not the be-all-and-end-all that it was sometimes made out to be. The groups identified as the principal problem a significant variation in quality. It was pointed out that sometimes a student was taught by someone who ran the course, other times by a PhD student who did not know the course. One student in another group commented that in a tutorial the student had the opportunity to delve into details that could not be covered during lectures. A student in

another group said that the teaching model at Oxford was hard to beat sitting one-on-one with a tutor who was asking questions that got the best out of the student. He described it as phenomenal and something that that was not available in the US. Another described the teaching system as amazing.

#### RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TEACHING AND RESEARCH

Mr Willis asked about the relationship between teaching and research. One student commented that the advantage of having teachers who were research active was that they were up-to-date with developments in the field. Another noted that it was not important for teachers to be up-to-date in all fields—for example, when teaching Kant, most of the best books on Kant were written in the 1930s and 1950s. In another group most students supported being taught by someone who was a leader in the field. One student commented that a researcher in the field could be more critical of a student's work. It was noted that, despite some teachers not being the best, knowing that they were leaders in the field made it worthwhile working hard to get the most out of the tutorials. A student in another group said that he had had a low expectation of the quality of the teaching, because lecturers were not recruited for their teaching ability but their research ability. Another commented that being an expert in the field was more important than having good teachers.

#### QUALITY OF TEACHING

Mr Willis asked about the quality of teaching. There was agreement that the quality of teaching was generally high. However, it was pointed out that some of the lecturers and tutors would have benefited from teacher training. It was noted that most colleges offered optional training. The students in one group considered that teacher training should be made compulsory for new tutors. A student in another group was happy with the quality of the teaching, and another commented that students usually received good tuition. One student commented that the quality of teaching was not good enough. He pointed out that students paid £3,000 per year and would be in debt until they were 30 years old. He continued that eight out of 10 tutors were good, but was concerned that that he was taught by some graduate students who were not qualified to teach.

Dr Harris also asked whether the students were satisfied with the quality of teaching they received. One student said that a request that lectures be podcast as reference material had been refused. The students in the groups considered that this decision reflected resistance to change by lecturers who liked an audience to perform to. The students all agreed that the opportunity for question and answer sessions at the end of lectures—although not universally offered—was a valued element of teaching provision.

#### DEGREE STRUCTURE

Dr Harris asked for the students' views on the structure of their degree programme. All the students in one group agreed that they worked intensively during each 8-week term and that they undertook a considerable amount of work outside of term time. Two students said they took only two weeks off from academic studies during the long summer break. Students explained that their lectures were supplemented by tutorials—in which they were likely to be taught in pairs—and private study.

Dr Harris asked whether the students were satisfied with the examination structure. One student saw the current system of sitting final examinations at the end of the degree programme as optimal. Two students expressed a preference for Oxford's examination structure to be reformed such that examinations in each year of a degree programme contributed towards the degree class awarded. One student considered that the university had recognised the need for change as coursework was beginning to feature more prominently as a component of individual degree programmes.

Dr Harris commented that drop-out rates at Oxford were relatively low. One student suggested that this was because students struggled through due to pressure from the university and that the drop-out figures hid the number of students that took a respite year in order to recover from the extreme stress that the short teaching term inflicted. These students either repeated a year or continued their degree programme at the point they left it.

#### DEGREE QUALITY

Dr Harris asked the students whether they considered that having a degree from Oxford would be advantageous in terms of their future employment prospects. In response the students pointed out that the tutorial system provided for the development of written and oral communication skills. One student suggested that, in the current job market, employers would be less interested in a prospective employee's degree class and the higher education institution relative to the candidate's ability to demonstrate core communication skills and work experience relevant to the employment opportunity. Several students considered that an upper second honours from the University of Oxford indicated a higher level of academic achievement than an upper second honours from a non-Oxbridge university. They agreed that an Oxbridge degree indicated a different type of "learning experience".

## PLAGIARISM

Dr Harris asked whether the students recognised plagiarism as a problem. No students were aware of plagiarism taking place amongst the undergraduate population. It was agreed that it would be more trouble than it was worth and that the close relationship between undergraduate student and supervisor would mean that plagiarism would be immediately identifiable. Several students pointed out that it would be difficult to submit plagiarised work for assessment. In particular, studies in disciplines such as English were self-directed and it would be unlikely that other individuals would be undertaking the same programme of work. It was also suggested that plagiarism would be self-defeating in the long-term as tutorial essays did not contribute to degree results and individuals' examination performance was likely to be adversely affected by lack of engagement with background material.

Students in one group explained that in the undergraduate population it was common practice for students to look at one another's essays. It was agreed that the university had clearly laid out what did and did not constitute plagiarism, and one student reported that plagiarism would be very difficult as supervisors invariably set different essay titles to one another. Students were aware of the existence of computer systems to identify plagiarised work, and cited peer review as defence against scientific fraud.

One student in another group said that plagiarism was not socially acceptable and all students in the group agreed that supervisors would instantly recognise the content of two essays as being the same. They noted that supervisors often set different essay titles and, as tutorial work was not assessed, saw little point in attempting to plagiarise work. It was also agreed that even if plagiarism went unnoticed it would not be possible to defend this content orally when grilled in supervisions. It was suggested that it would be relatively easy to copy laboratory reports unnoticed, however, and that plagiarism generally would be easier to get away with in science subjects.

March 2009

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**Summary of views and comments posted on the e-consultation held by the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee during February–April 2009 in connection with its inquiry into Students and Universities**

## STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES E-FORUM

The Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee set up a web forum to find out what students at universities in England thought about the university admissions process and whether courses, teaching and university life had lived up to expectations. The web forum ran for six weeks from 23 February and closed on 7 April 2009. The forum asked for views on six topics.

<i>Topic</i>	<i>Posts</i>
Why did you decide to apply to university?	29
Do you think that the admissions process for universities is fair?	34
What factors influenced your choice of university and course?	31
Has university lived up to your expectations?	32
What do you think of the quality of teaching at university?	41
Are all degrees the same?	29

1. *The first question asked respondents why they decided to apply to university.*

Respondents identified three factors influencing their decision to go to university: family expectation; school; and the prospects of a better career.

One post summarised the confluence of these factors: *“I had known from an early age that I would likely end up at university, and through encouragement from parents and teachers, it seemed a natural progression after A Levels. It was very much the ‘norm’ and expected of fairly intelligent people like myself to go onto university.*

*“I also knew that the job prospects and salaries were much higher with a degree level qualification. This and an enthusiasm for learning about two subjects in particular at A Level made me keen to want to further my study”.*

Some respondents made the point that entry into certain careers such as engineering, town planning, nutrition and dietetics required a degree or completion of a course provided at university. Some also choose university because of a passion for a subject that they wanted to pursue.

Several respondents commented on the lack of information about the alternatives to university. One said that alternatives to university were actively discouraged: when he considered a gap year his parents discouraged it as they had seen many of their friends' children not go to university after doing a gap year because “earning money was too appealing”. This respondent added that the alternatives to university were not pressed at either at his school or college and pointed out that options such as the army were characterised as the “thick” option. Others echoed these points. One person who did a year at university said: “I went to

university because no one could come up with a better idea for me. I didn't really know what I wanted to do so I understand that this may well have been the best option for me and I certainly got some things out of that year but I don't feel sufficient information is available about the alternatives. University is not the right place for everyone, academic-minded or otherwise. Apprenticeships and the like have a lot to offer."

Those who referred to the Government's target of 50% admission to university for school leavers were nearly all critical and the main concern was that the policy was propelling too many to university. One respondent pointed out that the policy would lead to graduates being unable to find suitable jobs. The respondent said that this was already a problem for those with degrees that were not job specific such as Business Studies and that the policy left a large gap in professions such as plumbers while characterising those who had no desire to gain further education as worthless for not going to university with no motivation to gain a "trade" qualification.

One post criticised the effects of the 50% university admissions target: *"The Government's 50% target for University education is absolutely ridiculous, if 50% of jobs required a degree then this would make perfect sense. However the vast majority of jobs require no further study beyond GCSE let alone A-Level or a Degree, all the government is doing with this target is to devalue a Degree, saddle a large number of the populace with more debt than they can ever pay back, force universities to run "dud" courses which realistically could be better served as Apprenticeships or not at all, and force Universities to "dumb-down" harder degrees to allow more people to succeed."*

The other strand of criticism running through the posts was the level of debt that students had to incur. One respondent pointed out that the amount of debt involved "is very hard for an 18 year old to even imagine" and suggested that it was likely such a large figure meant little to this age group until they started to earn a salary. This view was not, however universal. One student said that he was fully aware of the financial implications, as tuition fees had just been launched when he was searching and applying to universities. He said that he knew that he would have to establish what his maintenance loan would be and whether he could accommodate the loan in the short term. He added that long term financial planning was not a problem as UCAS, the Sixth Form and the Student Loans Company all produced financial FAQ's "very well indeed". But he added that bursaries were something he was less clear on and "I was somewhat bemused that students' in certain faculties get bursaries at my university whilst others do not". Others endorsed this concern about the lack of information on finance and also on costs: "the possible sources of Grants and Bursaries were never made clear with the exception of from the Armed Forces, whose bursaries are well publicised. Also, Universities don't necessarily make "all" of the costs of a degree known, Books and Field Trips for example are both not mentioned and changeable. this does not bode well for student finances."

Students who came from middle-income families considered that the level of support they could obtain was inadequate. One student commented: *"I was aware of the huge debt I would be left with when I came to university, however I was unaware of how draining the daily grind of poverty would be. For middle class students like me, whose parents are deemed by the government to be capable of contributing to their children's education but in fact have very little spare cash, there is a big gap between the amount I can scratch together to live on (including work, about 4K) and the amount the students from poor backgrounds get (upwards of 5K). If you consider that if I was working on minimum wage I would have 9K to live on, the figures really do get depressing."*

## 2. The second question asked whether the admissions process for universities was fair.

There was no consensus in the views posted. A few considered the system fair, a larger group considered it fair but with reservations and a significant number considered it unfair.

View of respondent who considered the admission process fair: *"My experience of the admissions process was fantastic, I got offers from all the universities to which I applied, whilst still coming from a lower middle class background and going to a relatively average state school. When I went to interview at the two universities that required me to have one, my grades were never on the agenda even though they were not all A's, it was always "have you got any questions for us? 'I see from your personal statement that....' and 'why do you want to come to this university?' The interviewers wanted to know about me, not my grades."*

The concerns of those who considered the process fair without reservations and unfair coalesced around the same issues: A-levels and interviews. Much of the debate focussed on whether too much emphasis was placed on A-level results and how to differentiate those who obtained three As at A-level. Some considered that A-levels should be supplemented or replaced with interviews as they reflected only a small part of an applicant's intelligence and aptitude. One respondent considered that A-Levels did not distinguish candidates and that "references are always glowing and candidates regularly make up activities on their UCAS personal statements (based on what I saw at my school)". In this respondent's view two 30 minute interviews—one technical and one general—could "easily work out who can think on their feet and who is telling the truth". The respondent added that the use of interviews made the "overall system fairer; better teaching at a good school easily affects your grades after 7 years, but school preparation for an interview is much harder and makes it a more level playing field." The view was also expressed in posts that the focus on A-level results excluded adequate consideration of vocational training and other non-academic achievements.

A mature student studying pharmacy posted the following: *“The admissions process was not that fair. Several institutions placed far too much emphasis on taking A-levels (or having recently taken them) and appeared unwilling to consider candidates with more complex circumstances, such as other qualifications, professional experience and time away from study (which seems a bit of an oversight for professional-leaning degrees!). It is also baffling that the percentage of students who achieve top grades at A-level has been allowed to increase year-on-year, instead of representing a relatively constant range of top performers over the years. This makes it harder for institutions to distinguish between candidates of differing abilities and creates a need for entrance tests (which could have been avoided through corrective action against such A-level grade “drift”). It also renders direct comparisons between results several years apart fairly meaningless, for example the number of top grades awarded has more than doubled since I sat my A-levels 20 years ago, which suggests (statistically) that had I sat my exams in 2008, I would have got a grade A instead of a grade B. This would not usually pose much of a problem after completing a degree, but it may have been an issue in my case when applying for places on competitive university courses.”*

The counter view was that interviews made the process too subjective. Some considered that universities should not base their choice of students on their backgrounds but the grades they have worked hard to achieve at A-level. One respondent also made the point that asking academic staff at all institutions to interview every candidate would have a significant impact on the time and resources available for research and teaching.

Opinions on entrance examinations were similarly divided. One student considered that introducing entrance examinations was a step too far for students and pointed out that applicants work “really hard for two years and then universities expect us to do more exams”. Another pointed out that the A-level system was the “standardised university entrance exam” and pointed out that the “reason why top universities, such as Oxbridge, have introduced their own entrance exams [...] is that A-levels do not distinguish sufficiently between very good pupils and excellent ones; this is shown by the high number of pupils that gain A grades. [...] That pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds do not go on to achieve the highest A-level grades is a failing of our school system, not the fault of the universities”. The respondent suggested that the Government needed to “improve the teaching in all state schools to ensure that all pupils are given an equal chance of academic success. This can only be done by raising the quality of teaching, by ensuring bad teachers are removed from schools, bright graduates are not put off by the conditions in schools and protecting bright, hardworking pupils from being affected by those who are badly behaved.”

One respondent commented on the increase in the top grades at A-level: *“The problem here is the number of people achieving high grades but rather the standard of the exams themselves; perhaps the curriculum should be blamed. On the other hand, it should not come as a surprise that pupils become increasingly better, year on year, at doing well in a particular type of exam—teachers learn how to train pupils to please examiners as they gain (collectively) experience and become more familiar with the layout of papers. The formula for doing well at A-level is pretty much ‘cracked’.”*

There was also debate on whether the name of the applicant’s school should be removed from the application form. This sat with a theme running through the posts that there should be neither negative discrimination nor positive discrimination in the process. As one post put it “I think [the admissions process] should be based on academic ability not your social status or background and the statements need to be anonymous. All they need are your grades, details and statement. The institution you studied should be blotted out until they have made their decision, in which case they can seek out references if needed”. Another post took a different view: “I think universities do a good job in attempting to balance academic achievement, academic potential and commitment to learning. I do not think that the universities should be banned from seeing the name of a person’s school unless interviewing/entrance exams become a lot more common than they currently are. A-levels test what you have been taught, not how you think, or your capacity to learn in the future, and so the quality of teaching has at least as much effect on the outcome as the ability of the student. Universities have to have some way of determining the quality of teaching a person has had, and knowing the school they have been to is one (admittedly imperfect) way of doing that.”

Some respondents noted the small number of students from certain ethnic minorities at leading universities and asked whether this cast suspicions on the fairness of the process.

### 3. The third question asked what factors influenced students’ choice of university and course.

The responses divided into those who did wide-ranging research and those who did not—usually because they knew where and what they wanted to study and so did not need to.

Several of those falling in the first category wished to continue studying subjects they were taking at A-level—or in some cases pursue a career built on those subjects—and then looked at a university that would provide the best course. Typically these next steps included:

- consulting a guide such as the Times Good University Guide, in particular the ratings for research, pass rates, student satisfaction and figures about graduate employment; One student said that he had also consulted an unofficial student forum which had influenced his eventual decision.
- for the preferred universities, examination of the entrance criteria, course content, how the course would be taught, contact time and access to tutors and the facilities available; and



- contact with the selected universities either through open days or at interview. When visiting a university one respondent commented that he or she made “sure I spoke to graduates, teachers, lecturers, current students and people in the world of politics of which I intend to focus my future career in. I found their opinions very helpful and much more accurate than my peers [which] played on popular beliefs [and] were easily unfounded.”

Post from a student who was clear about the course: *“For me the most important thing about the course that I picked was that it was something that I would enjoy. My A-levels at school were Physics, Maths and Geography and so I was looking at a career that was linked to these subjects. What made me decide on Engineering was a Headstart course that I attended with the Royal Academy of Engineering—this opened my eyes to an area that I had given some consideration to, but didn’t really know that much about.*

*“Once I had decided on Engineering [...] I looked at the Universities that offered this course. There are a limited number of Universities that offer a course [...], therefore the Universities that I applied to was partly predetermined by this. Of the Universities that offered the course I wanted to do I then selected the ones that made offers that matched my predicted A-level grades and that had a good reputation.*

*“My knowledge about quality of teaching and research at the Universities was mainly picked up when I attended interviews—I did not really take too much account of what the Universities were saying about this, as they all had achieved similar standards and they were only ever going to tell prospective students the really positive things. The thing that influenced me most on interview days was looking around the facilities, accommodation and locality—I was looking at the places I had applied to see if I could imagine myself living and studying there.”*

For those who did not conduct wide-ranging research the location of the university often determined their choice. Several mature students with family and other commitments made the point that the nearest universities were the only choice open to them. One post falling into this category said: “The main factor which influenced my choice was the locality of the university. Having a wife and children meant that I could not stay away and had to accept a place which was easy for me to commute. While this was the case I have to say that the university and the course have met my needs sufficiently.”

Cost was mentioned by a few respondents. One pointed out that it was cheaper to live at home with his parents. Another said that although she had received an offer from Cambridge, she ended up selecting Lancaster as it offered her a scholarship. She commented: “university was meant to be made more accessible financially to students. However, by raising the tuition fees the year before I started, my parents and I had no chance to save anywhere near enough money to pay for university. I will graduate with £19,000 worth of debt and that, I feel, is the best I could have hoped for. I have had to work while at university and over the summer which has massively affected my work at university. I would recommend anyone thinking of attending university to consider institutions which are not necessarily at the top of the ratings guide and look at institutions which offer scholarships or other forms of financial support”.

A member of the Youth Parliament posted the following: *“We asked over 1000 young people this question in March 2009. 1 in 3 young people said that the recession will affect their choice of university and/or course, with many opting for cheaper courses or choosing a local university so they can live at home. We think it is essential that these voices of YOUNG PEOPLE are taken into account, and not just those who are already studying who graduated. Any decision made by Government will directly affect our generation and we believe we have a right to be consulted.”*

#### 4. The fourth question asked students whether university had lived up to their expectations.

Posts varied widely. Those who commented favourably included the following factors:

- university provided the opportunity to study an interesting subject to degree level;
- access to the best minds in the field;
- good relationships with tutors, who were accessible and helpful;
- the opportunity to meet many new people with different viewpoints and backgrounds, and to improve social skills;
- the opportunity to travel abroad to experience other cultures and challenge perceptions; and
- university clubs and societies which allowed students to develop extra-curricula skills and to test and reform their beliefs and assumptions.

A post from a respondent who considered university life had lived up to expectations: *“A large part of why I have enjoyed university so much is because the opportunities I have had that I would not have had anywhere else. I have been president of a society, written for a newspaper and presented a radio show. These and other experiences have helped me become a rounded person. When combined with mostly fantastic teaching I am left in my final year feeling extremely satisfied.”*

The posts are not a representative sample and the universities at which students are studying are not always ascertainable from the e-mail addresses used but it would appear that those attending universities in the Russell Group tended to report a positive, rather than negative, experience.

Top of criticism was the quality of teaching and feedback on work (which is also covered at question 5). Critical comments on teaching ranged from “awful” to “hit-and-miss”. Also mentioned was the cost of attending university and some queried whether they were obtaining value for money for their tuition fees. One said: “The fact I am paying the £3000+ fees doesn’t really annoy as the payback system is quite good once graduates have received a job. Do I think it is value for money? No. I cannot find £3000 worth of value in my course, and I have not received that level of learning back”. Other criticisms included:

- poor administration by universities;
- sub-standard sports facilities
- a student culture too focussed on alcohol;
- lack of transparency in the decisions taken by universities and student unions;
- courses such as engineering becoming increasingly academic and theoretical; and
- absence of opportunities to learn other skills such as ICT or languages.

A student posted: *“I started as a ‘mature student’ at the age of twenty one and even with a modest three years full time employment behind me before I started my programme, I have been routinely amazed at the lack of professionalism, confidentiality, communication skills and responsibility exhibited by many senior lecturers. Whilst lecturing academics are clearly expert in their fields, this DOES NOT make them competent teachers, managers or equip them well to deal with student-lecturer relations. From my experiences, academics easily become institutionalised and clearly need more or better training in many aspects of professional conduct and skills which in almost any other job would be an absolute prerequisite.”*

Finally, a member of the Youth Parliament posted to say that they had consulted with students, parents and young people with aspirations to go to university to find out their expectations and hear their story regarding university accessibility. The post reported that they received “stories of disappointment, disillusionment and struggle as people from all ages and backgrounds battled against the barriers that are current in higher education.” This was published at [www.ukyouthparliament.org.uk](http://www.ukyouthparliament.org.uk).

##### 5. The fifth question asked what students thought of the quality of teaching at university.

This question received the largest number of posts, which pointed to variable quality in teaching in universities. A typical critical post read: “university lecturers seriously need to take lessons from school teachers on how to teach. They are clever [...] but they are not skilled at conveying the message. They talk to us like we are fellow professionals who understand everything [...] they simply talk through slideshows, don’t get us involved in the lecture, don’t care if we miss some info, miss major parts out and say we should catch up ourselves.”

A post taking the contrary view: “I have to listen to many different kinds of lecturers from very different backgrounds but I find that the vast majority, while not formally trained to teach, are very good at communicating the relevant concepts. In my opinion this is simply because the better someone understands a topic, the more comprehensively and clearly they can explain it to others. [...] To an extent, the perceived problem with university teaching [...] can be attributed to the spoon-feeding style of teaching used in many sixth forms. Perhaps emphasis should be placed on preparing children for a more independent form of study with greater flexibility rather than criticising the teaching ability of competent and passionate (for their subject area and research) academics.”

Several respondents addressed the question whether university teachers should be required to have professional qualifications. One student said that, while the majority of lecturers were knowledgeable in their specific subject areas, their means of conveying this information to students often left “a lot to be desired”. The student considered that “lecturers should have a professional teaching degree to be able to lecture at university.” While several shared this view, others said it would be “better to be taught by someone who has worked in the field for years, is enthusiastic about it, and who may not necessarily have devoted time to getting a teaching qualification”. Some were concerned that a requirement to obtain a professional qualification might deter first-rank researchers from becoming university teachers.

One category of university teacher criticised were graduate students, though praise for the quality of graduate students was also given. One respondent said: *“I’m a first year student and find myself becoming increasingly frustrated with the quality of teaching at my university. I have a decent chunk of contact time by most people’s standards, but around half of it isn’t worth going to. Most of the lecturers are reasonably good speakers—the worst offenders are the PhD students (“tutors”) who are employed to run lab sessions (in which they refuse to help), mark coursework (which is always carried out suspiciously quickly and inconsistently) and give lacklustre tutorial sessions (these involve a couple of half-baked PowerPoint slides and quickly deteriorate into having a chat).”*

Some respondents made the point that there was no mechanism for dealing with poor teachers in universities, unlike schools and that, deans of faculties appeared unresponsive and were not accountable to students for inadequate teaching. As one respondent put it: “In a lot of lectures, the entire year group are made to feel like an inconvenience. Complaints go unheard, student reps seem to be ignored even when the same complaints arise, and the bog-standard answer to most requests for help seems to be ‘You should know it already, so I won’t tell you.’ Yes, there are times when the asker should certainly be at a standard in year

3 where they shouldn't have to ask for help with year 1 or 2 principles, but if 10/20 students on a course of 80 (down from 130 in year 1) are all asking the same things, shouldn't this set off alarm bells as to why so many students are struggling? Apparently not. The same goes for when a third of a year group fail an exam first time around—surely this should be an indicator? Apparently not.”

Commenting on the relationship between teaching and research one student said: “[I]t is important that the people teaching are still engaged in research, so that they can keep students up to date with their topic. However, this should not be at the expense of the teaching itself. Some lecturers do seem to just be teaching so that they can get funding for their research and therefore don't enjoy the teaching aspect, resulting in uninteresting lectures. Also, classes were often cancelled when lecturers were off on research projects, sometimes without students being given much advance notice and with no work set to do whilst they were absent. There needs to be some sort of cover system at least but, where possible, the research should be done in non-contact time.”

Views on the quality of feedback also varied. One student said that feedback was “usually prompt and detailed, explaining the good and bad parts of your work and how it could be improved.” This was not the majority view. Criticism ranged from one who said that feedback and consistency of marking were “awful” to another who said that the “feedback I have been given ranges from no comments to well done to ‘don't use bullet points’”. The respondent believed that this was “insufficient feedback to learn how to improve my work. Each lecturer should have to put one good point about the work that should be continued for future work, and one bad point that needs to be improved on. This way, students can learn what they are doing right and the improvements needed.”

On contact time, comments were more favourable than on feedback. There was some criticism that given the tuition fee contact time was inadequate. One student commented that the “contact time we have with staff is a problem. Lectures are often informative but there is no one-to-one time. Sometimes I feel like I'm in a sausage factory rather than surrounded by some of the foremost minds in my field. I appreciate that students get in the way of research but the whole point of university is for the lecturers to pass on their knowledge.” But others—particularly it appears those studying science and possible students at Russell Group universities—considered contact time was satisfactory. One respondent said that “I have a decent chunk of contact time by most people's standards”.

#### 6. *The sixth question asked whether all degrees were the same.*

Comments posted in response to this question focussed on two issues: comparisons between subject and comparisons between universities. The consensus, though not universal view, was that the degree classification system cannot be perceived as equal either between universities or between subjects.

On subjects, one respondent considered that it was the case that an upper second honours degree in two different subjects within the same university could be of different value. She pointed out that it was possible to have a very well respected department within a poorly performing university and that in media coverage of the league tables caveats were rarely added that certain departments were outstanding. A Cambridge student put a different view: “based on Cambridge, degrees classes was roughly equivalent within an institution. The range of marks varied between subjects, but the proportion of students getting a 2:i wasn't [...] hugely different. Given that the entry criteria were also broadly similar for each course, the degrees are probably roughly equivalent in value”.

There was also an exchange of views on the relative difficulty of arts subjects in comparison to science subjects. One student did not consider that most arts degrees were as difficult as most science degrees. The respondent pointed out that in arts degrees the main form of assessment was essays, which students have weeks to work on, in contrast in those taking science degrees who were continually assessed and had “far more exams”. Some respondents pointed out that arts and science degrees required contrasting skills: a science degree was “more about learning and understanding material delivered in lectures and practicals”, whereas an arts degree was “more text based”.

One respondent considered that it was “wrong to assume that arts subjects are worth less, or are easier to do well in, than science degrees. My sister, a straight A student, passed her first year in medicine, to change to English because she wanted to think philosophically, and not just regurgitate medical knowledge. She is on for a first in English, but has a mixture of marks in her papers. Her clear ability, and her success in her medical degree did not necessitate success in English, and I don't think her workload has substantially changed, although she has greater flexibility now. In English, you have never finished reading.”

On the comparability of universities, several posts considered that the requirements to gain entry to a particular courses were instructive. One point pointed out that a degree in History at a “red brick” university might require three As at A-level, while universities “lower down the scale” would require “much less”. While taking the view that this should not dictate the worth of a 2:1 degree, the respondent considered that, if the standard of students admitted were of “a higher calibre, this will then often affect the quality of debate in classes, tutorials and ultimately the standard of work produced”.

Commenting on whether all degrees were the same one respondent said:

*“It is [...] entirely depressing and de-motivating for students who go to the most rigorous universities to hear that they might as well have gone elsewhere. Is this really what we want to encourage? There are indeed students who gained near perfect A-level grades and worked hard at these universities that*

*got 2:2s. If they had gone to a university with much lower entry requirements, and hence necessarily lower academically intense courses, it is highly probable that they would have gained a 2:1 or a 1st. It therefore seems entirely unfair that graduate schemes and jobs have blanket requirements for a 2:1 or above. The only standard tests in England are GCSEs and A-levels. Compare a student with AAAA at A-level and a 2:2 from, for example, Cambridge versus a student with EE at A-level and a 2:1 from another university. The only way of comparing these two individuals (academically at least) is to compare their A-levels that were of the same (or at least very similar) academic standard. [...]*

*The suggestion that all university degrees are, or even should be, the same is to fundamentally discourage variety, difference and achievement in our society. Why would we want to make all degrees the same? Why would we want them all to be 'average'? We should celebrate those that attain brilliant degrees from top-class universities just as we do celebrate those that are talented footballers; amazing singers; etc. Students at our top universities, such as Oxford and Cambridge, are amongst the most brilliant in the world. It is of this England should be proud."*

There were several posts on the value of degrees in subjects such as social studies, media studies, football studies and surf sciences. Some took the view expressed by one post that it was "incomprehensible" that a media studies degree was comparable with the academic rigour involved in a subject such as medicine. Another wanted the system to "differentiate between the tougher courses and courses such as media studies. In rejoinder, a student of media studies said that he found the theories and concepts introduced in media studies just as challenging as those in politics in which he was taking a major.

Several students said that standards varied between universities. One respondent pointed out that courses at different universities would never be the same unless they all taught the same syllabus. She said that in her subject different universities emphasised different things—some put more emphasis on language skills and some on linguistics or literature. Even where courses covered the same broad topics, there was no guarantee that the level expected is the same. The student said one of her friends, who was now supervising students at another Russell Group university, was told that the material he covered at the same stage in his degree was "too difficult" for the students there. The student said that, if the course material was substantially easier, then she did not know how it was possible to test whether or not students were at the same level. Another student considered that the problem was not the classification system as such, but the academic requirements. The student said that in his university, 70% was a first but that was extremely hard to obtain whereas the marking in other universities allowed students to obtain a first with a mark as high as 86% on the basis of a performance that "would not qualify even for a 2.1 in a top university". The student considered that standards had to be raised in these universities.

One respondent who had studied experience of the University of Cambridge and the Open University commented: "*although the academic approach is different, with Cambridge encouraging new ideas and an innovative style and the Open University preferring a more traditional hoop jumping exercise, the resulting grade 2:i and a merit, are about the same level, not the top first or distinction. We worked hard at Oxbridge, but we were privileged in studying in an atmosphere conducive to that. At the Open University students juggle full time work and study, and that reflects different skills.*"

One respondent considered that degrees were worth less than in the past. Her father who had graduated in 1978 had been offered a PhD with a 2:ii, and getting a 1st then was much rarer. It saddened her that degrees had been devalued and she considered that a first should be a measure of exceptional academic achievement, not competent organisation.

Some students drew attention to the external element in the assessment process to ensure consistent standards—both the use of external examiners and external accreditation by professional institutes to "help to even out the differences".

Several posts commented on what employers were seeking from candidates for employment. One said that as employers mainly looked for a 2:i or above which many graduates had achieved, the only "thing that stands out is which university the student comes from. Some universities carry a brand name and broader status than others."

A member of the Youth Parliament posted the following: "*There is the fear that if universities are able to charge what they like, there will be a huge divide between affordable institutes and those that can get away with charging sky high fees. If we continue this way, there will be an unfair disadvantage and a growing divide between the Russell Groups and Polytechnics of this country. Again, young people between the ages of 11–18 need to be asked these questions as part of the upcoming review to relay their perceptions of higher education as they are the next generation of students.*"

April 2009

## Memorandum 1

### Submission from the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills

The Department welcomes this opportunity to respond to the Committee's request for evidence on the topics outlined below. This memorandum largely covers activities within England, although references to the research councils apply across the UK. Responsibility for higher education (HE) is devolved, while science and research funding is reserved.

#### SUMMARY

- An excellent higher education sector with world class learning and research is crucial to meet both economic and social needs;
- DIUS is committed to increasing and widening participation in higher education to achieve the high level skills needed to secure the nation's future prosperity;
- Universities are autonomous organisations and have their own admissions policy. Government is determined to promote fair and transparent admissions policies and has asked OFFA and HEFCE to undertake work in this area
- Young people are motivated by different types of learning and these provide a variety of access routes to HE;
- The Government has ensured that, even as participation in HE increases, sufficient resources have been made available to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to maintain the unit of funding. We have ensured that expansion is properly funded and have increased HE funding by 24% in real terms in the last 10 years;
- The Government is committed to the dual support system through which funding for research is channelled to universities;
- Maintaining and improving the quality of teaching is a priority and there are agreed standards and outcomes which are expected from HE;
- Students who have the ability and wish to study in higher education should not be prevented from doing so for financial reasons, as there is a generous package of support available in the form of loans and grants;
- The Government has set up a National Student Forum (NSF) to provide a mechanism for student feedback to be channelled into the policy-making process and improvements in the student experience;
- The Government intends to publish in 2009 a framework for the development of higher education over the next ten to fifteen years

#### INTRODUCTION

1. An excellent higher education sector is a central part of our national and international economic success and key to long-term growth for the UK. Higher education is about knowledge and understanding. It is about imparting knowledge to learners and extending that knowledge through research. Key objectives for higher education in the future must be excellence in research and in teaching.

2. Higher education institutions (HEIs) and students are not homogeneous groups. This diversity is one of the strengths of the sector and means that the student experience will vary according to individual (social background, age etc), course (full time, part time under/post grad), institution (size, urban, rural, research intensive) etc Diversity means we can meet the educational and employability needs of a range of students.

3. Graduates stimulate the economy and make a huge contribution to our national wealth. We have high completion rates of full degree courses which results in a flow of graduates that remains above the OECD average. The UK continues to be an attractive destination to foreign students, second only to the USA in terms of overall numbers.

4. The Government has set an aspirational target to increase participation in higher education towards 50% of those aged 18 to 30 with growth of at least a percentage point every two years to the academic year 2010–11 (the Higher Education Initial Participation Rate—HEIPR). Domestic demand for higher education continues to rise (see Data Annex Figures 1 and 2). We are aiming to produce more, and more employable, graduates increasing initial participation rates and meeting our targets over time. We are also determined to ensure fair access policies so that young people from every social class, over 50% of whom now aspire to go to university, can benefit from higher education—a huge change from the 1960s when only 5% went to higher education.

5. Between 2000–01 and 2006–07 the numbers of part time students (undergraduate and postgraduate) rose by almost 12%; and the numbers of full time rose by almost 16%. We are funding a record number of places (1,156,000) in 08–09.

## ADMISSIONS

### *Progression into Higher Education*

6. Good quality, timely information, advice and guidance (IAG) about progression to HE is extremely important and we are working closely with the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) to make improvements to help schools—with input from the HE sector—for example through the development of new, high quality materials for use in the classroom. It is essential that potential students can access the right information, advice and guidance to help them select the course which best meets their personal and career aspirations. This is a priority issue for the National Student Forum (NSF) which included recommendations on IAG in their recently published annual report (see para 38). It is important that young people, and their advisers, are able to consider this sort of information early, so it can inform their choices.

### *Routes to Higher Education*

7. If we are to increase participation in higher education, we need to ensure that all young people enjoy an education that fulfils their potential and stretches and challenges them so that they can go on to further or higher education or employment. The Government has a comprehensive qualifications policy for 14–19 year olds because young people are motivated by different types of learning. We have a range of qualifications providing a choice of curricula and learning methods. They each provide a variety of access routes to HE and progression routes to further study. They ensure young people are able to develop all the skills and knowledge they need, and that employers and universities want.

A sample of the key access routes for young people are:-

- A-level is the traditional university entrance qualification. OFSTED and QCA/Ofqual have confirmed that they are confident that A level results reflect the real achievements of students and that standards have been maintained.
- The International Baccalaureate (IB) Entries for the IB are a fraction of those for A-level.
- Apprenticeship frameworks now have a clear pathway to higher education for those who have the potential to succeed at that level. Arrangements are being piloted to award UCAS Tariff points for apprenticeships.
- University entrance tests: Research has shown that a relatively small number of institutions use tests (14%) and only for 0.43% of courses in the UCAS scheme. They could impose burdens on under-represented groups and/or schools that are less familiar with preparing leavers for higher education
- the 14–19 Diploma. Many HE Institutions have worked as part of Diploma Development Partnerships to ensure the Diploma qualifications have been developed in such a way as to ensure their suitability for progression onto Honours Degree courses. The Extended Project (EP) is a stand-alone piece of work which requires students to use independent research, critical thinking, planning, and evaluation skills which universities have particularly welcomed. The EP is a compulsory part of the Diploma, but can be taken alongside A Levels, or as a qualification in its own right. It is equivalent to half an A Level and is graded, like A levels and Advanced Diplomas, from A\* to E.

8. Institutions including all Russell Group and 1994 Group Universities are now working on course-level statements for their 2010 prospectuses reflecting their acceptance of Diplomas. The Advanced Diploma will be awarded a maximum of 420 Tariff points; the same number as for 3.5 A levels. Work is underway in UCAS to consider whether an additional Tariff should be awarded for achievement of an A\* grade in A levels and Diplomas. A decision is expected by the end of 2008.

9. Universities are autonomous organisations. The Government does not direct institutions in admissions policy. It remains a fundamental principle that universities are responsible for who they admit to their courses, but we must allow the most talented and hard working of our young people to achieve their full potential, irrespective of what kind of social background they came from, or the school they went to. Universities must operate a fair and transparent admissions policy and we believe that key to increasing public confidence in application and admissions processes is to increase openness, transparency and accountability. Earlier this year, we asked HEFCE and OFFA to look at how HEIs can bring together their widening participation and fair access policies, including transparent admissions system into a single document and we will announce our response to this advice shortly.

10. We are addressing barriers to progression into higher education for those with vocational qualifications. We are responding to the demand for developing those in work who may have vocational qualifications or significant practical/work related skills and who need to access higher education through, for example supporting employer co-funded places for their existing workforce. Lifelong Learning networks are addressing barriers to progression into and through higher education for those with vocational qualifications by developing new routes as are Foundation Degrees.

11. Entry to most full-time first degrees, HNDs and university diplomas, for UK students and for students applying from overseas, is administered by the University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) an independent body and a registered charity (see Fig 1 Data Annex). Between 2002 and 2007 the number of applicants rose by 15%. Provisional figures show that the total number of people applying for 2008 entry was 582,657

12. HEIs accept many different qualifications as evidence of an applicant's potential to succeed on the course they have applied for. They couch their offers of a place in conditional terms, based on the qualifications and grades they expect the applicant to achieve before taking up the offer. Some institutions will use UCAS Tariff points instead of, or as well as grades to specify their offers.

#### WIDENING PARTICIPATION

13. Lack of financial support should not present a barrier to students who have the ability and wish to study in higher education, as there is a generous package of support available in the form of grants and loans. No eligible full-time student has to pay their fees before or during their studies. All students are able to apply for a loan for the full variable fee.

14. Improving access to higher education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds is a key priority for the Government and we have made real progress in recent years (see Figures 3 and 4). The proportion of young entrants from lower socio-economic groups has increased steadily, reaching 29.8% in 2007. Since 1997–98 the proportion of young people entering university for the first time from State schools has risen by over six percentage points to 87.2% in 2006–07. However, we have always said that widening participation requires a long-term approach and that results would not be immediate.

15. HEFCE's widening participation allocation of £364 million recognises the additional cost to HEIs of recruiting and retaining students from non-traditional backgrounds. This is in addition to the work that HEFCE has commissioned from Action on Access to disseminate and promote examples of good practice in retaining students. For students entering full-time first degree courses in 2005–06, 78.0% are projected to obtain a degree. This is amongst the highest overall completion rates in the OECD countries. Non-completion rates have fallen from 15.8% in 1997–98 to 13.9% in 2005–06.

16. We continue to help and encourage a range of people to enter HE through for example.

- *The Aimhigher programme*, to raise the attainment levels of young people and their aspirations towards higher education, so that the numbers and proportions of young people from backgrounds currently under-represented in HE continue to rise. Aimhigher enables partnerships of school, colleges and universities to co-design and deliver a range of activities to engage, enthuse and enable young people to be able and willing to participate in HE. Aimhigher is impacting on the aspirations and attainment levels of young people.
- *Aimhigher Associates* commenced in September 2008. The programme will build to 5,500 undergraduates mentoring 21,000 pupils from age 13 to support them and encourage them through educational transitions and into HE.
- *The HE recommendations from the National Council for Educational Excellence* which were announced in October and focus on how universities and schools/colleges can work together to identify and nurture young talent.

17. Many HEIs are engaged in a number of their own outreach and other activities designed to help young people from under-represented backgrounds to apply successfully to their institution. These include "Compact Schemes", which provide additional support to prospective HE students including arrangements which may allow lower entry offers to be made. Recent research has identified 51 HEIs offering some sort of compact arrangement, although they vary widely in scope.

18. We welcome the announcement by 11 of our most selective universities to extend opportunities—for the best performing students from the most challenging backgrounds—to show what they can achieve, and seeking further to develop ways in which their outreach activity, including in some cases compact schemes, can help young people. Our most selective universities are recognising their full responsibilities in helping to seek out and develop the best of talents, wherever they are in our society.

19. We are growing student numbers to record levels. But we are not simply concerned with recruiting younger students. Our development of new models for the funding and design of HE courses will also enable us to grow the number of mature students entering HE part-time. As part of this strategy for growth, over the next six years HEFCE have been asked to support twenty new HE centres with around 10,000 student places, under our New University Challenge (NUC) initiative. This will allow more students to gain access to HE locally and bring significant benefits through driving local economic and social regeneration

#### *The balance between teaching and research*

20. The Department has ensured that, even as participation in HE increases, significant additional resources have been made available to HEFCE in the last decade to maintain the unit of funding in real terms. For 2008–09 the Department has allocated to HEFCE a recurrent grant for teaching of £4,920 million. This includes widening participation funding and funding for anticipated growth. Most of this budget is linked to student numbers recruited by institutions, which are at record levels

21. Working with HEFCE, the Department has sought to raise the profile of teaching in HE. HEFCE is providing significant funding for special initiatives that support teaching excellence and innovation through research and dissemination of best practice. That includes, in the current year, £35 million for the Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) which reward and promote excellent teaching practice; £17.9 million to the HE Academy which supports the sector in providing the best possible learning experience for students; £54 million for institutional learning and teaching strategies, supporting professional standards, teaching informed and enriched by research, and staff and student volunteering; and £2.6 million towards the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme which makes awards to individuals and to institutions for projects to build on expertise.

22. The details of individual programmes of training and continuous professional development in teaching vary according to the needs of institutions and individuals. The Higher Education Academy (HEA) published in 2006 the UK Professional Standards Framework which HEIs can apply to their professional development programmes and activities to demonstrate that professional standards for teaching and supporting learning are being met.

23. It is crucial that all institutions offer excellent teaching, but the balance between teaching and research must be determined by each institution according to its own strengths. Support for teaching in HE helps sustain, and is in turn enriched by, world class research.

#### TEACHING QUALITY

24. The Government has made HEFCE legally responsible, under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, to ensure that provision is made for assessing the quality of education provided in institutions for whose activities they provide, or are considering providing, financial support. HEFCE fulfils its responsibility by contracting with the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and provides a close oversight on quality through its committee structures.

25. The sector owned Academic Infrastructure, developed by the QAA in partnership with the sector, provides a means of describing academic standards in UK higher education. It allows for diversity and innovation within academic programmes offered by higher education. Audits are then carried out by a team of academics who review the institution's quality and standards, using their knowledge of higher education and reference points in the Academic Infrastructure. After each audit, QAA publishes a report on the audit team's findings. Each HEI also appoints external examiners (independent academic experts from other HEIs or from areas of relevant professional practice) to provide impartial advice on performance in relation to particular programmes.

26. As universities are autonomous organisations with legal powers to award their own degrees and responsible for their academic provision, the responsibility for ensuring appropriate methods of assessing excellence in teaching must remain at the institutional level. However, the national arrangements provide a public assurance about excellence and quality in HE overall, which are evidenced by:

- positive outcomes from Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) audits;
- consistently high student feedback—in the most recent National Student Survey 82% of students in England expressed overall satisfaction with the quality of their courses;
- high graduate employability—93.6% of full-time first degree graduates from English HEIs in employment and/or further study; and
- high employer satisfaction—84% of employers recruiting graduates thought that they were very well or well prepared for work.

27. Each university is different, bringing a uniqueness of experience to bear on its teaching provision. It is important that students receive good clear information about what each university has to offer, to help them make the right choices about what to study and where. The Department has encouraged the development of the Unistats website (formerly Teaching Quality Information website) as a key route to information on quality and outcomes for prospective students.

28. The Department maintains a keen interest in ensuring the HE sector's reputation for excellence, and has made clear that, if any concern does arise about quality, the sector should be in a position to respond proactively and quickly.

#### *Degree classification*

29. Instigated by the former Department for Education and Skills (DfES), a sector group chaired by Professor Burgess has reviewed current methodologies for recording student achievement. It concluded that, whilst the UK honours degree itself is a robust and highly-valued qualification, the degree classification system is considered no longer fit for purpose, because it does not describe the range of knowledge, skills, attributes and experience of today's graduates. The "Burgess Group" found no suitable alternative summative system, but concluded that there was a need to provide more information about each student's achievements.



30. Maintaining confidence in the value of UK degrees is vital. The Burgess Group proposed, in October 2007, development of the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) which will pull together and increase the amount of information about an individual student's achievements and will give employers more detailed information on the skills, progress and attainment of prospective employees. In October 2008 Universities UK (UUK) announced plans for 18 HE Institutions to pilot the HEAR. The HEAR will incorporate the European Diploma Supplement (DS) which is one of the tools used in the *Bologna Process* to create a system of easily readable and comparable degrees across the European Higher Education Area.

31. HEIs have their own regulations for assessing the work of their students, underpinned by the sector-wide Academic Infrastructure which is key to the process of assuring quality and standards. Benchmark statements (one element of the Academic Infrastructure) set out expectations about standards of degrees in each subject area. HEIs also use a form of peer review—external examiners advise on the extent to which assessment and decisions on awards are sound and fair. The proportion of 1st and upper 2nd class honours degrees awarded by English HEIs has remained broadly constant at 58–60% over the last four years (03–04 to 06–07). Nevertheless, in response to recent media concern, the QAA is carrying out investigations into the use of external examiners and institutional assessment practices. The Department will be looking at the results of those investigations as soon as they become available in the New Year.

#### *Student plagiarism*

32. Student plagiarism is a matter for which HEIs, as autonomous organisations, are responsible for addressing and applying penalties. The QAA, the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC), and the HEA all provide advice and guidance to HEIs on dealing with plagiarism. In May 2008, JISC and HEA published the second part of their Academic Misconduct Benchmarking Research (AMBeR) Project and used the survey results to determine a reasonable extrapolation of the national number of plagiarism incidents across UK HE—7.20 cases for every 1,000 students or 0.72%, which is lower than other student surveys have previously shown. The report also suggested that the vast majority of incidences are first offences, which indicates that current punitive measures are successful. JISC and HEA will continue to use such research to support institutions and in the report they urge institutions to improve their existing recording procedures to aid transparency and communication within the sector.

#### *Research Funding*

33. In the decade since 1997, Government funding for the UK research base has risen from £1.3 billion to £3.4 billion, and it will rise further during the CSR07 period. The Government channels research funding for universities through the dual support system, and remains committed to continuing it (see Figure 5). The system aims to balance:

- a stable (but not static) financial foundation with competitive funding for specific projects.
- the need for funders to promote specific priorities with the freedom of universities to set their own agenda.
- the rewards for discovering new knowledge with those for working with users.
- rewards for future potential with those for established performance.

34. The main methods for assessing research quality in the dual support system are the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), which informs the selective distribution of funds by the UK higher education funding bodies, and peer review of individual projects, which informs research council funding.

35. DIUS believes that the RAE has significantly improved the quality of research over the past 20 years working within a dual support system. This is supported by the 2002 House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee report on the RAE which concluded that: “The RAE has had positive effects: it has stimulated universities into managing their research and has ensured that funds have been targeted at areas of research excellence.”

36. The 2008 RAE results will fully inform HEFCE research funding until 2010–11 for all subjects. However, it is our intention (announced in 2006) to replace the RAE with the Research Excellence Framework (REF). The REF must take into account the whole range of indicators of excellence, including the broader contribution which academics make to policy development. HEFCE is now refining the details of the new system, in consultation with funding bodies and the university sector across the UK.

37. Research councils fund research through the mechanism of peer review—academics submit research proposals to a research council for funding, and expert peer review panels then allocate funding to those that are judged to be of the highest scientific merit. Academics are free to submit research proposals on any subject in a research council's remit; in addition, research councils will make calls for proposals in a particular area (proposals received will be evaluated by peer review) and fund post-graduate studentships and academic fellowships. Some (principally Medical Research Council (MRC), Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) and Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) maintain their own institutes which employ scientists directly.

38. In August 2008 RCUK published, on behalf of all the research councils, a statement of mission and statement of expectation on economic and social impact, reaffirming its commitment to excellent research that extends the boundaries of human knowledge but emphasising the need to take into consideration the potential for societal and economic benefits when thinking about future directions for research.

#### STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND SUPPORT

39. Since 2003 the Government has encouraged the higher education sector to seek student feedback and to involve students in developing further improvement initiatives. The most tangible example is the introduction of the *National Student Survey* (NSS)—a survey of all final-year undergraduates on the quality of the teaching and learning on their course. The most recent results from that survey show overall satisfaction remaining above 80% (82%). All HE institutions now participate and pass the 50% publication threshold. Results are used by HEFCE and the HEA to identify national development priorities and by individual institutions (universities and HE colleges) to identify specific areas for improvement. In addition the recent NUS student experience survey also showed high satisfaction levels—with 85% rating the quality of teaching and learning as good or excellent and 85% pleased they had chosen to attend university.

40. In October 2007, DIUS Ministers launched the *Student Listening Programme*, designed to amplify the student voice in Government—and to give a strong message to the sector about the importance of directly engaging with students. Students must be at the heart of discussions and decisions to improve the student learning experience. Ministers regularly meet students on their visits to HEIs to take their views.

41. As part of the Student Listening Programme five *Student Juries* were held between November 2007 and February 2008, giving “typical” students an opportunity to listen to expert speakers from the HE sector, debate issues of concern, and vote on their top priorities for the future.

- a. Building on the Student Juries, a new *National Student Forum* has been established in partnership with the student representative organisations. The Forum members are a representative group of 16 current students, with an independent chair (Maevé Sherlock).
- b. Since the creation of DIUS, we have designated a *Minister for Students*—with responsibility to listen to and speak up for students in DIUS and across Government. Lord Young is now the Minister for Students in both higher education and further education.

42. The National Student Forum’s first annual report, which was published on 17 October 2008, focuses on Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) and Student Finance as two areas which are of top priority for students. It also includes proposals for further development by the Forum on employability and issues affecting disabled, international and postgraduate students. The Government responded publicly to the Forum’s annual report and recommendations on 10 December.<sup>3</sup>

#### STUDENT FINANCE

43. Non-repayable maintenance grants and bursaries have been reintroduced, focusing help on the least well off and families on modest incomes. The grants package has been significantly enhanced since 2004–05 by raising both the grant amount and the family income thresholds for receiving full and partial grants.

44. In July 2007 it was predicted that a third of students would get the maximum maintenance grant and a further third a partial grant (see Fig 6 Data Annex). It is now expected that about 40% of the students will be eligible for the full grant. It has been necessary to make some adjustments to ensure that the original intention of the announcement made in July 2007, that is, that two thirds of students will benefit from a full or partial grant is maintained. In 2009–10 all eligible new students from households with an income of around £18,000 to £50,000 will benefit from higher levels of maintenance grant than in 2007–08; and those from households with an income of around £57,000 will get more total support including subsidised loans. An additional £100 million has been made available to meet that commitment.

45. In addition to subsidised loans for tuition fees, and living costs and non-repayable maintenance grants, students paying the full tuition fee and getting the full grant benefit from a non repayable bursary of £310 from their university or college. In fact many universities and colleges are paying much more, to a broader range of students. A typical bursary is around £800.

46. Students are also able to take out a loan to cover their living costs, the majority of which is non means-tested. Unlike commercial loans, student loans only attract an interest rate linked to inflation, so borrowers will repay no more, in real terms, than they borrow. Borrowers repay at a rate of 9 per cent of their income over a threshold of £15,000 a year.

47. In 2004 the Government introduced a package of support for part-time students for the first time and this was subsequently enhanced. This includes non-repayable, means-tested grants for fees, travel and course costs.

<sup>3</sup> Correction to paragraph 42—the Government now expect to publish its response to the NSF annual report in January 2009.

48. In addition, targeted support is available for students with specific needs: including full-time students with children or adult dependents, those with a disability and those who are eligible for income-related benefits. The Access to Learning Fund, a discretionary budget administered by higher education institutions, is also available for full and part-time students in financial hardship who might otherwise have difficulty accessing or remaining in higher education.

49. As noted above, the NSF's annual report made a number of recommendations on student finance. It reported that students were not always familiar with the range of financial support available to them and that further work may be necessary. Currently there is an extensive information and advertising campaign to raise awareness of HE and student finance.

#### THE FUTURE: CONCLUSION

50. Next year we will publish our framework for the development of higher education over the next ten to fifteen years. It will address the expansion and development of higher education in Britain. We need a framework to help us ensure that higher education in this country meets the growing demands upon it for research, teaching, international cooperation, economic development and cultural influence in the 21st century and provides a reference point for future policy decisions, including decisions about funding and other priorities.

51. We invited contributions from external expert contributors on issues such as demographic changes, institutional performance, internationalism, intellectual property, part-time study, research careers, and the student experience and e-learning. Reports on these issues were published in November on the DIUS website. Representatives of the users of HE have also been asked to provide reports. The users will report shortly. They have been selected from a variety of backgrounds: business, the arts, public sector etc. The outcomes of the debate will help us ensure that HE in this country meets the growing demands upon it for research, teaching, international cooperation, economic development and cultural influence in the 21st century. It will also set the essential context for the work of the review of student tuition fees.

December 2008

Data Annex

#### ADMISSIONS:

**Figure 1**

#### TRENDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION APPLICANT AND ENTRANT NUMBERS

Applicants and acceptances to full-time undergraduate courses at UK institutions 2000–01—2007–08

<i>Year of entry</i>	<i>Applicants</i>	<i>Acceptances</i>
2000–01	442,028	339,747
2001–02	453,833	358,041
2002–03	461,365	368,115
2003–04	476,467	374,307
2004–05	486,028	377,544
2005–06	522,155	405,369
2006–07	506,304	390,890
2007–08	534,495	413,430

Covers students from the UK and overseas (source UCAS).

*Line on latest position on UCAS accepted applicants for 2008 entry.*

Latest figures for 2008 entry show that, as at 15 October, accepted applicants from England were up by 7%, and the proportion of accepted applicants aged 18 and under who were from the lower socio-economic groups has increased from 28% to 28.9%.

*NB Changes to the UCAS application system in 2008 have created inconsistencies which affect comparisons with earlier years. The figures quoted above for 2008 take account of these changes and provide a like-for-like comparison.*

*Line on initial figures for applications by 15 October for 2009 entry*

Early figures for 2009 entry show that as at 15 October, total applicants (UK and overseas) were up by 6.5%, and applicants from England were up by 5.4%. However, it is still early in the application cycle and these figures are not necessarily a reliable guide to trends (normally by mid-October only around 10% of applicants have applied).

**Figure 2**

NUMBERS OF ENTRANTS AND ENROLMENTS (BOTH FULL TIME AND PART TIME INCLUDING THOSE APPLYING DIRECTLY) TO ENGLISH HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

	2000–01	2001–02	2002–03	2003–04	2004–05	2005–06	2006–07
Entrants	724,160	781,835	817,040	845,260	843,220	884,240	877,935
Enrolments	1,656,700	1,726,802	1,807,665	1,868,415	1,895,825	1,936,420	1,957,195

Source: HESA.

Figures cover all domiciles and all levels of HE study, on a Standard Registration Population basis.

Numbers are rounded to the nearest five.

**Figure 3**

FULL-TIME YOUNG PARTICIPATION BY SOCIO-ECONOMIC CLASS (FYPSEC)

CSR07 PSA 11 indicator as follows: “*The gap between the initial participation in full-time higher education rates for young people aged 18, 19 and 20 from the top three and bottom four socio-economic classes*”—Note that this has no specific target attached.

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Participation rate for NS-SECs 1, 2, 3	44.1%	40.9%	41.2%	42.8%	39.5%
Participation rate for NS-SECs 4, 5, 6, 7	17.5%	17.8%	17.4%	19.8%	19.0%
Difference	26.5%	23.1%	23.7%	22.9%	20.5%

(Total drop in gap: 6.1 percentage points).

Source: “*Full-time Young Participation by Socio-Economic Class (FYPSEC) 2008 Update*”, DIUS (2008). Note that the figures suggest a narrowing of the gap of 6.0 percentage points rather than 6.1 percentage points. This is due to rounding and the correct figure is 6.1 percentage points.

*Performance indicators*

Published annually by HESA, these show the proportions of UK-domiciled young full-time first degree entrants to English HEIs who are from state schools, lower social/socio-economic classes & low participation neighbourhoods.

SR04 measurement system for target 14, element 2: “By 2010... make significant progress year on year towards fair access...”

**Figure 4**

YOUNG FULL-TIME FIRST DEGREE ENTRANTS TO ENGLISH HE INSTITUTIONS:

Proportion of young full-time first degree entrants to university from:

	State schools	Lower social classes (IIM, IV, V)	NS-SEC 4-7 <sup>(1)</sup>	Low participation neighbourhoods	Low participation neighbourhoods (POLAR2) <sup>(2)</sup>
1997–98	81.0	24.7	n.a.	11.4	n.a.
1998–99	84.4	24.9	n.a.	11.6	n.a.
1999–00	84.1	25.1	n.a.	11.7	n.a.
2000–01	85.0	25.3	n.a.	11.8	n.a.
2001–02	85.2	25.5	n.a.	12.4	n.a.
2002–03	86.4	n.a.	27.9	12.5	n.a.
2003–04	86.1	n.a.	28.2	13.3	n.a.
2004–05	85.9	n.a.	27.9	13.1	n.a.
2005–06	86.9	n.a.	29.1	13.5	9.2
2006–07	87.2	n.a.	29.8	n.a.	9.6

n. a. = not available.

The socio-economic group classification was introduced in 2002–03 to replace the social class groupings. The two classifications are not directly comparable.

In 2006–07 the method for defining low participation neighbourhoods changed and indicators are based on the new POLAR2 method. Using this new method, figures for the 2005–06 academic year have been calculated for comparative purposes. This new method is not comparable with the low participation data produced previously and hence no comparison can be made between the two methods.

Source: “Performance Indicators in Higher Education”, published by HESA

**Figure 5**

HEFCE AND RESEARCH COUNCIL FUNDING 2004–07 (IN £M)

	2004–05	2005–06	2006–07
HEFCE Recurrent Research Grants (England)	1079	1250	1344
Research Council Grants (UK)	926	1073	1152

Source: HESA data (Resources of Higher Education Institutions).

*Graduate employment trends:*

**Figure 6**

PROPORTIONS OF FULL-TIME FIRST DEGREE GRADUATES FROM ENGLISH INSTITUTIONS WHO WERE IN EMPLOYMENT OR FURTHER STUDY SIX MONTHS AFTER GRADUATION

	2000–01	2001–02	2002–03	2003–04	2004–05	2005–06	2006–07
Proportion	93.2	92.5	92.4	93.0	92.8	93.0	93.6

Source: “Performance Indicators in Higher Education”, published by HESA.

Figures cover UK domiciles.

*Student support and engagement:*

**Figure 7**

NON-COMPLETION RATES FOR FULL-TIME FIRST DEGREE STARTERS

Published annually by HESA, these show the proportions of UK-domiciled full-time first degree starters to English HEIs who are projected to neither obtain an award nor transfer to another institution.

	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01	2001–02	2002–03	2003–04	2004–05	2005–06
% with no award or transfer	15.8	15.9	15.0	13.8	13.9	14.4	13.8	13.9

Source: “Performance Indicators in Higher Education”, published by HESA.

**Figure 8**

TAKE-UP OF MAINTENANCE GRANTS

Numbers of students awarded full and partial maintenance grants

	2006–07	2007–08	2008–09 (Provisional) Entry prior to 2008–09	2008–09 (Provisional) Entry in 2008–09
Full	98,200	179,600	142,300	110,400
Partial	68,000	121,700	90,500	81,900
Nil	115,100	224,200	202,300	85,800
% full	35%	34%	33%	40%
% full or partial	59%	57%	54%	69%

Source: SLC.

Data cover English domiciled student support scheme students in the UK  
Includes the Special Support Grant payable to vulnerable groups of students who may otherwise have their DWP benefits reduced.

Excludes those students who do not apply to the SLC for any financial support.

Excludes the older HE grant which was replaced by Maintenance Grant for new students from 2006–07.

December 2008

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## Memorandum 2

### Submission from Professor Stephen Gorard<sup>4</sup>

#### STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

##### Admissions

- Insofar as it is possible to conclude, the stratification of admissions to HE is not related, in general, to the admissions process.
- We have very little reliable evidence of the success or otherwise of any widening participation initiatives, for two main reasons.
- None of the initiatives have been evaluated properly, rigorously and independently. In fact, the overall quality of work on this area is often poor, reliant on *post hoc* data dredging, and confounded by missing comparators, inappropriate analyses, and unwarranted conclusions.
- The standard official data on admissions, while the best available for analysis, is not complete enough to allow monitoring of what are often very small groups of potentially disadvantaged students.
- Insofar as we can tell from these figures, the most likely under-represented groups in HE have traditionally received the least attention in widening participation activities—these are males, and those describing their ethnicity as “white”.
- Participation is heavily predictable from earlier events and background characteristics. This calls into question the importance of overcoming the purported barriers to participation.

This is a summary of selected findings based on a number of research studies, including work for the Rees review of student financing in Wales (2006), a review of evidence on WP in England for HEFCE (2006–07), a chapter on the barriers to lifelong learning for DIUS (2008), two systematic reviews on ethnic minority post-16 participation for DCSF (2007–08), and two reviews of evidence relating to participation in science and maths for the Royal Society (2007–08).

I attach three papers with further details on some aspects of the above:

Gorard, S. (2008) Who is missing from higher education?, *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 38, 3, 421–437

Gorard, S. and Smith, E. (2007) Do barriers get in the way? A review of the determinants of post-16 participation, *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 12, 2, 141–158

Gorard, S. and Smith, E. (2006) Beyond the “learning society”: what have we learnt from widening participation research?, *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 25, 6, 575–594

Full reports are also available on all of the above, and a longer discussion of many of these points appears in the book [not attached]:

Gorard, S., with Adnett, N., May, H., Slack, K., Smith, E. and Thomas, L. (2007) *Overcoming barriers to HE*, Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books.

Viewing the evidence on admissions to HE in lifelong order is an important corrective for some apparently erroneous conclusions. It is clear that inequalities between socio-economic groups appear early in life and remain important in attainment at school, in the range of the options available and selected at age 14 and 16, qualifications at age 18, and in the decision to participate in higher education or not. Overcoming the identified barriers to post-18 participation may be an important step for some individuals, but the evidence is that the role of these barriers is marginal once a relatively stable learner identity has been formed by these prior events. Put simply, by the age of 18 participation in HE is not considered as an option by many. Thus, all WP initiatives tend to attract and benefit the “usual suspects”. Participation in HE (and choice of institutions within HE) is selective. Therefore, policy-makers in England are in the peculiar position of not allowing HE institutions to select their student intake on the basis of factors such as social class, sex or immigrant status, but at the same time knowing that the qualifications that are being used for selection are unequally distributed by these same factors.

Perhaps the most important target of widening participation activity has been tackling the apparent under-representation of less advantaged socio-economic groups. Tables 1 and 2 present a historical breakdown of the student body in the UK by social class (Registrar General’s previous and current scales). They show that students from 1996–2001 come from predominantly professional and intermediate

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<sup>4</sup> University of Birmingham.

backgrounds (I/II), with few from part-skilled and unskilled backgrounds (IV/V). This pattern changes very little over the time period shown (despite the change in classification from 2002 onwards). The most consistent change has been in the growth of those students of unknown occupational class. It is important to note that occupational groups are not evenly divided in the population, and we would expect there to be many more individuals in HE from class II than from class IV, for example. And this is what we find. The dominance of certain social groups in HE is partly a function of their numerical frequency in the population which changes over historical time, to an extent that is not always made clear in media and policy reports.

**Table 1**

## PERCENTAGE OF ALL HE STUDENTS BY SOCIAL CLASS, UK, 1996–2001

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Professional	15	13	13	13	13	12
Intermediate	39	39	39	38	38	37
Skilled manual	15	15	15	15	14	15
Skilled non-manual	12	12	12	12	12	12
Partly skilled	7	8	8	8	8	7
Unskilled	2	2	2	2	2	2
Unknown	10	12	12	13	13	15

Source: UCAS.

**Table 2**

## PERCENTAGE OF ALL HE STUDENTS BY OCCUPATIONAL CLASS, UK, 2002–05

	2002	2003	2004	2005
Higher managerial	19	18	18	17
Lower managerial	25	25	25	24
Intermediate	13	12	12	12
Small employers	6	6	6	6
Lower supervisory	4	4	4	4
Semi-routine	10	11	11	11
Routine	5	5	5	4
Don't know	18	20	20	23

Source: UCAS.

Note: for the 2001 population census a new Registrar General's scale of occupational class was used, and official figures hereafter use this different scale. Don't know includes never worked, long-term unemployed (and unknown or invalid response)

Tables 3 and 4 show that across the UK home countries the reason that social classes I and II predominate in HE is that they predominate in applications for HE. These figures make it clear that the inequity, if it occurs, does not take place in the admissions process. In fact, acceptances to HE (table 4) are slightly more balanced in terms of social class than applications (table 3). If anything, the admissions process favours classes III–V but this difference is very small compared to the growth from application to acceptance of those whose social class is unknown (as above).

**Table 3**

## APPLICATIONS HE 2001–02

	Wales	England	Scotland	NI	UK
I/II	53	52	55	42	52
III–V	37	36	35	48	36
Not known	10	12	10	11	12

Source: UCAS database.

**Table 4**  
ACCEPTED HE 2001–02

	<i>Wales</i>	<i>England</i>	<i>Scotland</i>	<i>NI</i>	<i>UK</i>
I/II	50	50	51	44	50
IIIN-V	37	35	35	46	36
Not known	13	15	15	10	15

Source: UCAS database.

It is very difficult to establish a clear count of UK higher education students in terms of the categories used for widening participation, such as occupational background or ethnicity. Using some of the best and most complete data available, such as the annual figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency, there is little evidence of a simple consistent pattern of under-representation within these categories, except perhaps for men, and students of white ethnicity. However, once prior qualifications are taken into account, there is no evidence that potential students are unfairly and disproportionately denied access to HE in terms of occupation, ethnicity, sex or disability. This has important implications for what we mean by widening participation in HE, and how we might achieve it.

This leads to a consideration of the quality and relevance of the research activity in this large field of endeavour, and to the creation of a typology of the kinds of widespread problems encountered therein. These include pseudo-research, poor quality reporting of research, deficiencies in datasets, analytical errors, a lack of suitable comparators, obfuscation, a lack of scepticism in general, and the regular misattribution of causal links in particular. All of these can be illustrated using generally high-profile research studies and publications. We found a substantial proportion of non-empirical pieces. Of the remainder, we found a substantial proportion that did not report sufficiently well their methods or their findings. Of the remainder that were empirical and did explain their methods and findings sufficiently, we found a substantial proportion in which the findings could not support the conclusions drawn from them.

November 2009

### Memorandum 3

#### Submission from Peter Dorey<sup>5</sup>

##### “DUMBING DOWN” OF UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

I am convinced that “dumbing down” is taking place in British Higher Education, and at an alarming rate too. It has been throughout the last decade at least, but politicians resolutely refuse to listen to those who work in universities.

1. Universities are now run as businesses, so many VCs and senior administrators want to avoid obliging weak students to withdraw from their courses, because that will mean a loss of revenue from their fees. Maximisation income is now a priority, so we are compelled to “mark creatively” when faced with a weak student. We are also obliged to be “culturally sensitive” to students whose first language is not English, because these are financially lucrative in terms of the high fees they pay to study at a British university.

Ultimately, financial considerations are competing against academic criteria and standards.

2. The “customer is always right” ethos fostered by successive governments since the 1980s, via their reform of the public sector, and their unrelenting hostility towards professionals (“selfish producer interests”), means that a weak or lazy student will simply claim that the lecturers were at fault, and threaten litigation, backed by assertive middle class parents who always think that their own children are wonderful; if only some parents could see how badly their offspring behave, and how ill-mannered they are, when away from home.

Even the articles quotes Phil Willis re-asserting that “students are now customers”. Sorry Mr Willis, that is part of the problem; YOU are encouraging students to be arrogant, lazy and passive, rather than actively-engaged learners. The term customer implies handing over money, and being *given* something in return, not working for it.

3. Key concepts and intellectual ideas which students readily understood 10–15 years ago, they struggle to understand today. Indeed, many of them have serious problems thinking critically or independently at all: “Just tell us what we need to know in order to pass our exams. Everything else is irrelevant or boring”, they say.

4. Many of them are semi-literate, and write in “text-message” style. However, we have to assume that inability to spell is *always* due to Dyslexia. We are not permitted to penalise poor spelling in written work for fear of breaching “equality and diversity” policies.

<sup>5</sup> Reader in British Politics, Department of Politics, School of European Studies, University of Cardiff.



We then get employers and the media criticising universities for churning out illiterate graduates.

5. Today's students, overall, are less willing to read and work hard.

They often sit in seminars with only their mobile phone in front of them on the desk (which they anxiously look at every three minutes to see if any of their friends has contacted them, rather than paying attention to the lesson), but no books or note pads. Ask them what they have read by way of preparation, and they will brazenly admit to having read nothing—"I was out last night", they will say with a smirk. They are paying £3,000, so how can we admonish them for not working? We can't, and they know it.

Indeed, the view is becoming established that having paid £3,000 fees, they should not have to do any work. They expect academics to do all the work now—we are their servants entirely, and every time a government Minister says that "students are customers", this problem becomes more entrenched.

This problem is further compounded by the "celebrity culture" which youngsters today are in thrall to, which promotes the ethos of instant success and instant gratification—you can have it all now, they are led to believe. Hard work is for "losers". Those (dwindling number of) students who do admit to working hard academically and staying in during the evenings to read for a tutorial or write an essay are sneered at by their peers as being "mugs" or "anoraks".

There is no point in expanding Higher Education and increasing the number of graduates if they are too illiterate or lazy to be of any use to employers in an increasingly competitive, global knowledge economy, by this Government just does not seem to understand this, or listen to the concerns of those who can see fist-hand, what is happening.

And we all know that "teaching quality audits" are about having the "right" paperwork and boxes ticked, not actual teaching

So given all of this, how could anyone seriously believe that the record number of university graduates is evidence that students today are brighter or more hard-working?

I used to enjoy teaching, but now increasingly feel as if I am wasting my time with today's students.

*November 2008*

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#### **Memorandum 4**

##### **Submission from James Boyle**

I hope the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee will also look into the plight of foreign students who pay exorbitant fees and in return get poor quality education and support from UK universities.

*January 2009*

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#### **Memorandum 5**

##### **Submission from Professor Alan Ryan<sup>6</sup>**

I'm sorry to bore you with my collected works on this topic, but they might make a change from "standards have collapsed" on the one side and "oh no they haven't" on the other.

I've been teaching for the past forty-six years, and one thing that is obvious is that there has been no general deterioration in the mental quality of students at the "top" end of HE. I doubt there is any anywhere else. There has also been, if anything, a considerable diminution in sheer idleness, and an agreeable reduction in the number of people who come to university purely for the social life. That is especially true of the "top" end of the system, where all the evidence is that students are worked much harder than they are at the unselective universities. But, I doubt that much above 5–10 percent of students anywhere are wholly wasting their time. [I don't deny that students at unselective universities may have had terrible training in good work habits and that they may find even the limited amount of work they are required to do very demanding. But that is like the elderly and the overweight running for a bus and finding it harder work than when they were eighteen and four stone lighter; just as we can't run, so a lot of students doing essentially remedial courses can't work properly. It is not a moral failing, but it is a problem.]

What there has been—and the evidential basis is pretty good for this claim—is something interesting, though mildly depressing. Secondary education takes students less far than it once did; language A levels where students never have to translate from English into, say, French, German, Latin, Greek mean they arrive knowing the language much less well than if they had been put through the mill of unseens, proses, dictation. This isn't simply a matter of content; while it is true that students read for A level what they would once have read for O level, in many of the sciences you learn things for GCSE that somebody got a Nobel Prize for twenty years ago, and nobody had heard of twenty years earlier than that. But it is a retreat from

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<sup>6</sup> New College, Oxford.

the idea that students are being continuously brought to the point where they can deal with their teachers as their intellectual peers. [This has nothing to do with the social easiness of schools; they are in that respect much nicer places than they were; but the intellectual relationships are more rather than less hierarchical than they were.]

The university scene is very complicated; thirty years ago, when the CNAAs vetted degrees in polytechnics, there were few 2.1s and very few firsts. If anything, the intake was better trained before arrival than it is now, so it is easy to think that dumbing down has occurred. That may not have happened in a straightforward way; the CNAAs kept the polytechnics on a tight leash and courses were pretty much identical to their university equivalents, so you'd expect the polytechnics to produce a lot of lower seconds and the like, but to have some astonishing students who had slipped through the net. The subsequent history is one of adjusting courses to what students could do rather than the more difficult task of adjusting students to what one supposes the discipline demands. [Another fact of some interest is that the idea that an academic training is a discipline has very much fallen by the wayside.] It's a safe bet that the dropout rate if you put a Wolverhampton first year through an Imperial first year would be close to one hundred percent. It would be an experiment of extreme cruelty, and would prove nothing beyond the fact that people can't do what they have never been taught to do nor have been socialised into the necessary work habits to master. Academic work is much like training for cross-country running; building up stamina takes hard work and persistence. So, some of what people complain of is that more people do degrees that don't demand much in the way of mathematical or linguistic skill, and are assessed by methods that place little weight on internalising a substantial body of knowledge, and place not much more weight on displaying analytical skills in handling what information they do have. I myself share that view. I'd like to mark the line between secondary and tertiary in these terms.

At the "top" end of the system, there has been a process—and this is largely the fault of the QAA, which encapsulates the bad ideas that New Labour uncritically bought from Mrs Thatcher—that amounts not to dumbing down but to dumbing into the middle. The mechanism is boringly simple: the QAA thinks in terms of "course delivery" and "course providers" rather than disciplines and teachers. Its notion of how to square academic freedom with quality assurance is to avoid making any judgment about the content of courses—which allows Oxford to teach theology and Westminster complementary medicine—but to insist on a particular form of bureaucratic packaging; this means that a higher value is put on it being absolutely clear and predictable what a student will be told than is put on waking up their minds and seeing how far they can go if they are stretched. Lectures are then matched to syllabi, classes to lectures, and examinations to both. This means that the ditzier sort of student is saved from his errors, but the most interesting is forced to turn her intelligence to handing the examiners what she knows they want. It is impossible to regret that students have a fair opportunity to know what they are going to have to do for their final examinations, but it is certainly possible to regret the resulting compression in the scale of assessment. In a place like Oxford, where anyone who remains awake and is tolerably well-organised, can get a 2.1—as they should—the effect is that lots of students get firsts who in essence have put in a methodical, well-organised, high 2.1 performance; but it would be absurd to cut the number, since we have asked them to do a particular job and they have done it impeccably. The problem is that we haven't asked them to do something more interesting.

But this is what one should expect when Mrs Thatcher gives way to Tony Blair; like her, he was a genius at political manipulation but a person with no intellectual interests whatever. The chain of reasoning is simple: There is no market discipline in education and it is hard to see how there could be—the process of eliminating poor or merely competent intellectual performance in favour of the good, the surprising, and the dazzlingly clever is much slower and more imperfect than the process that eliminates Austin Allegros in favour of Volkswagen Golfs. So anyone who doesn't trust teachers to transmit their knowledge to students tries to manage the production process as distinct from relying on the market to assess the output—which one would not do with BMW or VW. Scrutinising inputs is a very poor substitute for a proper assessment of outputs. The way we do it is manifestly flawed; one can check whether departments follow QAA guidelines, but it takes thirty years to discover whether anyone produced by a given institution has contributed anything intellectually interesting to the world. It is, however, the world of Tony Blair, "cascading targets," and Peter Williams. Your committee cannot repudiate its masters for all the usual and perfectly respectable reasons. If it could do so, it should, but I don't see how you can.

I think the expansion of higher education has on the whole been a very good thing. Too much of it has been remedial secondary education passed off as something else, but it's better to have that than nothing, even though it's expensive and inefficient. Nor do I think that more means worse; it's certainly true that in any field where you can rank performance more means that you go further down the pool of talent—the slowest runner in the London Marathon is a lot slower than the last runner to finish in the Olympics, for instance. Mostly, more only means different. But if the question is whether the HE regime instituted by New Labour is in some respects—not, for the most part, at the level of research—anti-intellectual, the answer is plainly yes. I append a few pieces to amuse you and perhaps the committee.<sup>7</sup>

*December 2008*

<sup>7</sup> Not printed.

**Memorandum 6**  
**Submission from Richard Royle<sup>8</sup>**

1. SUMMARY

The essence of my evidence is that:

- I have witnessed a steady decline in academic standards since I began lecturing 15 years ago.
- One of the major reasons for this decline is the fact that there is virtually no external scrutiny of the grades awarded by Universities.
- HEFCE/QAA etc. concern themselves merely with the written documentation of the courses.
- The external examiner system is a sham.
- There should be some form of external assessment which takes account of subject specialism.

2. ABOUT MYSELF

- I am a senior lecturer in law at the Lancashire Law School, University of Central Lancashire.
- I have been lecturing in law, specialising in Land Law and the law of Equity and Trusts, for over 15 years.
- I have also taught at Liverpool John Moores University, the University of Derby, and the University of Wolverhampton.
- I have been involved in many course and module validations, and I have been an external examiner.

3. EVIDENCE

3.1 In the time I have been teaching I have witnessed a remarkable decline in academic standards. At many institutions, grades have been inflated, plagiarism is often ignored, and difficult areas of the syllabus are either omitted in their entirety or simply not examined. I also have grave doubts concerning the subject knowledge of some academics who purport to teach the more complex and technical subject areas.

3.2 I think that I should emphasise at the outset that my criticisms do not apply to every academic institution, but such practices do appear to be rife, especially in the newer universities. Fortunately, my own institution has endeavoured to maintain standards.

3.3 The major reason for the decline in standards is undoubtedly the desire to improve performance figures, reduce retention rates, and improve performance in the league tables. This may be seen as similar to the situation which is faced by many schools, but there is one crucial difference: the absence of external scrutiny makes it far too easy for universities to “cook the books”. At least schools have to prepare pupils for an external examination: universities are free to set their own examinations and prepare students accordingly.

3.4 There is a conspiracy of silence amongst academics. Nobody wishes to be subject to external scrutiny.

3.5 When I first began teaching, the HEFCE used to inspect courses, an inspection which included both course documentation and teaching on those courses. The assessment was performed by subject specialists. This is never the case today. Each department or faculty assesses the “quality” of its own course, but this assessment is usually merely an examination of the course documentation. There is no genuine external scrutiny. This self-regulation is remarkably similar to that performed by the Financial Services Authority, and we are all now aware of the ineffectiveness of this type of “regulation”.

3.6 In Law, my own subject area, the Law Society and Bar Council also used to take an active role in the scrutiny of undergraduate course delivery, but now those organisations restrict themselves to appearing upon validation boards etc. Only the course documentation is examined.

3.7 The resulting system is one where the documentation for most courses is excellent, but unfortunately practice does not always match the theory which is propounded in the course documentation.

3.8 It is not difficult to understand how we have arrived at this state of affairs. Academics are under pressure to improve results, so many make the course as easy as possible for the students and mark student work at the lowest possible standard. There is no external scrutiny, so nobody will know and everybody is happy. The institution is happy because grades improve; the students are happy because they are receiving high marks; and the staff are happy because they receive praise for raising standards!

3.9 External scrutiny is supposed to be provided by the external examiner system, a procedure which is too often abused. External examiners are often friends of the module leaders and are frequently asked to scrutinise subject areas with which they are unfamiliar. They are not encouraged to pass adverse comments.

3.10 Despite my comments above, I have experienced some excellent external examiners and I have always taken their advice. I have always altered marks and in accordance with comments made by the external examiner. However, some institutions have a policy of never altering their marks regardless of what

<sup>8</sup> University of Central Lancashire.

the external examiner says. In other words the external examiner is merely there to satisfy the procedural requirements. He may pass comment, but he is impotent, and cannot make any difference in practice. Of course, his comments will be “taken on board” before being ignored.

3.11 I have just finished my period of office as an external examiner at one University. Within my jurisdiction were the subject areas of Land Law and Equity and Trusts. Throughout my four-year period I had repeatedly passed comment about the standard of the work which was being awarded first class marks, but there was, nevertheless, a steady decline throughout my period of office. I was as gentle as possible with my comments because the role of external examiner is supposed to be that of “critical friend” and I did not want to alienate the teaching staff.

3.12 I was concerned not only with the standard of marking, but also with the content of the modules, especially the Equity and Trusts module. None of the more modern and difficult areas (tracing, recipient and accessory liability and many areas of constitution) were taught at all. Even the essential area of trustees’ powers and duties was not taught. I cannot recall one student at any time throughout my four-year period of office even referring to the Trustee Act 2000. Nothing was done in response to these comments, even though I think that the course was revalidated last year. I have been assured that the matter will be reviewed this year, but, as my period of office has ended, I will never know if it is. I did comment upon last year’s Equity examination paper, noting that it avoided any modern areas of law, and could have been adequately answered by a student in 1975! Needless to say, my comments were unacknowledged.

3.13 Last year I was totally astonished at the poor quality of the answers which were awarded first class marks in the examinations in both Land Law and Equity. Students were awarded a first class mark for work which would be on the borderline of third class and failure at my own institution. The scripts were well written (in terms of English), but demonstrated only a poor grasp of the subject areas.

3.14 I will try not to go into too much technical detail, but some examples are required. On the Equity paper every year there is a question on secret trusts (which in itself is a rather obscure area, of far less relevance to than many of the omitted areas). This area has been subjected to a great deal of academic commentary and there have been numerous journal articles written upon the subject. Previously, I mentioned that the module leader had awarded first class marks to a student who had not even referred to any of these commentaries. Nothing was done or said about my comments. Last year the same thing happened and a number of students were awarded first class marks for merely describing the requirements for secret trusts. I passed the same comments, but, once again, they were ignored. I was astonished that such superficial answers could be awarded a First Class mark.

3.15 Far worse was the marking of a question on constructive trusts of land. Upper Second or First Class marks were awarded to students who did not even demonstrate knowledge of the requirements for a constructive trust (there was no mention of common intention) and some students described a resulting trust rather than a constructive trust. These answers would amount to borderline failures at my institution.

3.16 On the Land Law paper, there was a question on the merits of the land registration system. It does not take an expert in land law to realise that any good answer of this question required some knowledge of unregistered land, but students were awarded very high marks, including one First Class, for writing an essay describing the merits of the Land Registration Act 2002. None of the students mentioned unregistered land at all, even though the question effectively called for a comparison of the two systems. When I mentioned this, one member of staff at the institution said that “we don’t do unregistered land”. I found this to be truly astonishing. If they did not want the students to talk about unregistered land, why ask a question concerning it? If they chose not to teach registered land either, would a good attempt at “What I did on my holidays” merit a First Class mark in Land Law? Candidates are supposed to answer the question which has been set, not the question which the module leader wishes he had asked, if only he had drafted the question properly.

3.17 I enclose a copy of the letter which I wrote to the programme co-ordinator. I did not receive a reply until after the assessment board. I could send many more examples.

3.18 At the assessment board it was made clear to me that the marks would not be changed and that my comments were unwelcome. I thought that this reaction was truly astonishing. I have always been prepared to change my marks if the external examiner disagrees with me, and such disagreements have only ever amounted to a couple of percentage points. Here, the difference in opinion is three whole grades (or approximately 30%—the difference between a bare pass and a comfortable first class mark). I could understand it if there was a compromise, leading to some reduction in the mark, but there was none, not even a token reduction.

3.19 I do realise that my own marking might be seen as a little on the frugal side and I realise that there can be differing interpretations, but a difference between First Class and borderline failure should never occur.

3.20 In response I received the usual platitudes about taking the comments of the external examiners very seriously (but obviously not seriously enough to act upon). At no stage did anybody even attempt to address my comments regarding poor knowledge of the subject matter. The reasons for ignoring my comments appear to change as time passes. At the assessment board I was told that members staff mark “according to the cohort”—I am not too sure what this means in this context. I assume that it means that you decide how many first class marks you intend to award and mark accordingly—regardless of how the questions are answered. I was also told that the Land Law and Equity marks were not “out of kilter” with the other marks for this group of students. However, at most institutions they would be “out of kilter”! Land Law and Equity

and Trusts are traditionally known as the most difficult areas for students to grasp, and marks are often lower in these subjects. If student performance on a particular paper is so irrelevant, why bother to require students to sit it in the first place? And why have an external examiner if his remarks are totally ignored?

3.21 When I received the course leader's comments (I can provide a copy of his letter if required), he said that the external examiner is merely "part of the team", and obviously not a very important part. I find this to be truly astonishing. I am a specialist in my subject but my opinion counts for nothing against the module leaders, supported by people who have no knowledge of the subject areas in question. Presumably if a student studying physics at the institution concerned writes an excellent essay about King Lear they should be given a First Class Degree in Physics!

3.22 I do not find it easy to write this statement about colleagues, and I do in one sense think that I have breached the trust of the people concerned. However, I think that to keep quiet would damage my professional integrity. It is truly shameful of our system of university education that the same piece of work could be awarded a First Class (or even an Upper Second) mark at one institution and be a borderline failure at another. Put another way, law students at my own institution are being disadvantaged because they have to learn the law in order to achieve high marks, whereas students at other institutions receive first class marks for inferior pieces of work. My students and potential employers deserve better.

#### 4. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Degree classifications should be comparable between institutions.
- External scrutiny is essential, both at the validation stage and afterwards—self regulation leads to abuse.
- Teaching should be examined by subject specialists.
- The external examiner system should be replaced.
- It should be considered whether there should be some assessments which are set (and perhaps even marked) externally—this could be difficult in some of the more obscure subjects, but would be feasible for the more popular courses.

*December 2008*

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### Memorandum 7

#### Submission from Disability Forward Ltd

#### STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

##### *Introduction*

Disability Forward is a limited company, set up a year ago. We provide consultancy services to the public, private and voluntary sector on disability equality issues. Our consultants have a real breadth of expertise in the field of disability equality, and we seek to work supportively with partners to achieve positive change.

We really welcome the announcement of the select committee inquiry. We feel that with pending changes in equality legislation, and the ever changing economic, socio political and demographic situation it's vital that our university sector is performing to the highest standard, and meeting the highest expectations especially in terms of providing an educational service to disabled people.

Overall, we would like the inquiry to examine how well Universities have been performing on their implementation of the Disability Equality Duty, and the Code of Practice produced by the Disability Rights Commission for further and higher education providers.

##### *Specific issues we would like the inquiry to examine:*

We note that the inquiry intends to cover a range of issues in the following areas.

- Admissions
- The balance between teaching and research
- Degree completion and classification
- Mechanisms of student support and engagement

In relation to these areas we would wish to inquiry to pay due regard to the following issues

##### *Admissions*

1. Accessibility of admissions procedure, including forms and process
2. More information for potential students about accessibility and support services for disabled students

3. A guided visit for potential disabled students to explore the accessibility of the site before they apply

Degree completion and classification

Flexibility in degree completion for disability related reasons

#### *Mechanisms of student support and engagement*

All higher education establishments are subject to the disability equality duty, yet many seem to not to have appropriately addressed their duty to involve disabled students. Often the involvement is done through the Students Union. This is fine, but it does not absolve Universities from their own legal duties. Disability Equality issues need to be addressed at all levels of the establishment, and therefore effective involvement is paramount.

In addition, we would like to see the inquiry examine:

#### *Procurement*

Again, the current Disability Equality Duty, and the forthcoming Single Equality Act, require Universities to have due regard to promoting disability equality in all their procurement activities. This ranges from procurement of ICT infrastructure,

#### *Infrastructure*

Promotion of equality values in all procurement of services. The new Equality Bill will include specific requirements on how public bodies use their procurement mechanisms to promote equality, so it would be helpful to have an early debate.

Infrastructure planning—it's not enough for institutions to say that their buildings comply with Part M of the building regulations. It's important that proper access audits are undertaken and that those responsible for managing facilities and premises have appropriate training about how to ensure that an establishment is designed to be accessible and is maintained as such.

Accessibility planning for all courses—there are many study areas that disabled people still find it very difficult to get access to eg medicine, science, technical degrees. This has to change.

Perhaps a standards document or a code of practice should be produced to guide institutions on these matters?

January 2009

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### **Memorandum 8**

#### **Submission from the British Computer Society (BCS)**

STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

#### *Summary*

- The present student population is quite different in character and expectation from its predecessors; the Beloit College Mindset List<sup>9</sup> is slightly strange but interesting in this regard. The BCS response is conditioned by the belief that:
  - It is vital to encourage, to excite and to thoroughly motivate students. The context in which ideas are taught is an important aspect of this and the educational issues need careful consideration and planning.
  - There is much talk of rate of change; that will only increase in the coming years. But rarely do educators really address that issue. The present set of students will be at their peak of productivity in around 2025–2030 and we need to prepare them for that.
  - Part of the above involves placing an emphasis on innovation, creativity, wealth creation but doing this in a setting to which the student can relate.
- As far as the latter is concerned, that has huge implications. Some organisations (such as Google) have created environments intended to foster these very qualities and we can all learn much from their ideas.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.beloit.edu/mindset/>

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## BCS BACKGROUND

1. With over 65,000 members, the BCS is the leading professional and learned society in IT and computing.

2. BCS is also responsible for setting standards for the IT profession. It is spearheading the Professionalism in IT programme and is also leading the change in the public perception and appreciation of the economic and social importance of professionally managed IT projects and programmes. In this capacity, BCS advises, informs and persuades industry and government on successful IT implementation.

3. BCS, as a Learned Society, also has direct responsibility for leading, encouraging, promoting, supporting and developing all aspects of teaching, research and technology transfer in the disciplines of, and relating to, computing, computer science and information systems.

4. BCS commends IUSS in its timely review of this particular topic. We certainly regard this as very important. As an institution, BCS undertakes accreditation activity and almost all of our universities and institutions of higher education have degrees accredited by the BCS. As a consequence BCS has access to a significant number of assessors and insights into the very questions you are asking.

5. In preparing this response, there has been input from BCS members in Scotland. Many of the questions have a strong orientation to the situation in England and Wales (eg mention of the English Funding Council but not the Scottish one) but our responses are intended to have UK-wide relevance.

## QUESTIONS AND ASSOCIATED ANSWERS

### *Admissions*

- the effectiveness of the process for admission to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), including A-levels, Advanced Diplomas, apprenticeships and university entrance tests
- the UK's ability to meet government targets for Higher Education participation and the relevance of these targets
- the implementation and success of widening participation initiatives such as Compact agreements, and the impact of the current funding regime on these objectives
- the role of the Government in developing and promoting fair access and admissions policies for the UK Higher Education sector

## BCS RESPONSE

6. It is important that the best institutions remain accessible to the best students. Admissions requirements must not ultimately be dictated by wealth.

7. It is also important that students are able to follow a reasonably broad curriculum until they reach the stage where they can sensibly make informed choices about future study.

8. The government target of widening participation to under-represented and disadvantaged groups such that half of 18–30 year olds enter Higher Education by 2010 appears to have stalled and it appears unlikely that the target will be reached. This is evidenced by the provisional figure for the Higher Education Initial Participation Rate (HEIPR) for 2006–07 of 40%, down from the final figure for 2005–06 of 42%<sup>10</sup>. This is also despite the fact that universities are trying to attract a wider cross-section of school-leavers by introducing courses with a more vocational aspect such as music technology, sports therapy, circus skills.

9. However, more students does not mean better students. “Widening participation has changed standards”. Higher education ‘may need to redefine and expand the concept of academic standards... Standards should be right for today’ said Sir Peter Williams of the Quality Assurance Agency with reference to the degree classification system<sup>11</sup>.

10. The need for change in Higher Education to suit the needs of today's society has been voiced by Professor Keith Mander, Deputy Vice-Chancellor Planning and Resources, University of Kent. He talks of the trend from undergraduate to postgraduate education, with the bulk of postgraduates aged 30–45 and studying part-time. The majority of these students are re- and up-skilling to improve their employability. Professor Mander speaks of the need to devise new delivery methods accessible in a global marketplace such as making course material available free across the web but charging for assessment thus enabling proof (via a respected brand) of one's knowledge.

### *The balance between teaching and research*

- levels of funding for, and the balance between, teaching and research in UK HEIs, and the adequacy of financial support for the development of innovative teaching methods and teaching/research integration

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<sup>10</sup> DIUS Participation Rates in Higher Education: Academic Years 1999/2000—2006/2007 (Provisional). <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000780/sfrdius02-2008.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> see <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2008/oct/23/dumbing-down>.

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- the quality of teaching provision and learning facilities in UK and the extent to which they vary between HEIs
  - the suitability of methods of assessing excellence in teaching and research and the impact of research assessment on these activities
  - the availability and adequacy of training in teaching methods for UK academics and the importance of teaching excellence for the academic career path, including consideration of the role of teaching fellows
  - the responsibilities of the Government and HEFCE in assuring (a) the quality of teaching provision and learning opportunities in UK HEIs; and (b) the balance between teaching and research in HEIs

#### BCS RESPONSE

11. There are huge issues here. Despite protestations from institutions to the contrary, the reality is that research dominates in terms of promotions, status, and so on. Often good researchers are highly focused individuals who will not devote time to anything other than their research interests and that is what makes them effective. But in terms of relating to students, for example, ensuring they have a sense of belonging, integrating them into the HE family, motivating them, then different skills are needed. Many academic staff devote much time to this and their contribution is often undervalued or even not appreciated since it does not bring money in the traditional sense of research grants.

12. It is our strong view that something akin to the US National Science Foundation is needed to reverse that situation. Its priorities are to support teaching and learning and to bring innovative methods that have the effect of transforming the universities; there are grants to support this and these carry considerable kudos, on a par with research funding. There is not the space here to develop this but the NSF CPATH<sup>12</sup> program is worthy of study. But words such as “transforming” are needed to convey the scale of change that must happen to make many institutions truly effective as places that attract, motivate and inspire young people.

13. The teaching fellowship concept is good. But debates rage over whether such recognition should be gained via self-promotion or via support from colleagues. Certainly much depends on the quality of candidates put forward for such recognition. Without a good pool and commitment from institutions including the best, this is difficult territory. BCS is keen to see the best educators recognised and facilitated in their endeavours. To date their reward often tends to be being given more teaching, and that is not always best for them or for the system.

#### *Degree classification*

- whether the methodologies used by UK HEIs to determine degree classifications and the distribution of degree classes awarded are appropriate, the potential methodologies for the standardisation of degree classifications within, and between, HEIs, and the effectiveness of the Quality Assurance Agency in monitoring degree standards
- the advantages and disadvantages of the UK’s system of degree classification and the introduction of the Higher Education Academic Record
- the actions that universities, Government and others have taken, or should take, to maintain confidence in the value of degrees awarded by universities in the UK
- the relationship between degree classification and portability
- the extent to which student plagiarism is a problem in HE, and the availability and effectiveness of strategies to identify, penalise and combat plagiarism

#### BCS RESPONSE

14. There will always be debates about degree classifications, and it is important to continually revisit the issue. (See paragraph 9 above). Historically the present classification system was introduced for the benefit of employers who wished guidance on degree attainment. The present system also has the merit of encouraging excellence, and encouraging students to strive to achieve their maximum potential.

15. Inevitably any system tends to be exploited; unless an institution has very strict (and fair) rules, examiners tend to spend enormous amounts of time on borderline situations over whether a student merits one classification or another and then the existence of a champion (or otherwise) from the staff can greatly influence events. That may be appropriate but it is not always either fair or reasonable. Anonymous marking often helps but can mean that exceptional circumstances are not taken into account.

16. Any new system needs to build on the positive aspects of the old while removing weaknesses of the old. (See also point 9 above).

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<sup>12</sup> NSF’s Directorate for Computer and Information Science and Engineering (CISE) Pathways to Revitalized Undergraduate Computing Education (CPATH) [http://www.nsf.gov/funding/pgm\\_summ.jsp?pims\\_id=500025](http://www.nsf.gov/funding/pgm_summ.jsp?pims_id=500025)



17. Given the great variety of degrees, comparisons across institutions and between disciplines are difficult and indeed dangerous. BCS believes that retaining this diversity of degrees and institutions is an important matter and a great strength of the present system. Inevitably there are weak areas and these ought to be reduced. Having said this, some cautionary notes are desirable:

- 17.1 It is not clear whether the present quality procedures are effective; historically the quality arrangements have been of benefit mainly to support services within institutions, but they also have introduced additional levels of bureaucracy leading to undesirable results, for example, leaving Heads of Department more remote from the Vice-Chancellor's office. What has often been sacrificed in this process has been the fun and excitement of academic life, attention to what is taught in the classroom and how it is taught. BCS believes this is a step in the wrong direction.
- 17.2 Having overseas students is wonderful, a richness for our own students and our systems and often a recognition of excellence. However, and we need to be cautious in our comments, having large numbers (90–95%) of overseas students in a Masters class is not always a recognition of excellence nor is it always in the best interests of UK students or UK plc. So there are delicate balances here.

18. Plagiarism in its various guises is a massive and growing problem in HE which threatens to undermine standards and yet this is recognized only by those who are truly conscientious. The problem is so serious that BCS believes that new ways of assessing student work (normally coursework) need to be found. Institutions will claim to have mechanisms in place to deal with plagiarism and to some extent they do. But typically institutions are terrified of legal action and their processes are typically heavy on bureaucracy because of these inevitable legal connotations. When faced with a class of 100+ assignments, looking for plagiarism could absorb massive amounts of time and finding it could be something of a lottery. It would also be quite unreasonable to expect external examiners do catch this on a systematic basis.

19. Tackling plagiarism poses huge challenges. Automatic methods have a role to play but they can be compromised as well. BCS believes this problem can only be resolved by reviewing what is done in the educational system as a whole.

#### *Student support and engagement*

- the effectiveness of initiatives to support student engagement in the formulation of HE policy, and how the success or otherwise of these initiatives is being assessed
- how the student experience differs in public and private universities
- examples of reasons for, and potential strategies to reduce, the non-completion of higher education programmes by students
- the adequacy of UK higher education (HE) funding and student support packages, and implications for current and future levels of student debt
- any further action required by the Government and/or HEFCE to ensure that UK HEIs offer students a world class educational experience

#### **BCS RESPONSE**

20. In the UK there is only one private university but when looking at the education system in the USA, private universities tend to be characterized by small classes, intense support and tuition from staff, and the expectation of a good strong work ethic amongst students. An effect from all this is that students do work hard outside the classroom and are expected to do so. But the students pay large tuition fees, and typically are highly committed. Achieving this in publicly funded institutions, while certainly desirable, would have considerable financial implications.

21. Positive steps need to be taken to draw the students into the “university family”. They need to have a feeling of belonging and accompanying that a feeling of genuine support; often that is missing in the early years and that can lead to students feeling isolated at an early stage.

22. There is also a view that the first courses which students encounter set both the scene and the standard for much of what follows. This happens almost within the first week affecting attendance, commitment, standard of work, attitude. If these initial courses are viewed as trivial or not sufficiently demanding by students, this can have an adverse effect on the entire cohort.

23. Also important is the perennial feedback issue which provides the opportunity to condition students' expectations. In large classes it is often difficult to provide significant amounts of feedback because of the resource issues. Yet great attention ought to be given to these classes; in part they ought also to give students a feel for the new and exciting aspects of the disciplines so that the students can make an informed decision about committing to a particular course of study. Opportunities for transfer ought to exist if needed and there should be no disincentives to staff if this occurs.

24. BCS wishes to bring your attention to a major difficulty which particularly faces those teaching Computing. Students entering higher education now have lived through the mobile phone, internet revolutions and have frequent access to IPODs, social networking sites and so on. This means that these so

called “digital natives” have a relatively advanced level of technical knowledge typically spread over a narrow front. Keeping them involved whilst at the same time bringing other students up-to-speed is a challenge.

25. At a departmental or subject level, university staff can help schools to make computing exciting. Such outreach activities can also provide a means of staff development but it should be noted that pressures relating from the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) tend to mitigate against such activity.

#### CONCLUDING COMMENTS

26. Although this is out of scope of this consultation, BCS wishes to stress the importance of considering how the curriculum should be delivered. As mentioned in paragraph 24, today’s “tech-savvy” students are different from previous generations. Universities need to find new approaches to engage, motivate and generally educate them in ways that they enjoy and from which they gain benefit. Of course, educators have to face up to them repeatedly since the scene—particularly in computer science—is rapidly changing and universities need to keep finding new and more effective ways of meeting these challenges.

27. There are also, of course, challenges at a disciplinary level, particularly in computing, by ensuring that what is taught is relevant to the needs of the employers. Again, addressing that is a major consideration, but lies outside the terms of reference of this consultation.

December 2008

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### Memorandum 9 Submission from ASKe<sup>13</sup>

“STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES”

#### 1.0 *Executive summary*

ASKe believes that if the UK degree is to continue to be seen an academic benchmark standard, and to maintain its reputation internationally, and with employers, parents and students, there is a need for a complete “root and branch” change in assessment processes and practices. In addition to providing evidence for this assertion, ASKe makes a number of practical recommendations as to how the sector could start to bring this change about.

#### 2.0 *ASKe*

2.1 ASKe is the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning based at Oxford Brookes University Business School. It was set up in summer 2005 with a £4.5 million award (spread over five years) from HEFCE in recognition of good practice based on pedagogic research into aspects of assessment carried out by staff in the Business School and the Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development. ASKe’s work focuses on ways of helping staff and students develop a common understanding of academic standards, and it builds on and promulgates established good practice. Last year we funded the bringing together of 40 national and international experts in assessment which met in November 2007 and has become known as the Weston Manor Group. The outcome of that group’s discussions was the production of a six tenet manifesto for change to assessment practice related to standards (attached).

2.2 This response is focused solely on the section of questions regarding degree classification.

#### 3.0 *Information for the committee*

3.1 We would argue that there are numerous and significant methodological flaws in current assessment practice at both the macro level of degree classification, and at the micro level of the assessment of individual students, which means that there should be growing concern about the integrity of the degree as a qualification and what it means to be a graduate.

3.1.1 This has effectively been accepted by both the Burgess report (2007) admission that the degree classification system is “no longer fit for purpose” (p5) and the QAA’s admission that currently:

“(a) it cannot be assumed students graduating with the same classified degree from *different* institutions, having studied different subjects, will have achieved similar standards; (b) it cannot be assumed students graduating with the same classified degree from a *particular* institution, having studied different subjects, will have achieved similar standards; and (c) it cannot be assumed students graduating with the same classified degree from different institutions, having studied the *same* subject, will have achieved similar standards.” (QAA, 2006, emphasis added)

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<sup>13</sup> Assessment Standards Knowledge Exchange.

3.1.2 The learning outcomes of a degree are complex and address a range of cognitive and practical skills but “A potential employer wants to know one thing: is a degree from the university of X creditable? If so, how does it compare with one from the university of Y? Yet these are questions the QAA cannot answer” (Kealey, 2008).

3.2 And before these recent admissions, we already knew from a number of studies that traditional reliance on the external examiner system to mediate standards within the system was misplaced (e.g Newstead and Dennis, 1994).

3.3 Let us consider some of the major questionable beliefs and bad practices in the system (Rust, 2007):

#### 3.3.1 *Belief that it is possible to distinguish the quality of work to a precision of one percentage point*

Although the reality of using percentages for much marking of student work does not actually mean the use of a one hundred point scale (because students rarely are given more than 70 or less than 35—with some disciplinary differences which we will return to below— so it tends to be roughly a 35 point scale) this marking still implicitly suggests that it is possible to distinguish between individual pieces of work to a precision of one thirty-fifth of difference. And of course in doing this there will be numerous aggregations having to take place between how well different learning outcomes and assessment criteria have been met. Theories of judgement analysis would suggest, as Elander and Hardman have pointed out, citing Einhorn (2000), that this is just not possible. “It is the integration of information about multiple cues that research has shown human experts to have the most difficulty with (2002, p 304). “People are bad at integrating information” (Dawes, 1982, p 395).

#### 3.3.2 *Belief that double-marking will ensure fairness and reliability*

Just because two markers arrive at the same or a similar mark does not mean that the system is reliable. It is quite possible that they have reached the mark for significantly different reasons. And where double-markers disagree, depending on the hierarchical and power relationship between them, the resolution may have little or nothing to do with the objective merits of the piece of work. The senior member of staff’s view may simply override the other’s, or in other cases, just because it is easier and saves time, a simple average between the two may be chosen.

#### 3.3.3 *The fact that most marks lack meaning unless they are stated in terms of norms, group summaries (the mean or median) or the objectives mastered*

This is true from the question of, “What does the fact a student got 54% for a particular piece of work actually mean?” all the way up to the question of “What does an upper second degree classification tell anyone about a graduate from a particular course?” In isolation, neither piece of data conveys any real meaning either to the student, another tutor, or to an employer, about the strengths and weaknesses, knowledge and skills of the student.

#### 3.3.4 *The practice of combining scores, which obscures the different types of learning outcome represented by the separate scores*

Let us consider a module where there may be a piece of coursework explicitly designed to test the application of one aspect of theory in depth, and an exam designed to assess primarily a breadth of knowledge gained. When the two results from these assessments are simply turned into numbers and combined, the detail of what has been assessed is completely lost.

#### 3.3.5 *The practice of combining scores where the variation (standard deviation) for each component is different*

This would be unacceptable in the practice of a first year statistics student, but university assessment systems do this all the time, both within modules, and in combining the total marks from different modules or units of study.

#### 3.3.6 *The distortion of marks by the type of assessment (eg coursework c.f. examination) and the actual subject discipline/s studied*

It is well known in the literature that students are more likely to score highly on coursework rather than examinations (Yorke et al, 2000; Bridges et al, 2002. It is also well established in the literature that marks will vary simply depending on the discipline being assessed, with much higher marks likely to be found in mathematics and statistics, for example, than in a subject like English (Yorke et al, 1997). But in modular degree programmes, where different subjects may well be studied in combination, marks are still likely to be just added together despite these differences. And where single disciplines are studied there is evident distortion in the resulting degree classification achieved. As Yorke et al point out (2000) from HESA data from 1999, 21.1% of Mathematical Science graduates get firsts but only 3.7% in Law.

### 3.3.7 *The distortion of generating degree classifications by the application of idiosyncratic institutional rules*

Several studies (Woolf and Turner, 1997; Armstrong *et al*, 1998) have also pointed out that the application of different institutional rules on how marks are combined, etc. can make considerable differences to the final degree classification obtained. With the same module results, different degree classifications could be obtained simply depending on which institution's rules are applied. In 2000, Yorke *et al* (p 230) said "there is a need for a deep inquiry into the fundamental nature of degree award algorithms, and a study of percentage-scale marking and grading," but there has been no such inquiry.

3.4 We would also argue that, ironically, a number of these bad practices have been as a result of a (failed) desire to create greater reliability which has been at the cost to the other, vitally important function of assessment—formative feedback and the improvement of learning.

3.4.1 "The types of assessment we currently use do not promote conceptual understanding and do not encourage a deep approach to learning.....Our means of assessing [students] seems to do little to encourage them to adopt anything other than a strategic or mechanical approach to their studies." (Newstead 2002, p3)

3.4.2 "Many research findings indicate a declining use of deep and contextual approaches to study as students progress through their degree programmes". (Watkins & Hattie, 1985; Kember *et al*, 1997; Richardson, 2000; Zhang & Watkins, 2001)

3.4.3 "This quest for reliability tends to skew assessment towards the assessment of simple and unambiguous achievements, and considerations of cost add to the skew away from judgements of complex learning" (Knight 2002 p278)

3.5 As for advantages and disadvantages of the classification system itself, it is arcane and peculiar to the UK, and to undergraduate courses. Even on postgraduate UK courses the differentiation of outcomes is much simpler and easier to understand being, either, just Pass or Distinction, or Pass, Merit, or Distinction. The planned introduction of the Higher Education Academic Record (HEAR) is a welcome development given that it should set student achievement in the context of the mission and values of the course studied which will vary in relation to the academic, employability or professional focus. However in addition to the problems of educating employers to HEAR's usefulness, we need to ensure that it is useful. And this will require the recording of much more than simply the almost meaningless marks or grades achieved by a student on individual modules.

3.6 Regarding plagiarism, it is a problem; and the concern about student plagiarism is an even greater problem. There is evidence to show it is rising, and in particular, that deliberate attempts to deceive assessors are rising sharply from a relatively low base of (a generally agreed assumed level of) 10–15 cases per 1000 submissions. Statistics about levels of plagiarism are contradictory and hard to evaluate as they ask very different questions of different groups of students. Surveys that show "almost all students cheat" are frequent but irrelevant since they usually refer to one-off or pragmatic decisions with little or no impact on students' overall skills /learning or on the credibility of their final award. Cheating and plagiarism does not threaten important graduate skills which are tested in other ways such as nurses knowing how to care for patients or engineers knowing how to build bridges. There is much useless scaremongering in this area, implying that UK graduates are not reliably assessed on discipline specific skills.

3.6.1 The opportunities for plagiarism have risen exponentially since 2003, both in terms of available internet resources and via bespoke writing "services" (sic). It is estimated that the latter are available via more than 250 sites in the UK alone. In 2005, the Guardian stated such "services" attracted spending of more than 200 million pounds per year. These opportunities and evidence of their use do now present a threat to generic, coursework-assessed courses. Copying and faking work is likely to be a regular practice in large, generic courses in some disciplines. Business, Computing, and Law are most often mentioned though concern in all disciplines is widespread. In some cases, studies show up to 50% of students say they submit others' work, at least for some of the assessment, in large, generic courses assessed by coursework.

3.6.2 There is a significant issue of plagiarism with students who lack sufficient skill to succeed, including but not exclusively international students (IS). ISs are over-represented in institution's punishment statistics because they are much more likely to be identified as plagiarists, both because of change in language and because of the way in which text-matching software works.

3.6.3 Text matching software can help to identify work that warrants extra attention by markers but will not solve the problem as plagiarism is a pedagogic issue requiring an integrated pedagogic responses. All universities should use text-matching software as an adjunct to other measures.

3.6.4 Simplistic reactions to the problems of plagiarism, like a retreat to exams or reliance on technology are not the solution. Addressing plagiarism is well within the capacity of university pedagogic and administrative processes and there are examples of it being handled with creativity and good effect across the UK. There are also many examples of universities who have yet to address the issue systematically and in those cases, a significant issue remains.

3.7 *The fundamental premise, on which our recommendations for change are based, is that "meaningful understanding of standards requires both tacit and explicit knowledge" (O'Donovan et al. 2004) and while the provision of explicit knowledge has been addressed through learning outcomes, benchmarks and assessment criteria, the role of tacit knowledge is largely ignored because "tacit knowledge is experience-based and can*

only be revealed through the sharing of experience—socialisation processes involving observation, imitation and practice” (Nonaka, 1991). To establish standards at both local and national levels therefore also requires the implementation of such processes, both nationally and locally, for both staff and students.

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#### 5.0 Recommendations for inclusion in the committee's report

5.1 To establish national standards in any given discipline requires the establishment of a disciplinary community of assessment practice across the sector. This requires bringing together members of the discipline from different institutions to compare the quality of their students' work and their marking judgements. [Much could be achieved by emulating the assessment practices used in schools in the 80s to standardise the marking of what was called Mode 3 work where staff from all the schools in a region came

together and moderated their marking in this way.] The Subject Centres would be ideally placed to organise this, and it could sensibly replace the current external examiner system as an extended and much more efficient form of peer review.

5.2 To establish national standards for a degree across disciplines it is necessary to reopen the discussions of the 90s into what does “graduateness” mean? And it would be sensible to start this discussion by looking at the work on graduate attributes that is on-going in Australia. Only once it has been identified as to what it is that should be common to the notion of a graduate can any systems of comparison be put in place. This is a task that the HEA should be well placed to lead on.

5.3 The QAA should be charged to completely rewrite their good practice guidance on assessment, mindful of the many criticisms of current practice identified in the literature, and summarised above, informed by the ASKe/Weston Manor “assessment manifesto”, and starting with a consideration of the abolition of numerical systems.

5.4 Regarding plagiarism, it should be recommended that simplistic solutions (eg “return to invigilated exams”) are NOT the answer; neither should university managers hold unrealistic expectations about text-matching software. Instead, it should be recommended that all universities adopt the integrated set of actions (the “holistic approach”) that some have already adopted.

December 2009

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### Memorandum 10

#### Submission from the Research and Teaching Group (R & T Group)

#### SCIENCE AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

1. The Research and Teaching Group (R & T Group) was founded in 1998 by a number of independent researchers committed to exploring the relationship between research and teaching for the benefit of the student learning experience (see Annex A for list of members)..

2. This memorandum is submitted by the R & T Group on behalf of its members. The R & T Group welcomes the opportunity to respond to this invitation.

3. The R & T Group represents higher education researchers, national and institutional policymakers who have engaged with these issues for over a decade. This memorandum provides evidence from R & T Group international conferences and regular deliberations and is in response to the theme on “The balance between teaching and research” identified in the consultation document.

#### INTRODUCTION

4. *“We believe an understanding of the research process—asking the right questions in the right way; conducting experiments; and collating and evaluating information—must be a key part of any undergraduate curriculum”* Bill Rammell University of Warwick 25 October 2006.

*“So I find that teaching and the students keep life going, and I would never accept any position in which somebody has invented a happy situation for me where I don’t have to teach. Never.”* Richard Feynman, Nobel Laureate, in *Surely You’re Joking, Mr. Feynman!*

5. The reorganisation of the DfES and DTI brought the elements of the dual funding system for universities within a single Department for the first time, a Department whose organisational structure is aligned with the strategy of the ten-year science framework, and in which research, teaching and learning sit together. Historic changes to the funding and regulation of universities have made a major contribution to raising standards and ensuring quality but have, unfortunately, also encouraged a separation of their three core activities: education, research and outreach. As a result, the potential benefit of each activity to the others has become harder to achieve, and they are often in competition with one another for resources and esteem.

6. This is in a context where both the universities and government are keen to understand and maximise the benefit which flows to society from what universities do. The problems in gaining that benefit are well documented. In particular, the Lambert Review highlighted how UK business often fails to benefit from university research, and the Leitch Review highlighted how university courses often do not develop in graduates the skills and abilities which they need in their careers. Even in the short period since those reviews, the rapidly changing nature of business and society driven by the growth of the internet makes it likely that these failings are more damaging for the UK, not less. This is not of course to imply that the fault lies wholly on the supply side.

7. The conclusion of the work of the Research & Teaching Group is that forging a closer connection between staff research and student education provides clear benefit to both, and can make a major contribution to rectifying these weaknesses. Furthermore, it is clearly an opportune moment to do this, as was noted by the Secretary of State in his speech at the Wellcome Centre last spring: *“The strength of DIUS should lie in its ability to bring all aspects of higher education policy—teaching, research, innovation—together.*

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*The world is evolving very quickly and we must be able to unlock British talent and support economic growth through innovation as never before. We need to decide what a world-class HE system of the future should look like, what it should seek to achieve, and establish the current barriers to its development.”*

8. Many higher education institutions (HEIs) claim that their teaching is “research led” or “research informed”, but in practice this rarely provides students with much direct engagement with the research process. It most often means that students read contemporary journals reporting on the findings of research, that their teachers are active researchers or scholars, and that they do limited research projects within the confines of what is sometimes a highly regulated course structure. Research funding rewards activities favoured by the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and many in the academic community, and effectively penalises anything which might get in the way of this, eg undergraduate involvement in research. As Stokes<sup>14</sup> argued, the distinction between basic and applied research is based on a misunderstanding of the history of science that has had malign consequences for the role of universities in innovation. Similarly, it has been a force in isolating education activities from the research work of universities. Yet the full range of research which Stokes describes is of clear value in developing a student’s skills and abilities.

9. By contrast, many United States of America (US) institutions involve undergraduates in authentic open-ended research endeavours and have done so for decades. The motivations for this are many, but it has become an established part of the higher education landscape there, and is appearing in other countries too. The Undergraduate Research Opportunities Programme (UROP) at MIT is 35 years old, and is cited by many alumni as a key factor in their development and subsequent success. The National Science Foundation established the Undergraduate Research Collaborative Program<sup>15</sup> to further this agenda. Its goals are to have an impact on the skills of graduates, the culture of both universities and industry, and to widen participation in higher education by making the experience more attractive. It also classifies the use of current research project findings in the undergraduate curriculum as one way of satisfying the obligation to disseminate them. The overwhelming experience there is that each of these practices is of benefit to both the undergraduates and the academics involved. Indeed, many academics welcome the stimulus provided by young minds focussing on their current research, especially when the narrow constraints of didactic responsibility are loosened. Furthermore, these benefits are not confined to a narrow range of subjects in science and technology, nor are they restricted to a few elite institutions.

10. It should be emphasised that as well as acting as researchers in a piece of research, students can work like researchers through research-like project work. Such work is best incorporated in the general learning programme through approaches like Problem Based Learning (PBL) and Enquiry Based Learning (EBL). In all cases it is essential that the assessment of the student’s learning is congruent with the programme’s aims and projected outcomes.

11. The responsibilities of the Government and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in assuring (a) the quality of teaching provision and learning opportunities in UK HEIs; and (b) the balance between teaching and research in HEIs is our primary concern in this inquiry.

12. In the 2000 *Review of Research* by HEFCE, there was scepticism as to the value of a link between education and research, but practice has begun to reflect the US model. Imperial College has an established the UROP scheme which it has expanded in recent years; Cambridge established its own version in 2002 as a result of its work with MIT; the BBSRC and EPSRC have provided experimental funding for summer research by undergraduates; and HEFCE have funded a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) on undergraduate research at Oxford Brookes and Warwick to advance our understanding of its value. The experience of this work supports the conclusions of the R&T Forum. It greatly stimulates student interest in their subject and thereby increases the likelihood of a career in it, either in the academy or outside, which is a particularly important consideration in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects. But there are significant benefits in non-STEM subjects too. Arguably, the learning gained and skills developed by students working on research in non-STEM areas, especially the Arts and Humanities, is one of the major ways that benefit flows from such research to the society and the economy. Overall, any student who graduates with authentic experience of research will have greatly enhanced generic transferable skills as well as a quite different and much more mature attitude towards knowledge.

13. Advancing the goal of connecting research to the education of students will require new policy initiatives to effect institutional change. The following are offered as possible starting points.

- Giving closer attention to the linkage between an institution’s research and its educational provision in its own internal processes and the assessment of this in institutional audits and other external reviews and evaluations;
- Including questions about the link between research within the educational provision in student surveys;
- Including the impact of staff research on student education in the metrics to be used post 2008 for Research Evaluation;
- Providing support for collaboration with the Higher Education Academy, the ESRC and other Research Councils, in the evaluation of existing teaching programmes;

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<sup>14</sup> Stokes, D.E. (1997) *Pasteur’s Quadrant*. Washington: Brookings Institution Press.

<sup>15</sup> See <http://www.nsf.gov/pubs/2006/nsf06521/nsf06521.htm>

- Developing focussed support to build upon existing publicly funded initiatives in the UK, eg the Learning through Enquiry Alliance group of six CETLs, and the BBSRC/EPSRC undergraduate research programmes which draw on the successful practices which have been instituted elsewhere;
- Creating initiatives to promote and extend PBL and EBL;
- Within funded research programmes, giving additional value to those kinds of research which can offer particular benefits to student learning.

14. The relationship between staff research and student education is a highly important one for both activities. The Research and Teaching Group is therefore delighted that the Committee has chosen to make this one of the main themes of its inquiry. There is now a good deal of understanding and experience to guide us to the best ways of achieving synergies between the two activities. Some of this is reflected in the Group's submission. The Group would therefore welcome the opportunity to give oral evidence to the Committee at its discretion.

*December 2008*

## **Annex A**

### **MEMBERSHIP OF THE R & T GROUP: 2008**

#### Members Consulted

Professor Patrick Ainley  
 Ms Elizabeth Allen  
 Professor Graham Badley  
 Professor Ronald Barnett  
 Dr. Rosanna Breen  
 Professor Roger Brown  
 Dr. Angela Brew  
 Professor Bruce Brown  
 Professor Reva Brown  
 Dr. Joyce Canaan  
 Mr Allan Davies  
 Professor Grainne Conole  
 Dr. Glynis Cousin  
 Professor Rob Cuthbert  
 Professor Vaneeta D'Andrea  
 Professor Miriam David  
 Dr. Dawn Edwards  
 Professor Lewis Elton  
 Dr. Liz Elvidge  
 Professor David Good  
 Dr. Chris Hall  
 Professor Lee Harvey  
 Dr. Nick Hammond  
 Professor Alan Jenkins  
 Professor Aled Jones  
 Professor Sam Leinster  
 Dr. Lisa Lucas  
 Professor Herbert Marsh  
 Professor Ian McNay  
 Ms Mary Morrison  
 Professor Andrea Nolan  
 Ms Andre Oboler  
 Professor Andrew Pollard  
 Mr Alastair Robertson



Professor Stephen Rowland  
 Prof. Chris Webster  
 Dr Su A White  
 Ms Barbara Zamorski  
 Mr Ged Matthews: Clerk to the R & T Group

### Memorandum 11

#### Submission from Professor Mantz Yorke<sup>16</sup>

*Changes over time in the proportion of “good honours degrees” awarded in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*

#### MEMORANDUM

1. The establishment of the Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA] has made possible analyses of bachelor’s degree classifications awarded since the academic year 1994–95. The recording of award data was subjected to a break at the beginning of the academic year 2002–03 when a new system of classifying academic subjects was implemented.

2. A summary of the analyses is presented below, and greater detail can be found in the annexed paper<sup>17</sup>. Data from Scottish institutions have been excluded from the analyses because of the different approach adopted in Scotland to the award of honours. Bachelor’s degrees in Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary Science are typically awarded on a non-honours basis and are also excluded.

3. Analyses of this type are important, since they can add some light to the heat engendered by assertions of “grade inflation”.

4. The analyses for the period 1994–2002 showed that the percentage of “good honours degrees” (ie first and upper second class honours degrees, combined) tended to rise in almost all subject areas. When the award data were disaggregated by institutional type, the rises were most apparent in the elite “Russell Group” universities.

5. Similar analyses for the period 2002–2007 showed that there was still a general tendency for the percentage of “good honours degrees” to rise, but that the strongest rises were scattered more evenly throughout institutional types.

6. There are many possible reasons for the observed changes. Amongst those likely to influence an upward movement in classifications are:

- Improvements in teaching
- Greater student diligence
- Curricula being expressed in terms of specific learning outcomes which give students a clear indication of what they need to achieve
- Students being “strategic” about curricular choices
- Developments in assessment methods
- Changes in the way that classifications are determined
- The significance for institutions of “league tables”.

Classifications may be influenced downwards by:

- Student part-time employment
- The distraction from teaching of other demands on academics’ time.

The following might also be influential, but it is unclear what their effects might be:

- Changes in institutions’ student entry profiles
- Changes in the portfolios of subjects offered by institutions.

7. Since the honours degree classification is likely to remain for the foreseeable future (even if greater attention is given to the Diploma Supplement and the Higher Education Achievement Report), there is a need for the higher education sector to have a greater appreciation of the probable effect of the various influences on the classification process. This would best be achieved through investigations in a number of subject disciplines selected as broadly representative of sectoral provision.

<sup>16</sup> Lancaster University.

<sup>17</sup> This paper is to be presented on 9 December 2008 at the conference of the Society for Research into Higher Education held in Liverpool.

## RECOMMENDATION

*It is recommended that a study be undertaken of the influences upon the classification of honours degrees, and that this be undertaken in a representative range of subject disciplines. The Subject Centres of the Higher Education Academy could be the focal points for this work.*

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Annex

EDDIES IN THE CURRENT? TRENDS IN HONOURS DEGREE CLASSIFICATIONS IN  
ENGLAND, WALES AND NORTHERN IRELAND, 2002–07

Mantz Yorke  
Visiting Professor, Lancaster University

PAPER PRESENTED ON 9 DECEMBER 2008 AT THE SRHE CONFERENCE, LIVERPOOL

*Abstract*

A five-year run of honours degree awards from institutions in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, spanning the years 2002–03 to 2006–07, is analysed. Whilst the general picture is of an upward trend in the percentage of “good honours degrees”, at sub-sectoral level the pattern of trends differs in some respects from that derived from the preceding eight-year run of data.

*“Grade inflation”*

“Grade inflation” is perceived as a longstanding problem for education at a variety of levels and across national systems. In the UK, for example, there is an annual ritual when the results of public examinations are announced, in which claims that standards are declining are countered by claims that improved grades are a consequence of improved teaching and greater diligence on the part of students. As regards higher education in the UK, there are analogous claims of slipping standards when summaries of honours degree results are published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (see, for example, Attwood, 2008). There has been a longstanding belief in some quarters of the US that grade inflation is endemic. Adelman (2008) argues that this is due to increases in grades awarded in elite institutions and the disproportionate attention that such institutions command in the media.

There is a variety of definitions of “grade inflation” in the literature (see Yorke, 2008, p.108ff). Some are naïve; others acknowledge the complexity that is inherent in the construct. Even if one defines grade inflation fairly neutrally in terms of an increasing divergence between the grade awarded and the actual achievement (with the former exceeding the latter), there are embedded assumptions about demographic equivalence, the baseline for measurement, the relationship between achievement and grade, and the stability of what is being measured. Despite the use of “subject benchmarks” (see [www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/default.asp](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/default.asp)) as points of reference for higher education curricula in the UK, the exercise of institutional autonomy undermines the possibility of arriving at definitive conclusions as to the causes of changes in grading outcomes across the higher education sector. There are simply too many variables in play.

*The JACS categorisation of academic subjects*

Academic subjects in the UK are categorised by the Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA] according to the Joint Academic Coding System [JACS], with the categorisation being possible at different levels of “granularity”. In the present paper, the coarsest level of granularity has been used. This represents a preference for largish numbers in institutional subject disciplines over the fineness of detail that is bought at the expense of statistical robustness. At the start of the academic year 2002–03, JACS replaced the original subject codings used by HESA. The change had two facets: first, the subject classification was changed and, second, the outcomes of joint-honours and combined subjects honours degrees were roughly apportioned to the relevant constituent subject headings (they had previously been swept up into a composite grouping of combined programmes). This meant that, under JACS, there would be a discontinuity with respect to the trends that were computed for the academic years 1994–95 to 2001–02.

*Trends in the award of “good honours degrees”, 1995–2002*

The “good honours degree” (an upper second [2.1] or a first class honours degree) is often taken as a yardstick of success, in that it opens doors to careers and other opportunities that would generally remain closed to graduates with lower classes of honours (ie lower second [2.2] and third class honours). The third class honours degree is an endangered species, judging by the decline in the use of that category which is, nevertheless, a passing grade. It makes sense, therefore, to focus attention on the boundary between upper and lower second class honours, and to use as an index of trend the percentage of awards above the boundary. The percentage is calculated with reference to the total number of honours and “pass” degrees awarded:

$$\frac{100 \times (N \text{ firsts} + N \text{ 2.1s})}{(N \text{ firsts} + N \text{ 2.1s} + N \text{ 2.2s} + N \text{ thirds/pass})}$$

This index omits unclassified degrees, since across the system there is a scattering of programmes that award degrees on only a non-honours basis (the number of these has diminished over time). “Pass” degrees are awarded to students whose achievements on an honours programme narrowly fail to satisfy the criteria for honours: this may be due to deliberately opting not to do the honours project or dissertation, and/or because performance in one or more curricular components falls below an acceptable standard. For reasons of this kind, pass degree awards are included in the denominator of the ratio. (There is, in practice, some blurring arising from variations in institutional practice in the reporting with respect to the pass and unclassified categories, and consequently some error: however, the method chosen minimises this.) The trend is computed according to the formula:

$$(\% \text{ “good degrees”}) = (m * \text{year}) + \text{constant} ,$$

with the trend being the slope [m] of this linear regression equation. The trend is expressed as the averaged annual change (in terms of percentage points) in the percentage of “good honours degrees” awarded. Its statistical significance depends on the closeness of the sequence of the data-points to a straight line (see the Appendix to this paper).

Data regarding the classifications of honours degrees awarded between 1995 and 2002 were supplied by HESA. Analyses showed that, across the higher education sector in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, there was a general shift towards the upper end of the honours classification scale (Yorke, 2008). (Data from Scottish institutions were not included in the analyses because of the different approach in Scotland to the award of honours.) The rate of rise varied with broad subject area and institution (Figure 1).

Unexpectedly, the rise was much stronger in the elite “Russell Group” universities than in other institutions and, on the relatively limited evidence available from the Higher Education Statistics Agency regarding entry qualifications, there seemed to be no reason to conclude that entry qualifications constituted an important factor in the trend in honours degree classification (Yorke, 2008, p.92ff). Adelman (2008) shows that there has been a similar effect in elite institutions in the US, and that across the great swathe of less-prestigious institutions the grade-point average has remained fairly steady.

	Alli Med	Bio Sci	Agr	Phy Sci	Mat Sci	Com Sci	Eng & T	Arc	Soc Stu	Law	Bus & Ad	Mas Com	Lan	Hist & Ph	Cre A&D	Edu
<b>ALL</b>	.91	.19	-.14	1.31	1.59	.64	1.42	1.33	.62	.56	.53	.63	.99	1.09	.53	.95

<b>Coll</b>	.28	-2.09	-.05	-.02		2.56	.87	1.48	-.16	1.33	1.17	1.31	-.36	1.04	.85	1.03
<b>New</b>	.86	-.09	.12	.25	.55	.19	1.29	1.10	.47	.26	.29	.26	.27	.32	.33	1.42
<b>Old NotR</b>	-.03	.27	-1.19	1.26	1.74	.96	1.00	1.59	.53	.36	.09	.14	.97	.80	-.61	-.30
<b>Russ</b>	1.16	1.52	1.46	1.70	1.75	1.87	1.96	1.89	1.15	1.01	1.69		1.58	1.47	1.00	1.23

Key  Rise, sig.05  Rise, ns  Fall, ns  Fall, sig.05

Figure 1. Trends in the percentage of “good honours degrees” awarded in the years 1995 to 2002, by institutional type.

#### Abbreviations

Coll = institutions not universities in 2002; New = universities designated as such following the 1992 Education Act; Old NotR = pre-92 universities, but not in the Russell Group; Russ = Russell Group universities.

Alli Med = Subjects allied to Medicine; Bio Sci—Biological Sciences; Agr = Agriculture & related subjects; Phy Sci = Physical Sciences; Mat Sci = Mathematical Sciences; Com Sci = Computer Science;

Eng & T = Engineering & Technology; Arc = Architecture, Building & Planning; Soc Stu = Social Studies; Law = Law; Bus & Ad = Business & Administrative Studies;

Mas Com = Mass Communication & Documentation; Lan = Languages;

Hist & Ph = Historical & Philosophical Studies; Cre A&D = Creative Arts & Design; Edu = Education.

*Trends in the award of “good honours degrees”, 2003–07*

Data are now available from HESA which cover the five-year span between academic years 2002–03 and 2006–07. These have enabled trend analyses to be reinstated. The recent computed trends are less likely to exhibit statistical significance because of the smaller number of data-points compared with those available to the previous analysis.

Between 2002 (the start of the academic year 2002–03 in which awards were made) and 2007, many colleges (particularly those with broad portfolios of disciplines) became universities, and in the present analysis have been subsumed into the “new universities”. The specialist institutions focus on Art & Design, Teacher Education and Agriculture, and so the “specialist institutions” group produced data relevant to only a few of the JACS-designated broad subject areas. As with the previous analyses, some institutional mergers took place during the period in question: these are likely to have introduced some discontinuity into trends, thus reducing the possibility of the trends reaching statistical significance. Further, the University of Cambridge changed its system of reporting honours degree classifications.

	Alli Med	Bio Sci	Agr	Phy Sci	Mat Sci	Com Sci	Eng &T	Arc	Soc Stu	Law	Bus &Ad	Mas Com	Lan	Hist &Ph	Cre A&D	Edu
ALL	60	62	57	62	63	50	61	54	61	56	49	60	73	75	62	55

New	53	52	55	53	62	45	57	49	51	40	43	57	57	58	58	54
Old NotR	63	70		63	61	56	59	63	63	62	58	68	76	75	71	53
Russ	70	76		67	65	66	68	64	75	76	67	78	84	84	80	63
Spec			58								46				63	79

Key 40-49% 50-59% 60-69% 70-79% 80+%

Figure 2 shows the percentage of good honours degrees awarded, by broad institutional type. It is evident that there is a relationship between this percentage and the institutional type.

	Alli Med	Bio Sci	Agr	Phy Sci	Mat Sci	Com Sci	Eng &T	Arc	Soc Stu	Law	Bus &Ad	Mas Com	Lan	Hist &Ph	Cre A&D	Edu
ALL	-.31	1.00	.93	.69	.55	-.17	1.01	-.05	.59	.18	.11	.17	.88	.94	.75	.13

New	-.68	1.59	.02	1.40	1.15	-.46	1.13	-.34	.78	-.24	-.11	.32	1.05	.73	.59	.10
Old NotR	.37	.86		1.61	1.61	.49	.48	.12	.38	1.32	-.62	-.57	.52	.73	.66	-2.19
Russ	-.53	.33		-.47	-.56	.34	.71	.35	.64	.44	-.15	-.20	.43	.89	1.46	1.91
Spec			3.34								2.62				.94	1.90

Key Rise, sig.05 Rise, ns Fall, ns Fall, sig.05

Figure 3 shows the respective trends over the five-year period. Compared with the results from the previous eight-year run of data, there is no strong pattern though, when all results are combined, the shift in the percentage of “good degrees” tends to be upward. In considering these results, it needs to be borne in mind that the numbers of awards relating to cells in the Figure can be quite small, and that too much should not be read into trends in such cells. A good example is in Creative Arts & Design, where the bulk of

enrolments are to be found in the new universities and the specialist institutions. Hence the overall trend is determined mainly by the results from these institutions, with the other institutions contributing relatively little.

Figure 2. Percentages of “good honours degrees” awarded in 2007, by institutional type.

Abbreviations as for Figure 1, save that Spec = specialist institution.

Figure 3. Trends in the percentage of “good honours degrees” awarded in the years 2003 to 2007, by institutional type.

Abbreviations as for Figure 1, save that Spec = specialist institution.

#### *Possible influences on trends*

There are many possible contributing influences on the percentage of “good honours degrees”, and it is naïve to collect them together under a blanket condemnation of “grade inflation”.

Rises in the percentage of “good honours degrees” may be attributable to, *inter alia*:

- Improvement in teaching quality.
- Increased student diligence.
- “Strategic” students (ie students who opt for modules in which they can expect to obtain a high level of return—measured in terms of grading—for their investment of effort: see Johnson, 2003, for an example).
- Learning outcomes and explicit criteria. If students know clearly what is expected of them, they will focus their work so as to achieve the best result they can. Quality assurance considerations have been instrumental in focusing on the need for assessments to be as explicit as possible, and for a close alignment between curricular content, pedagogy and assessment (Biggs and Tang, 2007).
- Increased use of coursework (using the term in a broad sense). Coursework can, if tasks are well constructed and rendered relatively secure from plagiarism and other forms of deception, lead to a better indication of student attainment than can formal examinations: coursework has been shown to give rise to higher marks than such examinations (Bridges et al, 2002; Simonite, 2003; Yorke *et al*, 2000). A broadening of the range of coursework demands could also be a contributory factor.
- Changes in award algorithm. “Benchmarking” of award outcomes against cognate institutions has shown on occasion that students may be being disadvantaged compared with their peers. Institutions have on occasion felt it appropriate to adjust the way in which awards are determined in order to fall into line with their comparators. Such adjustments are more likely to edge classifications upwards than downwards.
- League tables. “Good honours degrees” figure in a number of “league tables”, or rankings, of UK institutions. Institutions for which a league table position is deemed to be of significance in marketing are perhaps particularly susceptible to the implicit pressure to boost their position, and assessment practice—not necessarily at the level of the institution—may be influenced despite the attentions of external examiners.

Student achievement, as indicated by the honours degree classification, may be adversely affected by

- Distractions from teaching. The roughly quinquennial Research Assessment Exercise [RAE] is a potent influence on institutional activity. The increasing expectations laid on academics to be entrepreneurial may be another influence.
- Student part-time employment. The evidence suggests that a low level of part-time employment whilst studying full-time is not deleterious to academic performance, but that higher levels can have an adverse effect. (See for example Brennan *et al*, 2005; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005).

There is some ambiguity about the effect of some changes on student achievement, since what may have a positive effect in one context may have an adverse effect elsewhere. Two examples are:

- Shift in institutional provision (eg course or departmental closures). RAE outcomes that have been relatively poor in some universities have led to the closure of departments and/or the reassignment of staff to other academic areas. In the case of science-based subjects, this may have led to a concentration of the most able students in a smaller number of institutions, with other students shifting into applied or combined programmes, perhaps in other institutions.
- Entry profiles of students. As well as the preceding point, entry profiles evolve with governmental and/or institutional policy. Demographic projections, such as that of Bekhradnia (2006), are harbingers of future shifts which could have consequences for institutional award profiles.

*At root, it's about standards*

The evidence suggests that, although the current of rising percentages of “good honours degrees” is broadly continuing to flow, the more recent results point to some eddies in which the direction of flow is reversed. This is particularly noticeable in the Russell Group of universities, where the strong upward trend over the period 1995–2002 has been reversed in a number of subject areas. The reasons for the shifts in trend cannot be determined from the data—further study is needed to identify whether there are any particular influences at work: ceiling and/or norm-related effects on grades and “regression towards the mean” could be making a contribution.

There is always a temptation to look for a simple causality for rising grades. If “the cause” can be identified, then the problem can be fixed. However, the discussion in the preceding section—which could have been extended—shows that grade-outcomes are susceptible to influences of varying kinds which in turn have varying provenances. There is no simple sectoral “fix”, since the multiple influences will have weights that differ according to the context. It is likely that a rising trend in an institution whose entry profile reflects a strong commitment to widening participation arises from a different concatenation of influences than a similar trend in research-led university.

The underlying issue is that of academic standards. These evolve over time, in response to developments in subject areas, expectations of the higher education system, and so on. A truly self-evaluating institution keeps a watch on its performances and how these relate to its aims and objectives: for the purposes of this paper, the particular performance in question is the summation of a host of student achievements. These, in turn, can only be interpreted against curricular expectations, pedagogy and assessment methods, both within the institution and between institutions. The potential of benchmarking activity, on both an intra-institutional and an inter-institutional basis, is readily apparent.

The kind of analysis presented in this paper (which takes some time) can be undertaken within the institution, though some cohort numbers will be too small to permit statistically robust conclusions to be drawn. This may not matter greatly, since institutional self-evaluation is inherently formative and hence tolerant of a lower level of reliability than would be needed for summative judgement. Institutional self-evaluation, done properly, is not an easy option but a demanding and intellectually rigorous activity.

Borrowing from Auden’s poem *The question*,

To ask the hard question is simple;

[...]

But the answer

Is hard ...

Should not academics relish the challenge of hard questions, such as those pertaining to standards?

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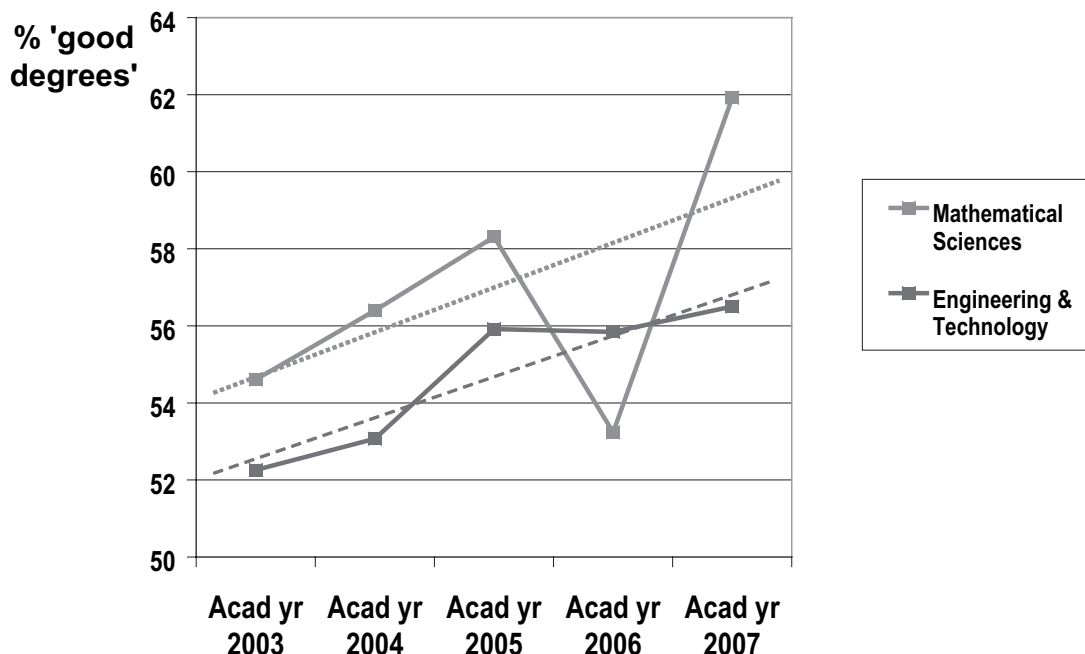
**DISCLAIMER**

HESA cannot accept responsibility for any inferences or conclusions derived from the data by third parties.

**APPENDIX**

**THE STATISTICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF A TREND**

The statistical significance of a trend depends on the closeness of the data-points to a straight line. In the example below, the computed upward trend (the “m” in the regression equation) for Mathematical Science is marginally greater than that for Engineering & Technology. However, the greater amount of zigzag in the data-points making up the former means that the upward trend is less robust, statistically, than that of the latter. Of course, the trend relates only to the data-points displayed: there is no way of telling from the data where the next data-point in each sequence might lie. Observers of once-booming house prices and stock markets will be only too aware of the force behind the financial services’ warning that past performance is no guarantee of future success.



**Memorandum 12**

**Submission from Professor G.R. Evans<sup>18</sup>**

*On “The responsibilities of the Government and HEFCE in assuring (a) the quality of teaching provision and learning opportunities in UK HEIs; and (b) the balance between teaching and research in HEIs.*

**SUMMARY**

1. The wording of the present question “joins” the Government and HEFCE as though they stood together “over against” UK HEIs. This takes the Funding Council to be an arm of Government rather than a statutory buffer and appears not to be in accordance with the intention of present legislation.

2. It is a Government “responsibility” to ensure that policy is formed, continued or varied with express reference to earlier policy-frameworks and in full consultation with the sector, otherwise HEIs will be unable to plan sensibly and that will put taxpayers’ money at risk.

<sup>18</sup> Project Leader, Improving Dispute Resolution (HEFCE Leadership, Governance and Management Project).

3. There must be proper consultation if the “Robbins Quadrilateral” is to be modified or abandoned as the foundation of decisions in these areas.

4. There must be proper consultation a decade on about the implementation of the Dearing principles relating to these areas.

5. The expansion of targeted funding streams affecting teaching and research is eroding both the “block grant” and the “buffer” principles, without its being established that this development is in the public interest. The consequent uncertainties are compounded by HEI expectations of special streams, and employer involvement.

6. The overarching Government and HEFCE responsibility now is to consult widely on current trends in the context of the history of policy-change, reviews and reports since 1992, so that the pros and cons of external intervention in these areas may be considered calmly and objectively with reference to the whole picture before any further initiatives are instigated.

#### EVIDENCE IN DETAIL

##### *Summary Point (1)*

*The wording of the present question “joins” the Government and HEFCE as though they stood together “over against” UK HEIs. This takes the Funding Council to be an arm of Government rather than a statutory buffer and appears not to be in accordance with the intention of present legislation.*

7. The sole direct responsibility of Government is to ensure good use of taxpayers’ money in the public interest. It has been an established principle for 90 years that this is best achieved by funding universities through the allocation of a block grant to each HEI, with broad restrictions which require it to be used in support of teaching and research and the provision of infrastructure to that end. Governments have not sought directly to control the internal allocation of resources by HEIs.

8. For nearly a century a buffer, formerly the UGC, now the statutory funding councils and research councils, has stood between Government and the universities to ensure that funding is not subject to political control.

9. There is protection to ensure that the money is used for the purposes for which it is granted, in the form of HEFCE’s system of assurance and the backstop of a statutory “conditions of grant” sanction. These principles are embodied in statute under the FHEA 1992. “Conditions of grant” sanctions have been used very conservatively by HEFCE and solely where there was serious financial risk. To use such sanctions to control academic activity in individual HEIs would take regulation into new territory.

10. There are mechanisms within the sector to allow a cause for concern to be brought to light. The Quality Assurance Agency has provided one since 2007 and has strengthened its provision and made it more “proactive” from August 2008. Research Councils UK is consulting on improving mechanisms for raising concerns about research misconduct. Both bodies seek to ensure that academic freedom and academic autonomy are respected and that HEIs retain control of their academic affairs.

11. The weak point in the system lies not at the juncture between Government/HEFCE on the one hand and the HEIs on the other, but in the management structures of HEIs themselves which have come into being as a result of the imposition of a method of governance which largely separates a governing body with a majority of external members from the academic work of an HEI, and allows teaching and research to be managed top-down by non-academics. There is an obvious analogy with the dangers to patients of allowing NHS managers to take clinical decisions. A review of the dangers to quality and standards inherent in this trend is now overdue. It is here at “management” level that HEIs have been taking decisions which have resulted in such phenomena as rising proportions of first-class degrees and other indications of “dumbing-down” by directive to academic staff, though the frequency of such occurrences now needs to be established on a more than anecdotal basis.

##### *Summary Point (2)*

*It is a Government “responsibility” to ensure that policy is formed, continued or varied with express reference to earlier policy-frameworks and full consultation with the sector, otherwise HEIs will be unable to plan sensibly and that will put taxpayers’ money at risk.*

12. The time-line of the work of HEIs is fundamentally different from that of politics. There is a danger of short-termism, or at best, a mismatch between the inherent pace of the academic work itself and the thrust and time-frame of a given initiative. This is wasteful of resources and cannot constitute responsible Government in reference to higher education.

13. There is a history of lack of continuity in Government thinking even in areas of policy where there has been a relatively consistent thrust over a number of years. For example, David Blunkett’s “Skills” initiative of 1998, involving several years’ work, the publication of a series of reports and no small expense, appeared to have been forgotten about altogether only a few years later when the “Leitch” skills agenda was published, adopted and acted upon in a matter of months during 2006–8. Leitch makes no reference to this earlier work.



*Summary Point (3)*

*There must be proper consultation if the “Robbins Quadrilateral” is to be modified or abandoned as the foundation of decisions in these areas.*

14. At the beginning of the 1960s the Robbins Committee examined the questions which underlie the Select Committee’s (a) and (b). Robbins identifies a series of areas of activity where the institutions must retain control, the making of appointments, designing the curriculum and setting standards, admitting students, striking a balance between teaching and research and deciding their own directions of development (Robbins, 711 ff.).

15. A similar summary was quoted from the University of Capetown in the Standing Committee’s discussion of the drafting of the Education Reform Act 1988:

*“the right to determine, on academic grounds (emphasis added), who may teach, who may be taught, what may be taught and how it should be taught” (Standing Committee J, col.1654).*

16. The Robbins Committee also thought it important to protect the right of the individual academic:

*to teach according to his own conception of fact and truth, rather than according to any pre-determined orthodoxy [ and ] freedom to publish and, ...to pursue what personal studies or researches are congenial” (Robbins, 705).*

This has been eroded by the introduction of institutional research “strategies” and would be further eroded by Government and Funding Council taking powers to direct teaching and research, to determine the balance to be struck between them in individual HEIs, or to concentrate research funding solely in selected HEIs.

*Summary Point (4)*

*There must be proper consultation a decade on about the implementation of the Dearing principles relating to these areas.*

17. *“A distinctive element in the relationship between the Government, as a major source of funding, and the higher education institutions, has been the inter-position between the two of Funding Bodies, established under statute with defined functions and responsibilities” (Dearing, 22.9)*

18. On its fact-finding missions overseas the Dearing Committee saw places where the making of academic and senior administrative appointments did not rest with the universities:

*“where academic salaries may be determined by the government; where the addition of a professorial post may require government approval; and where the government may have powers to appoint some members of governing bodies.”*

19. Dearing decided to endorse the British model:

*“The independence, responsiveness and effectiveness of UK higher education institutions owes much to the well-established tradition of the government distancing itself from institutions and entrusting the high-level administration of the public financial to independent bodies of standing, the Funding Councils” (Dearing, 22.10).*

20. Indeed, Dearing supports the continuation of this arrangement with some vigour:

*“While the government can attach general conditions to the funding it provides, it may not attach conditions to the funding of individual institutions. We are wholly convinced and firmly commend to the Government that there should continue to be an arm’s length relationship between government, both nationally and regionally, and the higher education system, so as to assure the autonomy of institutions within a broad framework of public policy.*

21. Dearing warned against creeping erosion of the principle, citing the OECD’s concern that:

*“while no evidence was brought before it of deliberate attempts to erode institutional autonomy”, “there are obvious pressures that individually may be slight but collectively could impede the development of institutions if left unchecked” (Dearing 22.11).”*

*Summary Point (5)*

5. *The expansion of targeted funding streams affecting teaching and research is eroding both the “block grant” and the “buffer” principles, without its being established that this development is in the public interest. The consequent uncertainties are compounded by HEI expectations of special streams, and employer involvement.*

22. The block grant principle is being eroded by the identification of a series of funding streams driven by Government initiatives.’ Strategically important and vulnerable subjects’ are one such class of these identified by HEFCE:

*“The ‘strategic importance’ of these subjects refers to the need for some kind of assistive intervention to facilitate the subject’s provision. Where such intervention is necessary in order to address a mismatch between supply and demand, the subject is designated as both strategically important and vulnerable.”*

23. HEFCE has been allocating substantial funding which ignores both the block grant and the buffer principle:

*In response to the Government's request, we have undertaken a £350 million programme of work to support subjects that are strategically important and vulnerable.*

24. Two classes of such subjects need to be distinguished here. "Vulnerable" are the subjects which attract small student numbers or are expensive to teach. Here the STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) are particularly significant and it is argued to be in the national economic interest to protect and foster the teaching of these. The second class includes subjects deemed to be "strategically important" for other reasons. The prime example here is "Islamic Studies" in the curriculum development and teaching of which HEFCE is encouraging direct intervention at Government instigation. There are clearly important public policy questions here.

(<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/aboutus/sis/islamic/>, <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/aboutus/sis/islamic/conf/>).

25. There is a further public policy question about the mingling of these academic objectives with "social engineering" objectives:

*"To support HEFCE's strategic aim to widen participation in higher education (HE), we have required key connections with Aimhigher, as the main national programme which aims to widen participation in HE by raising the aspirations and developing the abilities of young people from under-represented groups. By targeting the projects in this way, it is hoped that the projects will have a further effect of increasing participation more generally from all groups"*—(<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/aboutus/sis/>, <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/aboutus/sis/stem.htm>).

26. Higher Education Innovation Fund [HEIF] Third Stream funding is another example of the dilution of block grant funding through special funding which intervenes in the freedom of HEIs to allocate public funding as they think best for educational purposes. Again it may be helpful to glance at the history:

*"The NCiHE [the Dearing Committee] felt that 'against a background ... in which it is Government policy to encourage all industry, especially small and medium sized enterprises, ... it is appropriate to have a funding stream that actively promotes collaboration between higher education and industry and commerce',"*

as the Select Committee on Science and Technology commented in 1998.

(<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/199798/cmselect/cmsctech/303i/st0102.htm>)

27. *Third stream funding began in 1999 with the Higher Education Reach Out to Business and the Community (HEROBC) scheme and was followed by the HEIF. HEIF committed £265 million in rounds 1 and 2 over the years 2002–03 to 2005–06 and a further £234 million was committed for HEIF 3 for 2006–07 to 2008–09. The total budget for CKEs was £40 million over a four year period which—as a percentage of HEIF3 for example—represented an additional 8% of funds for reach-out activities—(Centres for Knowledge Exchange report to HEFCE November 2007).*

28. The Government noted in its response to the Dearing Report, that "higher education institutions had a good record in developing research links with industry," but by 2003 it was pressing energetically for more. The Dearing Report thus turned out to be a staging post between the New Framework White Paper of 1991 and the White Paper of 2003.

(<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/199798/cmselect/cmsctech/303i/st0102.htm>)

29. The Lambert *Review*, reporting in 2003, not only took it to be appropriate for public funding to be used to direct universities generally towards more active collaboration with business; it put forward detailed and *dirigiste* plans driving far into matters of academic judgement. Lambert's Recommendation 6.1 was that the collaborative research with industry "or other users" should be valued equally with purely academic research by funding rewards given through the Research Assessment Exercise. This would not be an exercise of academic peer-review but of Government policy. The academic peer-review exercise would itself be artificially adjusted from outside to make businessmen co-decision-makers with the academic community ("There should be significantly more business input into the priority setting, decision-making and assessment panels of both of the peer review processes").

30. Lambert went further and suggested interfering with the balance of public funding allocation between infrastructure and project funding in the interests of promoting industrial outcomes from academic research:

*The Government should consider the relative size of the Funding Council and Research Council funding streams and whether the present system provides the appropriate balance between giving institutions stable research funding and promoting a dynamic and competitive research base.*

31. A further steer came in Lambert Recommendation 6.2, which calls for a new stream of funding:

*The Government should create a significant new stream of business-relevant research funding, which would be available to support university departments that can demonstrate strong support from business.*

32. Lambert had radical ideas about the best way to administer this new funding. There were to continue to be block grants, but these were to be given as “pots” not to the universities but to bodies other than the statutory funding councils, which could ensure that business-relevant activity in directions favoured by the Government would be rewarded.

*There are a number of possible ways to allocate the new business-relevant research funding stream including an expansion in the scope of Higher Education Innovation Fund, an expansion of existing schemes such as LINK, or allocation through the Regional Development Agencies and their equivalent bodies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Review’s preferred approach is to allocate the new funding stream to the RDAs through their single pot allocation, and to provide them with targets on promoting business-university (Lambert Recommendation 6.3).*

33. HEIs have consequently renewed their efforts to develop research strategy committees and to direct the research of academics in ways which not much earlier had been banned from consideration. It has therefore proved difficult to achieve the objective stated in the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise, that:

*“the RAE should not encourage or discourage any particular type of activity or behaviour other than providing a general stimulus to the improvement of research quality overall.”*

34. There are immensely important policy-questions to be addressed about the desirability of the “Lambert drift” since the influence of non-Government and HEFCE forces is not envisaged in the framing of the questions addressed in this submission.

#### *Summary Point (6)*

*The overarching Government and HEFCE responsibility now is to consult widely on current trends in the context of the history of policy-change, reviews and reports since 1992, so that the pros and cons of external intervention in these areas may be considered calmly and objectively with reference to the whole picture before any further initiatives are instigated.*

35. Elements in current policy are likely to create a downward drag on quality and standards. For example:

36. The taxonomy of knowledge has been undergoing huge changes in recent decades, both as a consequence of the advancement of knowledge and because a wider range of studies is now considered “degree-worthy”. For Government and HEFCE to intervene to steer change without reference to relevant expertise may be dangerous to quality and the maintenance of standards.

37. Teachers at degree level should have the ownership of their subjects which comes from active engagement in research towards the advancement of knowledge. HEFCE has publicly countenanced a re-definition of “scholarship” to allow it to include merely “keeping up with reading” in a subject-area.

38. Those teaching at higher education level in further education colleges will not necessarily be qualified or professionally competent to maintain the standard which has traditionally been expected in HEIs under traditional “teaching-and-research” academic contracts. Nor do their contracts allow them “research” time in which to equip themselves for higher education teaching. “Teaching-only” universities cannot offer students an education of equivalent quality to teaching-and-research institutions.

39. The position of postgraduate students engaged in research (including PGT students doing short dissertations) needs careful thought in establishing a teaching-research balance in each HEI. This cannot be satisfactorily achieved by directive from Government or HEFCE

40. Employer-led engagement, by creating courses of value only to particular employers, may diminish the attractiveness of UK degrees to international students who are looking for global portability.

41. There is urgent need for a review of the principles governing “collaborative” and “partnership” arrangements of all kinds, in the interests of ensuring that quality and standards are not compromised.

*January 2009*

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### **Memorandum 13**

#### **Submission from Dr Stuart WG Derbyshire<sup>19</sup>**

#### **EVIDENCE REGARDING STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES**

##### *Executive summary*

This paper is a personal account of my experiences since returning to the UK as a senior lecturer in 2005. In summary, British universities have a vastly increased intake of students compared with the late 1980s to the mid 1990s. This increased intake has not been matched by increases in resources, especially staff. At the same time the A-level grading system has changed such that a greater proportion of students now receive

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<sup>19</sup> The author is a senior lecturer in psychology at the University of Birmingham. He obtained his first degree from University College London in 1991 and his PhD from the University of London in 1995. From there he took a research fellow position at the University of Pittsburgh, USA in 1996 and was subsequently employed as an assistant professor at the University of California, Los Angeles and at the University of Pittsburgh. He returned to the UK in 2005 when he joined the staff at the University of Birmingham.

top grades making it more difficult to find the truly excellent students. Despite educating more students, who are less well selected, and with resources stretched more thinly, increasing numbers of university students obtain a 2:1 or a 1st class degree. This indicates an obvious decline in standards. This decline is driven in part by the increased pressure on academia but also by a retreat from the idea that students can be educated.

#### *About the author*

The author is a senior lecturer in psychology at the University of Birmingham. He obtained his first degree from University College London in 1991 and his PhD from the University of London in 1995. From there he took a research fellow position at the University of Pittsburgh, USA in 1996 and was subsequently employed as an assistant professor at the University of California, Los Angeles and at the University of Pittsburgh. He returned to the UK in 2005 when he joined the staff at the University of Birmingham.

1. In 1986 only 15% of the population sat A-levels and only 10% were awarded an A-grade. When the quota system was scrapped the percentage of A-level students attaining an A-grade began to steadily increase and reached 15% by 1996. Since then the trend has accelerated and nearly 25% of students sitting A-level will now receive an A-grade. At the same time, at least 30% of the population now sit A-levels and many more sit A-level “equivalent” type courses. Whereas in 1986 only around 5–10,000 A-level pupils would pass an A-level at grade A today that figure is 30–40,000.

2. In 1980, UK universities educated about 20% of school leavers, today that number is closer to 44% and is intended to reach 50% by 2011. University attendance for popular courses, such as psychology, has doubled or tripled since the late 1980s. Over the last 20 years we have transitioned from a system of educating a relatively small group of highly selected students to educating a much larger group of much less clearly selected students. This trend has accelerated since 1996 and has not been accompanied by commensurate increases in resources, especially staff. Something had to give and it appears that our students are no longer producing work to the standards of the past but, nevertheless, receive degree classifications that are improving. Nationally, in 2006–07 13% of students received a first compared to 8% in 1996–97.

3. The obvious conclusion is that students now receive upper degree classifications for work that would have previously been graded with a lower degree classification. For my final year course I have received essays that were almost impossible to follow, largely empty of content, a regurgitation of lecture notes or basic textbooks and factually incorrect. I routinely awarded these essays low grades but have been brought under pressure, internally and externally, to provide higher grades.

4. The following is lifted from an essay that I would typically provide with a D grade, “In this essay I will explore only the relative merits of the genetic predisposition argument to alcohol independence as a branch of the biological approach for comparisons with the merits of the cognitive-behavioural perspective, most specifically the role of operant conditioning in alcoholism... Arguably the statistics could be representative of hidden population stratifications existing between the study sample and the controls placing a cultural partiality on the findings thus decreasing its reliability”. The ambiguity and incoherence is evident and as I cannot extract much sense from the prose I can only assume that the student has little understanding of the topic and thus deserves only a low grade. Indeed given that our school criteria for a D include—*a basic understanding of theories but conclusions drawn may be unclear; the material has a discernable structure but some sections may lack coherence and/or direction*—a D might even be considered generous.

5. Two years ago our external examiner added 3 marks to the grades provided for my final year course. When I complained he stated that it was no longer 1986 and that we cannot mark like we did in the past. We must, he said, look harder for excellence. I regret that I did not press him on what he meant by excellence.

6. The sentiments of our external examiner have been echoed by my immediate colleagues here and elsewhere. External examiners, it seems, are not under pressure to reduce grades but are under pressure to ensure that grades rise. Not via an improvement in work but via structural changes in assessment and marking.

7. Subsequently my level 3 course was double marked and essays I failed or gave low grades to received pass grades or an increased grade. One student last year received an F from me but a D after further marking. That student was then profiled from a 2:2 overall to a 2:1. It is a single case but not an exceptional one.

8. I understand why these pressures are being applied. If grades fall and the university drops down the league tables then we risk getting fewer students or worse students or both. If we get fewer students we earn less money and risk redundancies. If we get worse students we risk grades falling further unless we lower standards. Given the pressures it is entirely rational for universities to pressure their academics into providing higher grades.

9. What is not so certain is why the attack on standards is being received so passively. In the past education was viewed as a means to create cultivated and capable human beings who could argue their own corner. Consequently academics were a prickly bunch who vigorously defended their independence and put their students under pressure. In 1967 a report on the university’s role in social and political action stated, “The mission of the University is the discovery, improvement and dissemination of knowledge. Its domain of inquiry and scrutiny includes all aspects and all values of society. In brief, a good university, like Socrates, will be upsetting”. In contrast, the slogan for the University of Derby is, “Safe, Friendly and Supportive”.

It is not that I want university to be unsafe, unfriendly and unsupportive but education is inherently disturbing and has to be tackled in a robust and forthright manner. If we have abandoned that belief then we have abandoned the belief that people are capable of education.

10. The unwillingness or inability to challenge our students makes university life dull and boring. Education is being replaced with instruction. Education involves critical enquiry, debate and self-motivation. Crucial qualities include active and independent learning, self-reliance, reflection and evaluation. Instruction, in contrast, involves rote learning of procedures and skills, learning to the test, accepting authority and treating information as fact rather than evidence. The abundant use of learning outcomes and handouts break university down into fact sized chunks that can be swallowed and regurgitated. These practices are destructive to the real purpose of a university.

11. Whoever and whatever caused these problems it most certainly was not the students but it is the students who are suffering the consequences. One obvious consequence is receiving degree classifications that no longer mean what they are supposed to. This was drummed home to me by one of my students who was pleased he got a “proper first”. A proper first, apparently, is a first obtained across the board and not dependent on one high grade or profiling. Less obvious consequences include spending three years going through the motions of education at not insignificant monetary and spiritual cost.

12. What can be done about this? Longer courses and changes to the way degree classifications are delivered represent commonly debated solutions. I think these proposals, however, merely shift the goalposts while threatening to increase the cost and agony to our students.

13. I don’t have a magic solution but I think the place to begin is with an understanding that our students are capable of delivering much more but only if we do them the honour of demanding it. Personally I think expecting anything less is immoral.

14. Sources: UUK/HESA 2007; Ecclestone K, Hayes D. *The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education*. Routledge, London, 2009

*January 2009*

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## Memorandum 14

### Submission from Professor Geoffrey Alderman

#### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Over the past twenty or so years there has been a systemic failure to maintain appropriate academic standards in British higher education.
- The blame for this lies primarily with university chief executives, who have, in general, been willing to subordinate academic standards to their preoccupation with league-tables and “market-share.”
- The Quality Assurance Agency has failed to halt this process because of its mistaken belief that the maintenance of standards appropriate to higher education can be achieved through a compliance culture and the standardisation of procedures.
- The QAA needs to be radically refocused so that its processes address academic standards, and the resource decisions that underpin them.
- The current situation, whereby universities enjoy degree-awarding powers in perpetuity, is insupportable.
- Where an institution is found, by the QAA, to be derelict in its supreme duty to maintain standards (as judged by experienced senior academics from other institutions), financial penalties should be levied, followed if necessary by the partial or complete withdrawal of the authority to award degrees.
- The External Examiner system has broken down. It should either be radically reformed or abolished.
- A separate, urgent inquiry is necessary as to why so many British students, even with good A-Level grades, are quite unprepared for degree-level study.

#### SUBMISSION

1. I am by background a teacher and researcher in the broad fields of modern British history and politics, and have over 40 years’ experience of higher education worldwide. I currently hold an endowed chair at the University of Buckingham, having previously held senior positions in the University of London (where I was Pro Vice-Chancellor for Academic Standards) and Middlesex University (where I was Pro Vice-Chancellor for Quality & Standards). Between 2000 and 2006 I was a senior university administrator with

American universities. I have also researched and published extensively—both in the UK and the USA—in fields allied to the maintenance of quality and standards in higher-education. My full CV and bibliography are available on my website: [www.geoffreyalderman.com](http://www.geoffreyalderman.com).

2. In my view, over the past twenty or so years there has been a systemic failure to maintain appropriate academic standards in British higher education, with the result that these standards have measurably declined.<sup>20</sup> I place the primary responsibility for this at the door of university chief executives (generally vice-chancellors), who, even if they have scholarly backgrounds, no longer see themselves as academic leaders, but rather as business managers intent on achieving “market share.” In this quest, academic standards are viewed as subordinate and, hence, dispensable. In particular, vice-chancellors have permitted and indeed encouraged the decline in academic standards in the desperate search for (a) increased income from “full cost” fee-paying international students, (b) more favourable student retention rates and (c) high or higher positions in various “rankings” or “league tables” published by a variety of media.

3. This need not have happened. Based on my experience in both the public and private higher-education sectors, for-profit and not-for-profit, on both sides of the Atlantic, I must record my view that “marketisation” can, if professionally managed, result in *more* student contact hours, not less. At the wholly private University of Buckingham, for instance, the academic year is longer, not shorter, nor has the volume of the curriculum been reduced—in some subjects such as law, which is of course professionally accredited, it couldn’t be reduced, anyway. In the private sector there is more trust between students and staff, not less, and there is no greater pressure on standards than in the public sector. What is critical, however, is how staff react to this pressure. Here, leadership is crucial.

4. Marketisation and league tables are here to stay. But a robust university management, genuinely jealous for its own reputation, will never allow them to dictate the terms upon which the university guards its academic standards. Part of the problem we currently face undoubtedly stems from the gross underfunding of most of UK higher education. Non-EU students attract full-cost fees, and have—inevitably—become a lucrative source of much-needed cash. Failing or expelling a non-EU student can have serious knock-on implications as the word gets out. In the modern, mass higher education system, it seems, there must be prizes for all, because the student is the customer and the customer must walk away with something for her/his money.

5. The decline in academic standards has been facilitated by weak or non-existent surveillance of them. On 17 July 2008 the Select Committee heard evidence from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. It is worth emphasising that the QAA is, in fact, a *quality* assurance body; its remit does not actually extend, currently, to the direct scrutiny of standards. It is true that the Agency insists that its mission is to work with higher education institutions “to define academic standards”. But it does not do so, and never has. By “quality” I mean the totality of the student learning experience—the learning resources, the pastoral support and so on. You can in fact have poor “quality” in an institution that enforces and whose students reach high standards. Conversely, you can—and all too often do—have poor standards in an institution brimming with support mechanisms. The current methodology of the QAA is compliance-driven. Its approach is underpinned by the belief that high standards will be maintained through standardisation of procedures.<sup>21</sup> This approach is false and dangerous.

6. Academic standards are in decline in many British universities. Students who would formerly have been failed their degrees are being passed, and students who would formerly have been awarded very respectable Lower Seconds are now being awarded Upper Seconds and even Firsts. Students—I mean British students as well as students from overseas—are being admitted to commence their studies with levels of English so poor that universities are having to run remedial English courses to ensure that new entrants possess at least a basic level of literacy at the outset of their studies. Cheating is rampant, encouraged in part by lenient penalties.

7. Part of the evidence for this is statistical. Over the past decade the number of Firsts awarded by UK universities has more than doubled, whilst the UK undergraduate population has increased by less than a half. The standard exit qualification that most UK students obtain is now the Upper Second—the Lower Second is an endangered species and the Third is on the verge of extinction. A survey recently carried out the Higher Education Academy suggested that of 9,000 or so cases of plagiarism recorded last year, only 143 resulted in expulsion. The survey also pointed to an alarming variation in penalties imposed. In many mainly post-1992 “new” universities, lecturers are required to take national, ethnic and even social backgrounds into account when punishing cheaters.

8. Part of the evidence is empirical. In recent years, as part of an ongoing investigation into the decline of academic standards in UK higher education, I have collected evidence of the often intolerable managerial

<sup>20</sup> I find myself unable to agree, therefore, with the glib and unsupported assertion of Professor Paul Ramsden that “poor assessment practices ... are no longer easily tolerated in any higher education institution”: Paul Ramsden, *The Future of Higher Education Teaching and the Student Experience* (2008), para.1.22: [http://www.dius.gov.uk/policy/documents/teaching\\_and\\_student\\_experience\\_131008.pdf](http://www.dius.gov.uk/policy/documents/teaching_and_student_experience_131008.pdf) [accessed 12 November 2008]

<sup>21</sup> I therefore commend to the Select Committee the monograph published in 2004 by Dr Paul Greatrix (University of Warwick) entitled *Dangerous Medicine: Problems with Assuring Quality and Standards in UK Higher Education* (University of Warwick Press).

pressure that has been brought to bear on academic staff to pass students who should fail and to “massage” students into higher exit qualifications. Here are a few examples:

- In 2000 the Vice-Chancellor of the University of York despatched a memorandum to all his university’s external examiners pointing out that the proportion of firsts awarded in economics at York had fallen in comparison with York’s competitor institutions. This was a thinly veiled attempt to “lean” on them to award more firsts.<sup>22</sup>
- In 2007 Paul Buckland, professor of environmental archaeology at Bournemouth University, resigned in protest at the decision of university authorities that some 14 students whom he—and a formal examinations board—had judged to have failed a course should none the less be deemed to have passed it. In so doing, the university authorities appear to have endorsed the view of a senior official that students should have been able to pass the course merely on the basis of lecture notes, without doing the required reading. Earlier this year an Employment Tribunal ruled that Professor Buckland’s resignation amounted to constructive dismissal.<sup>23</sup>
- In July 2008 *The Times* revealed that an “academic standards manager” at Manchester Metropolitan University had written to staff in mathematics and computing encouraging them to award more firsts and upper seconds so that the university might be seen in a more favourable light compared with rival institutions.<sup>24</sup>
- A former senior lecturer in the Business School at [\*\*\*] has described to me, in some detail, how pressure was put on her to pass illiterate students: “When I was asked to mark examination papers of undergraduates, intense pressure was put on me to reverse my marking, that had failed about 75% of one cohort. My argument was simply: if they can’t construct a sentence, how can they construct an argument? The course leader reluctantly agreed with this & said that he was under pressure to recruit “almost anyone who walked through the door”. When I said that the scripts would never get past an external examiner I was told that only an internal 2nd marking process applied & they didn’t go externally.”<sup>25</sup>
- A senior academic at [\*\*\*] University reports as follows: “Last summer [2007] I marked a batch of work which at the time I considered to be the worst batch I’d seen in 20 years. I failed a number, and overall the grades were not good. On two occasions subsequently I have been pressurized to “revisit” the marks, because students complained, and because the marks for the module were “out of line” in comparison with other modules. I was even criticised for not giving “token credit” to failures. I refused to revisit the marks.”<sup>26</sup>
- A former external examiner in law at [\*\*\*] University complains: “At [\*\*\*] University, where until recently I was an External, the Externals are not permitted to alter marks or comment on individual scripts in any way. Their function is to comment merely on adherence to procedures. I complained about this repeatedly, to no avail. It’s a disgraceful misuse of the external examining system.”<sup>27</sup>
- Another senior academic has described what happened when he acted as an external examiner at another institution in June 2008: “In my capacity as an external examiner, I attended an examination board yesterday. I had already made it clear that I did not agree with the marks which had been awarded in one of the modules (a number of scripts had been given first class marks for an answer that was almost totally wrong). These answers would have merited a fail (or at best a third class) grade at my own institution. I had three short meetings with numerous members of staff, but it was made absolutely clear to me that I had no authority to change the marks.”<sup>28</sup>

9. Several themes emerge from this evidence (and I should perhaps add here that I could—alas -have filled this entire submission with examples of a kind similar to those reproduced above). Perhaps the most important is that the much-vaunted External Examiner system has broken down. It was once true that the academic judgment of an External Examiner was final. This is no longer the case, partly as a result of modularisation of degrees (rarely, nowadays, will one External Examiner have responsibility for an entire degree programme), and partly because Externals are now no more than procedural umpires. Additionally, the remuneration of Externals is a joke. The system itself either needs to be abolished (after all, the American HE system—the system that sustains Harvard, Yale, Princeton, etc—manages without Externals) or requires a radical overhaul—perhaps involving the formal accreditation of Externals.

10. But to address the crisis in the External Examiner system would do no more than deal with one aspect of a problem which is, as I said at the outset of this Submission, systemic. Why is this?

<sup>22</sup> This incident was reported in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* at the time.

<sup>23</sup> G. Alderman, “University standards under threat,” *Guardian Unlimited*, 18 August 2008, accessible at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/aug/18/bournemouthuniversity.administration>

<sup>24</sup> *The Times*, 2 July 2008. The truth of this report was confirmed by a Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Manchester Metropolitan University (Professor Kevin Bonnett) in conversation with me on the BBC Radio 4 programme “You and Yours,” 18 November 2008.

<sup>25</sup> [Footnote not reproduced]

<sup>26</sup> [Footnote not reproduced]

<sup>27</sup> [Footnote not reproduced]

<sup>28</sup> [Footnote not reproduced]

11. No university in the UK is actually “accredited” as a degree-granting institution. Universities derive their authority to award degrees either from a Royal Charter or from an Act of Parliament. Such authority is—in practice—granted in perpetuity.<sup>29</sup> This state of affairs is insupportable. In the USA every legitimate university institution is accredited, and no accreditation—not even of the most prestigious institutions—lasts for more than ten years.<sup>30</sup>

12. All the evils that are being complained of occurred on the QAA’s “watch”. And it seems to me that the remit and focus of the QAA call for a radical rethink. The QAA needs to be given stronger powers (including the power to investigate standards at an institution even where its Vice Chancellor does not invite it in), a wider remit (so that it can investigate the all-important interactions that occur between resource allocation, marketing and academic decisions within institutions<sup>31</sup>), and greater independence (so that in reaching its decisions, it does not have to accommodate itself to the Government, the Funding Councils and/or the institutions). It is my belief that the best way of achieving this end is by reconstituting the QAA under the umbrella of a Royal Charter. Given that the sector clearly (but sadly) lacks the will to regulate itself, chartered status for the QAA strikes me as the next best option, which would confer on the Agency the independence it needs to go about its work without fear or favour.

13. With this reform in place, and given the inextricable relationship between resource allocation and management and academic integrity, the government and management audit functions that are currently the responsibility of the funding agencies should be transferred to the reconstituted QAA, whose audit reports would then routinely include judgments on the appropriateness of institutional fiscal management strategies vis-à-vis institutional academic ambitions. A precedent for this already exists in the QAA scrutiny of the governance and management of institutions or organisations applying for degree-awarding powers.

14. In the regime that I envisage, much of the “checklist” paraphernalia currently employed by the QAA (most notably, the mammoth *Code of Practice* and the anodyne Subject Benchmark Statements) could be safely jettisoned. We must dispose of the myth that degree standards are or ever can be comparable in a diverse, mass system. Instead we should concentrate on ensuring that every student reading for a degree at a British university receives a worthwhile award.

15. Accordingly, the QAA should abandon its attempt to enforce standardisation of quality-assurance processes. Large sections of its *Code of Practice* are redundant, and a waste of time. Instead, a reconstituted QAA should require institutions to publish their own processes (where they do not already do so), and, using panels of academic experts, should audit these against the goal of adherence to national norms (in terms of academic standards) *as articulated by these specialists*. This scrutiny must include the processes through which institutions determine the fitness of students to undertake particular courses of study. Institutions found to be derelict in their duty to enforce proper academic standards should (whether in the public or private sectors) be subject to financial penalties and, if necessary, the withdrawal of some or all of their degree-awarding powers.

16. I am aware that the evidence I have collected presents another issue, namely the question why so many university entrants, including many with good A level grades, are quite unprepared for degree level study. This grave matter merits, in my judgment, an urgent independent investigation.

17. I agree wholeheartedly with the view that the present degree classification system must be abandoned as soon as possible in favour of what the Burgess Committee has termed a “Higher Education Achievement Report”, or some other way of recording students’ learning achievements. *But*, to limit the temptations of league-table addicts<sup>32</sup>, such reports must not contain anything approximating to a “grade-point average.” Universities must be strongly discouraged from publishing any aggregated statistics based on these individual reports.

18. A more exacting regime, of the kind I have described above, might possibly cost more than the present quality assurance regime. However, there will be substantial savings from ending degree classification, and from having a more focussed (and much less bureaucratic) academic audit process. In my view this will be a small price to pay for re-establishing faith in the currency of the British degree, and for restoring international confidence in the quality of UK higher education and in the rigour of its academic standards.

December 2008

<sup>29</sup> My understanding—which the Select Committee will wish to confirm—is that degree-awarding powers conferred on “modern” Scottish institutions of higher education can be revoked, but not those conferred on HEIs in the rest of the United Kingdom, save by Act of Parliament or the “calling-in” of a Royal Charter.

<sup>30</sup> It is true that in the USA withdrawal of accreditation need not automatically result in the loss of degree-awarding powers, which are conferred by the individual states of the Union. An American HE institution that loses its accreditation might still award degrees, but none of its students would be able to claim federal funds to support their studies, and in practice the degrees they were awarded would be valueless.

<sup>31</sup> In the USA the periodic accreditation reports of the Regional [higher education] Accrediting Commissions routinely include sections on resource management and allocation, and on staff remuneration.

<sup>32</sup> Such as Professor Rick Trainor, Principal of King’s College London and currently President of Universities UK, who, welcoming the news in 2007 that KCL had risen 22 places (to number 24) in the *Times Higher’s World University Rankings*, responded: “We take The Times Higher league table very seriously and I am extremely proud that King’s is positioned so highly.” [ <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/international/top25uni.html> , accessed 1 November 2008]



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## Memorandum 15

### Submission from the Education Committee, Birkbeck College Students' Union

Birkbeck College Students' Union (BCSU) is an independent body, funded by Birkbeck College, to represent over 19,000 Birkbeck students. We have been representing and campaigning for our members since 1904. Our advice centre is open daily. This submission is from Union Council's Education Committee, which leads on the education and education quality for the Students' Union.

In early 2008 our members voted to incorporate as a charitable company limited by guarantee, and with the support of the Birkbeck College, we adopted a new constitution. The effect has been commendation on our open and transparent democratic structures by various external bodies and internally we have increased participation at all levels within our organisation.

#### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Withdrawal of ELQ has negatively affected university admissions policies and this will take time to settle down.
- The part-time sector must be funded on the same basis as the full-time sector. Part-time institutions require full-time services, buildings, student support and libraries.
- Further education qualifications should be designed to become a stepping stone to Level 4 qualifications. The UK must not slide into a two-track system of mass and elite education through the introduction of entrance tests.
- National "academies" should be introduced to bring together national and international research, and foster regional collaboration. These would replace the current system of (research) funding councils.
- There must be a standard national plagiarism policy; students must be treated equally across disciplines.
- More national support given for student support, learning from Birkbeck's introduction of a dedicated Student Experience Pro-Vice-Master.

#### ADMISSIONS

1. The part-time sector of HEIs (eg Birkbeck College and the Open University) generally operates a system of direct application, without using a body such as UCAS.

2. UCAS in our opinion is centred on the first-time 18–22 year old full-time students, making multiple applications to up to eight HEIs and those HEIs which offer face to face contact are often those whose ambition and vision for the Student Experience is the greatest.

3. Much has been talked about regarding entrance tests, including the announcement from the previous Rector of Imperial College, Sir Richard Sykes that A-levels and equivalents no longer provided enough of a rigorous discrimination between students and that Imperial College was looking to introduce an entrance test.

4. Whilst we acknowledge that the current system of A-levels is seen as no longer providing enough of a rigorous discrimination between students, the introduction of entrance tests may produce significant challenges in delivering equal access to HE for many groups in society, further entrenching low levels of social mobility in the UK.

5. Any changes to admissions procedures must be equality assessed; there is a fear, and rightly, that little proactive initiatives and policies are being employed to equal access for many groups in society: white working class males, black people, women with caring responsibilities. Research suggests that whilst rhetoric has been to provide equal access, including the introduction of the Office of Fair Access, the reality is that it is the hierarchy of institutions at the university level whose decisions ultimately make or break a university's equal access obligations.<sup>33</sup>

6. We welcome the appointment of UCL to manage a secondary academy in Camden. The Government should encourage further collaboration between HEIs and the secondary and further education sector. This will help to match courses with admissions policies (see Para. 4) and the wider needs of a skilled knowledge economy.

7. We counsel the Government to actively increase the numbers of HEIs involved in secondary academies, and steer away from the path of academies being dominated by faith organisations and shareholder private enterprises.

8. For the part-time sector, there needs to be a levelled funding system with the full-time sector. Though the HEFCE funds part-time students as three-fifths of a full-time student, all part-time sector institutions require "full-time" libraries, laboratories, student support, buildings, staff and so on. We welcome DIUS' announcement that part-time funding would be included in the Fees Commission of 2009.

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<sup>33</sup> Peter Scott, "Mass higher education-ten years on," *Perspectives* 9, no. 3 (2005): 68–73.

9. We welcome the Governments introduction of a part-time student grant.

10. We call on the Government to equalise student loan funding between the part-time sector and the full-time sector and to legislate to allow part-time fees to be paid in arrears: often part-time students are changing careers, re-entering the workplace after starting a family or they have been failed once by the full-time system and need “that second chance”.

11. We condemn the effect that the withdrawal of ELQ Funding has had on university admissions policy, which in some instances we have experienced, have included students seeking to take a higher qualification when they are not suitable for admission, or entering a course which is exempted by the Government and seeking at a later stage to covertly switch into the ELQ-affected modules.

12. It is appalling that the Government has mooted that it will be a criminal offence not to disclose a qualification to an HEI in order to protect its flawed ELQ policy. The policy will continue to allow the richest to enter at any level and any course, whilst the poorest and middle income students will be forced to follow the Government’s money.

#### THE BALANCE BETWEEN TEACHING AND RESEARCH

13. Research is a vital component of any quality teaching environment and the Government must act to support research at our HEIs to enable all undergraduate (and below) students to access national and international level research, theories and methods.

14. Where an institution cannot support research, collaboration with other partner HEIs should be made worthwhile. Research staff should be given financial and resource support to take part-time sabbaticals at partner institutions to build their research portfolio.

15. Without inspiring, research-led teaching, we will not have tomorrow’s researchers and leaders.

16. We call on the Government to set out a radical funding plan to raise the proportion of GDP invested in research to above that of Germany.

17. In line with recommendations from the Stern Report, we call on the Government to make sure that new technologies for energy are born and developed in our Universities. In addition, we call on the Government to legislate that they receive tax-incentives to host research centres to boost our global contribution in developing technologies that can significantly reduce our greenhouse gas emissions and raise food production.<sup>34</sup>

18. We would welcome a Government decision to review all of the research funding councils in England in light of our vision as outline in Para.20.

19. Skilled jobs require different elements of research and we call for research and/or research methods to be key aptitudes and skills which all Level 4 awards and above have.

20. We draw inspiration from the Chinese system of “academies” and call on the Government (and this Committee) to consider the rapid introduction of UK-wide academies, which would bring together all of the national and international research under a single corporate body, transcending our universities, whilst keeping our Universities’ unique characteristics, which particularly the Russell Group and the 1994 Group cherish.

21. Academies would in effect replace the current inefficient research funding councils, and prepares us for the next century for research and teaching. Academies may overlap and be regional in nature or simply specific to a field of research (eg Physical Science; Classics; Law)

22. Academies should be designed so as to reduce the concentration of funding for research producing short-term results rather than longer “applied, interdisciplinary and discursive research.”<sup>35</sup>

23. We condemn the HEFCE for withdrawing special funding from the University of London’s Senate House Library, which is a long-standing federal university research and teaching asset prized by many students and staff of the Colleges (and wider) of the University of London. It is the potential atomisation of institutions and specialist collections/services which drives us to call for academies to foster collaboration, which in turn will give us efficiency.

#### DEGREE CLASSIFICATION AND PLAGIARISM

24. The schooling a student receives should reduce significantly the instances of plagiarism—a student should be trained to research, to “read around” and to cite and there is no shame in this and should be viewed as widening one’s knowledge and not “cheating”.

25. With higher education increasing the number of graduates in the UK, we believe that the current degree classification into 1s, 2is, 2iis, 3s, Pass (and fail) could do with a spring clean so that final awards calculations are open and transparent.

<sup>34</sup> Nicholas Stern, *Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change* (HM Treasury, 2006).

<sup>35</sup> William Locke, “Higher Education policy in England: missed opportunities, unintended consequences and unfinished business,” *Journal of Access Policy and Practice* 5 (May 2008): 180–204.

26. The amount of discretion an exam board has can often work in a candidate's favour as well as against. This is particularly concerning when applied to plagiarism, where the treatment of one student on one course will be significantly different to that of another. Similarly making adjustments to marks is open to the same discretion, which all too often lets one or two students down, who on appeal, find that the exam board was in fact acting incorrectly.

27. All Universities must have a plagiarism policy, which instructs those who detect plagiarism how to initiate an investigation and what the appropriate sanctions are. It is unjust for students on different courses to be treated differently. Plagiarism is intellectual theft and should be treated as a serious academic offence.

28. The quality and standards of qualifications must be defended, and to this end dangerous "trendy" widening participation initiatives such as allowing McDonald's to award qualifications (the so-called "Greasy S Es" and "McDegrees") must be stopped. It is breathtaking that the Government's proactive drive to increase and widen participation in higher (and further) education has resulted in unethical private businesses beholden to the shareholder and the bottom line should be welcome in to the education-delivery sector.

29. Academic collaborations should lead on wider participation policy. Whilst partnerships involving some private companies (eg Microsoft) operate on a dual positive feedback mechanism which supports both the private business and academic research/collaboration, there is a clear danger that allowing private companies, such as McDonald's into the classroom or the research centre, will quickly turn our qualifications into a Lego™ stack of the lowest common denominators, without pushing our aspirations and vision higher—both of students and private companies.

#### STUDENT SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

30. It is vital that students' unions operate as independently as possible from the institution to whom they represent their members.

31. Governing Bodies of HEIs should support their students' unions in the vital work they do, which in the case of Birkbeck College Students' Union is to provide daily counselling services and a full-qualified advice centre, course representation through to central university representation, education-related and extra-curricular clubs and societies, social and networking space, study centres etc.

32. Retention of students starts as soon as a student enrolls. Breaks in study and temporary interruption must be sympathetically dealt with, especially in the modern HEI system.

33. Flexible study options need to be put in place, including Weekend classes, and in the case of "evening colleges" classes during the day (eg to link in with childcare arrangements).

34. More resources should be put into supporting student engagement with the university community and environment. All too often, students come to classes and leave just as quickly, not taking advantage of the diverse provisions on campus. Distance learning students, ironically, have more support as their expectations for support are less and the HEI is dedicated to "serve-up" support instead of operating like a self-service canteen. Service learning should be seen as a crucial element of Government policy on engagement (see Para 43 for one proposal).

35. Birkbeck College, in the summer, appointed a senior management team member specifically for the student experience, responsible for all things that student will need from first encounter with the application form to joining the alumni.

36. Financial hardship and harassment/victimisation are the main topics raised with our advice centre, aside from support in dealing with allegations of academic misconduct. The student funding system is utterly complicated, especially for part-time students who are earning some (and often varied amounts of) money.

37. Even before the ELQ cuts came in, access to hardship has been determined on previous qualification status, for instance a student with a BSc will be refused hardship funding in favour of a student who has no qualifications. Whilst the intention of this policy is to help those with no qualifications stay in education, the impact of the policy is to totally discriminate in the most vicious way against those who have been failed before in the education system or those who have self-funded to the point of hardship application as their business or work has collapsed.

38. The hardship funding system, like the ELQ cuts previously<sup>36</sup>, aspires to drive the Widening Participation agenda forward, yet because both HEFCE and the DIUS fail to take responsibility for who is doing the Equality Impact Assessment (as opposed to being responsible for it legally), the result is devastating on students currently in the system as Universities are not *au fait* with funding policy, let alone Students.

39. Whilst we can give guarded welcome to increased grants, we caution the Government about targeting grants without first putting in place an equality policy to ensure that certain groups of students are not unfairly penalised. For instance, the rule that parental dependency for student financial support runs until age 20: which disproportionately negatively impacts on lesbian, gay and trans students who are (or would

<sup>36</sup> Birkbeck College Student Union, "Evidence 167—Written Evidence from Birkbeck College Student Union Council," in *Innovation, Universities and Skills—Third Report: Withdrawal of funding for equivalent or lower level qualifications (ELQs)*, HC 459 (The House of Commons: Innovations, Universities, Science and Skills Committee, 2008).

be) estranged from their parents or guardians. Research and our experience shows that current IAG targeting disadvantaged groups is inadequate eg the low uptake of tax credits shows that people often assume that they are not entitled to support. Furthermore, targeted grants will not support workplace diversity at middle and top layer jobs.

40. With regards to student parents who have a need for childcare, we call on the Government to enable local authorities to transfer childcare vouchers between each other, for instance, to support a parent who lives in an Essex County Council district travelling in with child to a London Borough and the parent having the option of choosing where the childcare can be had from week to week.

41. Students with caring responsibilities and those generally in the Part-time Sector are more likely to need flexible study and the need to interrupt studies. The cost of childcare is prohibitive, but more so is that of availability of local affordable childcare. Other students in the part-time sector, for instance, those who are self-funding, will be required to earn their fees up front and in the current recession, the self-funding self-employed (and those who are covertly career changing, and the “women returners”) are coming under severe pressure financially.

42. No student wants to quit university, however, we must recognise that flexible part-time education is more often a route to enable those failed by the full-time sector re-engage with education.

43. Each student should be assigned from the first day a personal tutor, and perhaps a senior student as a “buddy”. We can learn much from the UK’s medical schools and how their buddy systems work, taking the vast majority of medical students through their six year full-time programmes.<sup>37</sup>

44. The level of information literacy of new students, particularly in the Part-time sector is highly variable. The Government should ensure that FE-taught access courses should be more focused on critical information literacy. ICT in the National Curriculum should be changed to place more of an emphasis on participation and judgement. We believe this would also reduce instances of plagiarism (see Para 24).<sup>38</sup>

45. The taxpayer and the fee payer put a lot into the general pot for higher education. Society and the individual receive many benefits, particularly over time, from their experience of higher education. We forget, though, that there are many students who do struggle and fall on hard times (in a variety of ways, including, personal reasons, financial, housing, failure of dignity in education, harassment, etc) outside of the academic framework.

46. The Government prides itself on evidence-based policymaking and we hope that the Government will give greater support to those organisations and posts, which enhance the student experience and provide dedicated tailored students. To coin a phrase often touted around students’ unions (organisations run by and for their members), is that the members (the Students) are the greatest asset to a students’ union.

47. Members of students’ unions have set real achievements, which today are being reduced due to funding cuts or, in some instances, due to trustees of some students’ unions not listening or engaging with the members. Examples of this are the withdrawal of dedicated research student support; reduction in advice centre contact time and finally the abolition of member-led representation groups. On the positive side, we know that there is a yearning for these students to establish support centres as a “co-operative” within their students’ union and/or university. Examples of these are entrepreneurship centres; skills for study classes and industrial liaison groups. This is all on top of clubs and societies and peer support groups.

48. We have seen little value in the Government’s Minister for Students. We have seen no value in the student juries, particularly as they focus on the 18-22 year old full-time bracket.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

49. Revoke the Withdrawal of ELQ Funding Policy.

50. Bring the part-time sector funding in line with full-time sector funding across all funding channels.

51. Establish a Royal Commission to look into the creation of “national academies” on a discipline-basis and a regional-basis.

52. Actively promote more HEIs to run secondary academies; reduced the proportion of faith organisations and shareholder enterprises running academies.

53. Publish a collaboration policy which explicitly places an ethical value on collaborative partners in higher education to avoid the shameful McDonald’s “Greasy S Es” partnership.

54. Stand down the student juries and enable the Minister for Students, or dissolve the ministry.

55. Increase funding into research to above the GDP% level of Germany.

56. Introduce fiscal and tax incentive measures to promote international research in green/ethical new technologies in higher education.

<sup>37</sup> Christine Guest *et al.*, “Facilitating interprofessional learning for medical and nursing students in clinical practice,” *Learning in Health and Social Care* 1, no. 3 (2002): 132–138, doi:10.1046/j.1473-6861.2002.00019.x.

<sup>38</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*, Occasional Paper, Building the Field of Digital Media and Learning (MacArthur Foundation, 2006).

57. Ring-fence funding for Students' unions and universities (and other providers of student support) to develop their student support and student experience policies and activities.

58. Create a system of transferable childcare support, transcending local authority boundaries.

December 2008

## Memorandum 16

### Submission from the Student Assessment and Classification Working Group (SACWG)

1. Research, much of it conducted by SACWG, has shown the following.
  - Assessment regulations and practices ("practices" is taken to include not only the rules and conventions that complement the published regulations, but also assessment methods) across the higher education sector are quite varied.
  - The profiles of honours degree classifications in different subject areas are varied.
  - The type of assessment task set for students influences the grades that they receive for their work.
  - Assessment criteria are, in practice, fuzzier than is often acknowledged.
2. Further, there is a lack of clarity across the sector as a whole regarding the rationales for assessment regulations and practices. Yorke *et al* (2002, p.278) observed:  
*The higher education sector does not know enough about what its grading methodologies and award algorithms are actually valuing and how they operate to produce the results that they do.*
3. All of these points weaken the role of the honours degree classification as an index of a student's overall achievement.
4. It is inappropriate to impose a standardised approach to assessment on autonomous institutions which offer diverse programmes to diverse cohorts of students. Nevertheless, developmental work aimed at clarifying and evaluating assessment regulations and practices ought to enable the sector to advance them on a more collective basis than has hitherto been the case.

#### WHAT IS SACWG?

5. The Student Assessment and Classification Working Group [SACWG] is a small and informal body of academics and administrators who share an interest in assessment. Its membership has evolved over time, and the organisational hub of the Group is Oxford Brookes University, where Dr Chris Rust acts as convener of the Group. The membership of SACWG is annexed to this submission.

6. SACWG was formed in 1994 and took as its main purpose the investigation of issues that had hitherto been largely ignored: honours degree classifications (with particular reference to the modular schemes that had relatively recently been adopted in the erstwhile polytechnics); the implications for grading of different kinds of assessment demand; assessment regulations and related matters. It has also undertaken occasional commissions of research. The Group has, since its inception, run seminars and workshops on relevant topics, and has published a number of academic papers. It was commissioned to report to the Burgess Group (which was considering the future of the honours degree classification) on issues relating to degree classifications, other national approaches to final awards, and assessment regulations. SACWG is currently investigating the assessment of work-based learning in foundation degrees.

#### SOME ASPECTS OF SACWG'S RESEARCH

7. Quite small variations in the way in which degree classifications are determined (the "award algorithm") can have more effect on the classification of some students than is probably generally realised. Running a set of results through other institutional award algorithms produces different profiles of classifications (Woolf and Turner, 1997).

8. A number of institutions permit a small proportion of module results to be dropped from the determination of the class of the honours degree (provided all the relevant credits are gained). Dropping the "worst" 30 credit points from the normal 240 of the final two years of full-time study might raise one classification in six, and (separately) changing the ratio of weightings of results from the penultimate year to the final year from 1:1 to 1:3 might change one classification in ten, the majority of changes being upwards (Yorke *et al*, 2004).

9. Marks for coursework assignments tend to be higher than those for formal examinations, though some instances were found where the reverse was the case (Bridges *et al*, 2002). Simonite's (2003) work points in a similar direction.

10. The distribution of marks (usually in the form of percentages) varies between subject disciplines in terms of both mean mark and spread (Yorke *et al*, 1996; Yorke *et al*, 2002). Subjects in which student performances are more likely to be adjudged right or wrong (as is the case with science-based studies) tend to have wider, flatter distributions of marks than do subjects in which discursiveness predominates. Some

subjects tend to have high mean marks (eg subjects allied to Medicine) whereas others tend to have low means (eg Law). The honours degree award data published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA] clearly show these effects (see Yorke, 2008, p.118). One cannot therefore with confidence interpret classifications without an appreciation of the norms pertaining to the particular subject(s) involved.

11. A minority of institutions use a grade-point system instead of percentages. Whereas this appears to mitigate the disparity in mark profiles at the level of the module, the mitigation appears not to extend to the level of the honours degree classification (Yorke *et al*, 2002).

12. The “subject benchmark statements” produced under the auspices of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education [QAA] were intended to act as reference-points for curricula, and thereby give employers (particularly) a common frame of reference when considering graduate applications. In practice, the emphasis given to different kinds of learning outcomes varies between these statements (Yorke, 2002). SACWG showed that, despite the existence of the subject benchmark statement for history, learning outcomes and assessment criteria in the subject were suffused with fuzziness and that, as a consequence, assessment was dependent upon the exercise of a considerable degree of professional judgement (SACWG, 2005; Woolf, 2004).

13. A study of assessment regulations across 35 varied institutions in the UK showed that there were considerable variations between them (Yorke *et al*, 2008). Amongst the variations were the following:

- The weightings in the award algorithm ranging between 1:1 and 1:4 for penultimate:final year
- The treatment of “borderline” performances as regards classification
- The adoption (or not) of “compensation” (ie allowing weakness in one aspect to be offset against strength in another) and “condonement” (ie not requiring a relatively minor failure to be redeemed).
- The “capping” of marks for re-taken assessments (at the level of a bare pass).

#### THE VIEW FROM THE QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION [QAA]

14. In its *Quality Matters* series the QAA (2007) published a Briefing Note on the classification of degree awards, based on its experience of institutional audits. The following observation chimes with the evidence from research:

*The class of an honours degree awarded to a graduating student by an institution does not only reflect the academic achievements of that student. It also reflects the marking practices inherent in the subject or subjects studied, and the rule or rules authorised by that institution for determining the classification of an honours degree. This is based on the marks obtained in the components of the study programme followed by the student. The implications of the role these different factors play in determining the class of an honours degree are that it cannot be assumed students graduating with the same classified degree from different institutions having studied different subjects, will have achieved similar academic standards; it cannot be assumed students graduating with the same classified degree from a particular institution, having studied different subjects, will have achieved similar academic standards; and it cannot be assumed that students graduating with the same classified degree from different institutions, having studied the same subject, will have achieved similar academic standards.—QAA (2007, para 2)*

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#### RECOMMENDATION

The evidence from SACWG’s research and elsewhere indicates that there is considerable variation across the higher education sector in assessment practices. Whilst this can be seen as a consequence of institutional autonomy, the rationales for the various institutional choices that have been made are unclear. During the Burgess Group’s deliberations, suggestions were made that the sector would benefit from development work which would explore and evaluate the rationales for assessment regulations, with a view to providing a basis from which the sector could—more collectively than hitherto—advance its assessment practices.

*SACWG recommends the commissioning, at an early date and probably through the Higher Education Academy, of a study of the rationales for assessment regulations in higher education institutions, and of their associated rules and conventions. This is seen as an essential precursor to the advancement of assessment practices across the sector.*

January 2009

Annex

#### SACWG MEMBERSHIP

Graham Curtis, Dean of Modular Programmes, University of East London.

Chris Haines, Institute for Work Based Learning, Middlesex University.

Marian Redding, Head of Modular Programmes, Anglia Ruskin University.

Chris Rust, Head, Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development, Oxford Brookes University.

Marie Stowell, Director of Quality and Educational Development, University of Worcester.

Graham Taylor-Russell, Deputy Academic Registrar, Academic Planning and Information, London Metropolitan University.

Wayne Turnbull, Head of Academic Planning & Information, Liverpool John Moores University.

Lawrie Walker, Director of Quality & Standards, Thames Valley University.

Harvey Woolf, Associate, Institute for Learning Enhancement, University of Wolverhampton.

Mantz Yorke, Visiting Professor, Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University.

#### Memorandum 17

##### Submission from Charles Bland Tomkinson & Charles Edward Engel

STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES  
TEACHING AND THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

*“From Strategy to Tactics”*

#### SUMMARY

1. The place of higher education in the world has changed over the centuries, often by incremental progression, but it is right to conduct a fundamental review from time to time of exactly what higher education is for. There is a temptation to regard universities solely as producers of a skilled workforce, but that is to reduce them to mere technical colleges. In today’s complex and challenging climate universities need to do more than that: they need to produce graduates capable of taking their place as leaders in confronting the “wicked” problems that the world throws at us.

1.1. Gro Brundtland (1987) identified a number of such issues, including:

1.1.1. The burden of debt in the developing world, inequitable commercial regulations and a growing number of the world’s population living at or below subsistence level;

1.1.2. Overuse of non renewable resources, growing competition for limited water supplies and threatened armed conflict over access to water;

1.1.3. Reduction of biodiversity and continuing desertification;

1.1.4. Pollution of air, water and soil with detrimental influences on the global environment and climate change;

1.1.5. Continuing growth of the world's population, coupled with additional economic pressure caused by increased life expectancy;

1.1.6. Increasing nationalistic, political and religious extremism, terrorism, armed conflict, mass migration and social disruption.

1.1.7. Politicians and commercial organisations have hitherto demonstrated a short-term, constrained view of such complex issues, and it may fall to our graduates to “carry the torch” for their amelioration and resolution.

1.2. A sustainable approach to higher education demands that we look not solely at the economic needs of society but also the complex environmental, political, social and technical needs and the way in which these interact both nationally and internationally.

2. Important World Leadership would call for the acceptance of *The Ultimate Challenge* (Engel, 2000 a).

2.1. Inter-professional and inter-sectoral collaboration will be an essential requisite for national and international, long term research, mitigation and progressive resolution of the world's complex problems.

2.2. UK universities could lead the world in embedding the development of abilities and skills for *adapting to change* and for *participating in the management of change*, not only within the respective professions but also *on behalf of society at large*.

2.3. The growing exploration of courses in sustainable development is an encouraging, though limited example (Tomkinson, 2007).

2.4. The progressive development of abilities and skills for inter-professional and inter-sectoral collaboration would need to include the development of mutual understanding of discipline/profession—specific language and ways of thinking. To these would need to be added creative appreciation of cultural, religious, political and language differences. These have been explored in some detail in the Report of the European Inter-professional Consultation (Engel, 2001).

3. Undergraduate education should thus be planned and implemented to facilitate a *maturation process*.

3.1. A maturation process assists the individual student to develop from a late adolescent layman to that of an adult graduate who is ready to progress within the chosen profession or occupation, where *application* of what has been learned is called for.

3.2. In order for the graduate to be able to *apply both knowledge and skills in an innovative and competitive economy*, the maturation process should be embedded in a *coherent educational system* where the components of the system support each other.

3.3. These components will range from the overarching aims of the curriculum to recruiting and selection of the students and their teachers, induction and support, to implementation, monitoring and evaluation—all based on the imperative of fostering *active, contextual, integrated, cumulative, collaborative and reflective, lifelong learning*.

3.4 An application of *matrix management* will enable academics from different disciplines to benefit from collaboration with each other in the planning and delivery of an integrated, cumulative, active learning curriculum. (Clarke, 1984)

#### INTRODUCTION OF AUTHORS

Charles Bland Tomkinson, BSc, BA, MEd  
 University Adviser on Pedagogic Development, University of Manchester  
 Fellow, Higher Education Academy  
 Fellow, Association of University Administrators  
 Treasurer, Heads of Education Development Group  
 Member, Professional and Organisational Development Network (US)  
 Member, Higher Education Research and Development Society (Australia)  
 Member, International Society for Scholarship of Teaching and Learning  
 Author of books and papers on leading educational change.

Charles Edward Engel, SBStJ, MD(Hon), DEd(Hon)  
 Visiting Academic, Centre for Higher Education Studies, Institute of Education, London  
 Royal Academy of Engineering Visiting Professor, University of Manchester  
 Foundation Head, Division of Medical Education and Programme Evaluation, University of Newcastle, Australia  
 Foundation Director, BLA Trust for Health Education, British Medical Association  
 Member, World Health Organisation Expert Advisory Panel of Human Resources for Health Development  
 Foundation Editor: *Annals of Community Oriented Education*; and *Education for Health, Change in Learning and Practice*.



## THE MATURATION PROCESS

4.1 The Summary has outlined the need for a creative renaissance of the educational experience, so that our students can be suitably prepared to meet the complex challenges of the 21st Century.

4.2 The maturation process is designed to facilitate a seamless development of graduates who are able to *adapt to continuous change* (Weatherall, 1995) and to *participate in the management of change through inter-professional and inter-sectoral collaboration*. (Engel, 2001)

4.3 The success of the design, implementation and evaluation of the maturation process will depend on how well it can be embedded in a *coherent educational system* in which the components relate to, and support each other.

## A COHERENT EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

5.1. The components of the system are outlined below in the form of questions. These are designed to be explored by those responsible for the organisation and management of the design, implementation and evaluation of a well integrated curriculum.

5.2. Besides profession/discipline-specific competences, which generic abilities and skills should the intended approach to learning (eg problem-based learning) aim to have developed by the conclusion of the curriculum?

The answers to this question would provide the over arching criteria to be satisfied by decisions to subsequent questions.

5.3. What should the desired approach to learning enable the students to experience and practise, in order to foster the development of the generic abilities and skills (5.2)?

5.4. How could the design and the content of the curriculum enable the aims (5.2) and the related opportunities for learning (5.3) to be achieved?

5.5. How could the desired approach to learning be implemented within the criteria inherent in (5.3) and (5.4) within the university and in the work place?

5.6. How could the assessment of the students' progress and achievement support the students' learning and contribute to the evaluation of the curriculum's acceptability, effectiveness and sustainability?

5.7. How would students be recruited and selected for this curriculum? The criteria would explore not only "efficiency" (prospective successful completion in minimum time and without drop outs) but also "effectiveness" (indication of prospective quality of graduates' contribution in their subsequent careers)?

5.8. How may students be inducted and supported in this curriculum?

5.9. How may academic teachers be recruited, selected for different tasks within the curriculum, inducted and supported in this vertically and horizontally integrated, cumulative and active learning curriculum?

5.10. What will be involved in the design, conduct and organisation of *monitoring* the implementation and the *evaluation* of the outcomes of this curriculum?

5.11. How will the planning and the implementation of this coherent educational system be *organised and managed*? *Matrix management* (Clarke, 1984), rather than departmental management may need to be adopted to enable students to benefit from a vertically and horizontally integrated, cumulative, contextual, active learning experience.

5.12. Last but not least, what would be the requisites for successful initiation and subsequent maintenance of the change from a traditional to an innovative curriculum?

Detailed discussion and illustrative examples with appropriate references to the literature may be found in *A Whole System Approach to Problem-Based Learning in Dental, Medical and Veterinary Sciences—A Guide to Important Variables*—(Engel, 2007). Available from: [http://www.manchester.ac.uk/ceeb/resources/resourcepacks/pblsystemapproach\\_v1.pdf](http://www.manchester.ac.uk/ceeb/resources/resourcepacks/pblsystemapproach_v1.pdf)

## A. RECOMMENDATION

6.1. It is suggested that this evidence based, holistic approach to the planning, implementation and evaluation of undergraduate curricula be explored nationally as a promising step towards a 21st Century renaissance of the student experience.

6.2. Related experience over thirty years include:

6.2.1. Development of the medical curriculum at the University of Newcastle NSW, Australia (Henry, Byrne and Engel, eds, 1997).

6.2.2. A Royal Academy of Engineering sponsored undergraduate study unit for the development of inter-disciplinary abilities and skills in the management of sustainable development (Tomkinson, ed. 2007)

6.2.3. Development of a World Health Organization sponsored inter-ministerial course for inter-sectoral collaboration in decision making: Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Ghana, Latin America, India (Engel ed. 2000 b)

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## Memorandum 18

Submission from Professor Bernard Longden<sup>39</sup> and Professor Mantz Yorke<sup>40</sup> Lancaster University

## MEMORANDUM

1. In the academic year 2006–07, the numbers of students on taught programmes in higher education in the UK were as follows:

	<i>Postgraduate</i>	<i>Bachelor's degree</i>	<i>Other undergraduate</i>
Full-time	179755	1086075	122555
Part-time	260655	201150	393600

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency “heidi” website.

2. The experience of part-time students has been little researched. There were a couple of studies reported in the 1990s (Bourner *et al.*, 1991; Schuller *et al.*, 1999). More recently, Yorke (2005) reported findings from a survey of students who had embarked on the (then) new foundation degree programmes in England, and Callender *et al.* (2006) conducted a survey for Universities UK, which concentrated on funding issues and left other aspects of “the student experience” to be addressed via the National Student Survey.

3. The National Student Survey provides some limited data, from those about to graduate, about “the part-time student experience”. Until the 2008 administration of the NSS (for which detailed outcome data are not yet available), the instrument was limited to 22 closed-response items plus the possibility of replying in free-text form. Hitherto, students have given consistently high ratings across the six scales of that instrument, together with the “overall satisfaction” item. The problem is that the data are at a relatively high level of generality, which can provide only a very “broad brush” depiction of their collective experience.

4. The shortage of detail about part-time students’ experience prompted the authors of this submission to conduct a more detailed survey. Eleven post-1992 universities contributed to a survey of their part-time students who were following taught courses of various kinds. The post-1992 universities were approached because of their generally high level of commitment to part-time provision, and because it was in these institutions that there existed substantial numbers of students following programmes at the level of the bachelor’s degree and below.

<sup>39</sup> Liverpool Hope University.

<sup>40</sup> Lancaster University.

5. The survey received 2871 valid responses, of which roughly 40% related to postgraduate programmes, 40% to programmes at bachelor's level, and 15% to programmes below bachelor's level.

6. The strongly predominant reason given for opting for part-time study over full-time study was that it allowed study to be undertaken alongside other commitments. The flexibility that part-time study allowed, and its relative affordability, were by some distance the second and third most acknowledged reasons. The most frequently-stated reason given for studying was the students' desire to improve their capability in their current job. The possibility of gaining promotion and preparation for a career switch were significant for smaller proportions of respondents. Around one in five respondents gave personal satisfaction as a rationale: this was most marked in those studying at bachelor's level.

7. Around two thirds of respondents overall said that they had made the choice of programme. Relatively infrequently was the decision solely the choice of an employer: when employers were involved, the decision was more likely to involve both employer and potential student. Where employment-related study was the focus, tuition fees were met by more than two thirds of students' employers: however, the level of employer support for ancillary expenses was considerably lower. A more detailed analysis showed some variation between subject discipline areas as regards the balance between self-funding and employer sponsorship.

8. Students' responses to 28 items relating to "the student experience" were generally positive. The items coalesced into five scales with reasonable technical quality. The highest scale scores were found in the areas of programme quality, the engagement with others on the programme, and institutional services (especially library and computing provision). However, feedback was—as has been noted in the National Student Survey—less positively rated. There was a strong tendency to recommend the programme to a friend. Coping with demands elicited less positive responses, as did the ability to attend all of the taught sessions (probably because of the various other calls on students' time). The ratings suggested that worry about funding studies in higher education was a matter of fairly widespread concern to students.

9. Free-response comments indicated that there were two main aspects to concerns about programme organisation. First, a high proportion of respondents comprised part-time students who were nevertheless "infilling" on full-time programmes. The main complaint was that insufficient attention was given to their part-time status in the way in which the programme was implemented. Second, administrative and other institutional services were not available at the times when the part-time students attended.

10. The most important issue raised by this study (which has a number of practical ramifications) is whether institutions make provision appropriate to the needs of part-time students, and avoid making the uncritical assumption that part-time students can simply be accommodated on programmes designed for their full-time counterparts.

11. As King (2008) observed, part-time higher education lacks institutional performance measures comparable to those employed in respect of full-time study. Although outwith the remit of the survey whose outcomes are broadly reported here, the absence of such measures (difficult as they will be to construct for such a broad student body), does not help institutions to focus on their part-time students' experiences.

12. The contemporary policy interest emphasises the development of ways in which higher education engages with society. Part-time study is likely to be of increasing importance. The present study, constrained as it was by lack of funding, acts as a significant pilot for further—and more detailed—investigation of "the part-time student experience".

13. The full report can be obtained from the Higher Education Academy's website via <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/research/surveys>. It will be made available on 9 December 2008. An analysis of two aspects of the part-time experience has been presented as a paper at the SRHE Conference (Longden & Yorke 2008).

#### RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that funding be made available for a detailed study of students' experiences in part-time higher education. The priority should be on undergraduate provision in various forms.

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December 2008

## Memorandum 19

### Submission from the Wellcome Trust

#### IUSS SELECT COMMITTEE: STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

1. The Wellcome Trust is the largest charity in the UK. It funds innovative biomedical research, in the UK and internationally, spending over £600 million each year to support the brightest scientists with the best ideas. The Wellcome Trust supports public debate about biomedical research and its impact on health and wellbeing.

2. The majority of the Trust's funding in the UK is provided to universities, through response-mode project and programme grants and career fellowship awards. We therefore welcome this inquiry into "students and universities". Our response focuses on the balance between teaching and research, which is of most relevance to the Trust. We make four main points:

- the need to achieve a balance between teaching and research within universities;
- the importance of postgraduate research student training, where teaching and research activities combine;
- the need to ensure financial stability, both for teaching and research; and
- the role of research assessment activities in driving the quality of the research and university environment.

3. *Achieving a balance between teaching and research:* We argue that both teaching and research must be recognised and valued within universities and the wider higher education sector. The two activities should be seen to complement and reinforce each other. In particular, leading scientists often encourage and inspire the next generation of researchers, acting as valuable role models for students.

4. However, teaching and research may be seen to pose conflicting demands on an individual's time. The right balance will vary, and reflect a number of factors, including the nature of research, aptitude and enjoyment in teaching, and other commitments and responsibilities within the institution. Departments and institutions need to be flexible in order to accommodate these variations, and allow researchers to fulfil both their teaching and research potential.

5. We hope that individuals holding Trust Fellowship awards are able to contribute to universities by being good educators as well as good researchers. While we anticipate that those researchers whose excellence has been recognised by the receipt of a prestigious fellowship should be allowed to focus on their research throughout the award, we also recognise that the training of future researchers is integral to the role of a research leader.

6. *The importance of postgraduate research training:* teaching and research activities combine together particularly effectively in postgraduate research student training. Here, successful training will depend on carefully designed courses, strong scientific supervisors and supportive mentorship, combined with high quality research environments.

7. An example of an innovative approach to training provision is the Wellcome Trust Four-Year PhD Programme, established in 1994 with the intention of improving the quality of PhD training for basic scientists in the UK. There are now 27 Trust-funded programmes for basic scientists, and the four-year structure has since been adopted by other funders in the UK as a model for PhD research training.

8. The programmes each have a similar format, integrating teaching and research. The first year of study is used to: provide extra taught courses; develop transferable skills; increase students' technical abilities; give students experience working in different laboratories through rotations; and broaden understanding of specific areas of science. This study equips students to make more informed PhD project and supervisor selections, and to contribute to the development of the research question, and the planning and design of the project. The provision of realistic costs to support the projects carried out by PhD students has also been central to the Trust's support of research training.

9. *Building on financial stability:* Ensuring financial sustainability of teaching and learning facilities must form the foundation for maintaining and improving quality. The Trust has welcomed the introduction of Full Economic Costing (fEC) for research activities as a first step in a move towards sustainability. In particular, fECs has given universities a better understanding of the true costs of research. It is now important to begin to develop a similar understanding for teaching, particularly for laboratory-based disciplines.

10. Moving to sustainability will depend on effective partnerships—between universities, the Government, Research Councils and other funders, including charities and industry. In July 2008 the Trust announced four new Interdisciplinary Training Programmes for Clinicians in Translational Medicine and

Therapeutics—an example of a successful partnership with academia and industry. The industrial partners, including GlaxoSmithKline and Wyeth, agreed to match £11 million of Wellcome Trust funding. In return, the recipient academic institutions—Imperial College London, the University of Cambridge, Newcastle University and a consortia of Scottish universities—will use the funds to foster a new generation of clinicians trained in research and translational medicine.

11. *The role of research assessment activities:* We have previously expressed concern that the Research Assessment Exercise, in its drive to improve the volume of excellent research, has been seen to devalue teaching. It will be important to ensure that the Research Excellence Framework (REF) avoids such perverse incentives.

12. We would also encourage the Government and Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to consider how to promote the quality of the wider research and university environment. Factors such as strength in teaching, support for research career development, dissemination and public engagement activities, and investment in infrastructure, are also important to the broader university mission.

13. We remain concerned that these factors may not be adequately captured by the proposed REF, or indeed by a metrics exercise, although we recognise the difficulties of measuring these factors without significantly increasing the reporting burden. HEFCE may need to consider providing additional incentives to encourage excellence in teaching and training. It would be important to ensure that such incentives genuinely drove quality rather than simply acting as a “tickbox” approach.

December 2008

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## Memorandum 20

### Submission from the Institute of Physics

#### STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

##### *Summary of key points*

##### *Admissions:*

- A major issue for admissions to STEM subjects is that there is now strong evidence that A-levels and equivalent qualifications show enormous variation in relative difficulty. It is necessary for the government to accept that these differences exist and develop mechanisms by which students who take harder A-levels, such as physics, receive appropriate recognition in the admissions process.
- The diplomas represent a significant challenge to university admissions tutors. The problem is most acute in physics, which traditionally requires two specific A-levels for entrance: physics and mathematics. The Advanced Science Diploma’s principal learning will be required to cover all the sciences, ie material equivalent to a little less than the AS content of current A-levels. It is difficult to see how it will be seen as a sensible route into pure science at university.

##### *The balance between teaching and research:*

- Financial studies have shown that teaching in physics and chemistry has been underfunded by around 20% over a long period of time. HEFCE provided short-term, extra funding at this level for some vulnerable subjects, including physics and chemistry. However, the extra funding is not permanent and its eventual withdrawal would be a retrograde step that could lead to further closures of physics departments.
- There is a tension between teaching and research that has been compounded by the advent of fEC, which has introduced the possibility of researchers claiming part of their salary on research contracts, and potentially using this as a means to buy themselves out of teaching.

##### *Degree classification:*

- There appears to be no coherent reason for the current system of degree classification. In particular, the distinction between an upper and lower second, which occurs near the peak in the distribution of marks and which can be important for future careers, is arbitrary and unfair.
- Europeans do not consider our Masters’ programmes to be at a comparable level to their own. In the continued absence of any sort of UK leadership on the Bologna Process, there will be no analysis of the potential issues. By the time the problems of employability and, possibly, the reduced attractiveness of our programmes to international students are realised, it will be too late.

*Student support and engagement:*

- Non-completion of university programmes is a complex area. If universities are being encouraged, by the widening participation agenda, to sweep their net wider to allow more access, it is likely that they will be taking more risks. They should not subsequently be penalised if their completion rate falls.
- It appears that the introduction of top-up fees has not inhibited students from entering university, although the long-term effect of the debts on postgraduate recruitment has yet to be revealed. It could be sensible, for example, for physics graduates who enter teaching to have their debt repayments made on their behalf so long as they remained in the profession.

## ADMISSIONS

1. The process for admission to universities can vary enormously, not only between universities but also within a given university between different subjects. For example, it is common for, say, a Russell Group university to be selecting heavily in English while struggling to fill its quota in engineering. It follows that the processes for admission will be quite different in these different areas.

2. A major issue for admissions to STEM subjects is that there is now strong evidence that A-levels and equivalent qualifications show enormous variation in relative difficulty. A report commissioned by the SCORE partnership<sup>41</sup> and undertaken by the CEM Centre at the University of Durham demonstrated that the sciences and mathematics are amongst the most difficult of all<sup>42</sup>. Currently, the government, in public at least, insists that all A-levels are of equal difficulty. The majority of university subjects do not require specific A-levels for entry but instead rely on the UCAS points tariff. However, this tariff implicitly assumes equal difficulty of all assessments; it follows that students who are unsure are likely to be drawn to the A-levels where it is easier to achieve higher grades. Given that school, A-level league tables do not distinguish between subjects either, there are clearly strong forces militating against the take up of science and mathematics A-levels. It is necessary first for the government to accept that these differences exist and second, to develop some mechanism by which students who take the harder A-levels have some sort of recognition of the fact in the admissions process; by doing so, this will demonstrate the government's commitment to increase numbers studying STEM subjects.

3. The diplomas represent a significant challenge to university admissions tutors, particularly the phase 4 science diplomas, which have not yet emerged as having a clear purpose and constituency. The problem is most acute in physics, which traditionally requires two specific A-levels for entrance: physics and mathematics. The Advanced Science Diploma's principal learning will be required to cover all the sciences, which means that, at best, it will cover material equivalent to a little less than the AS content of current A-levels. Therefore, students wishing to follow physics programmes would need both to top up their physics with a stand-alone A2 course, and a full A-level in mathematics, both to be taken in parallel with the Science Diploma. In addition, the workplace emphasis of the principal learning would lead to some problems in teaching basic science. Given the very tight timescale for the Science Diploma and the insistence that it has the same structure as the vocational diplomas, it is very hard to see how it will be seen as a sensible route into pure science at university.

4. In principle, aptitude tests could be a sensible means of distinguishing between students who are talented and those that are merely well-prepared, which could be an effective tool for widening participation (WP). However, the main motivation appears to come from the most popular universities, who would want to use the tests to distinguish between the large numbers of candidates with top grades at A-level.

5. The government sets targets for HE participation regardless of the strategic needs of the country. As a consequence, university finances have been driven by the choices of often ill-informed students who have not acquired a coherent set of post-16 qualifications. The outcome has been massive student growth in certain areas, for example drama and media studies, while, as a proportion of all students, science and engineering have fallen. The notion of a "HE market", in which students make decisions based on employment opportunity, is deeply flawed. There is almost no means for any students to obtain neutral and reliable data about career and salary expectations in different subject areas and there is an urgent need for such data. Given that the Student Loan Company carries salary information for all graduates for many years, it should be possible for such data to be generated quickly and reliably for the first few years of employment.

6. It is unfair to put the burden of WP on universities and such pressures, coupled with penalties for high drop-out rates, are almost inevitably going to lead to the lowering of standards. We note also, however, that many universities impose conditions on their departments only to take people with good A-levels.

7. It is difficult to see how a fair access and admissions system can operate with the present arrangements whereby universities make offers before A-level results are known. Currently, university departments tend to make offers above the true level they are prepared to accept because they cannot afford to have students registering insurance offers. Consequently, prospective students are faced with a barrage of high offers,

<sup>41</sup> [www.sciencecouncil.org/documents/SCOREStatementMarch2007.pdf](http://www.sciencecouncil.org/documents/SCOREStatementMarch2007.pdf)

<sup>42</sup> [www.iop.org/Media/Press\\_Releases/press\\_30373.html](http://www.iop.org/Media/Press_Releases/press_30373.html)

which may well deter those nervous of their ability. The system also makes the predicted grades of teachers more important than they should be and, in the more popular courses, can place an undue emphasis on interviews, which may work against those students from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

8. A truly fair admissions system would select on the basis of ability to complete the course and not only on how well one has performed in public examinations. However, there is a particular problem in some subjects, including sciences and languages, where prior knowledge is essential. Here ability alone is not enough, some knowledge is required, and this is a substantial barrier to WP.

#### THE BALANCE BETWEEN TEACHING AND RESEARCH

9. Detailed financial studies undertaken by the Institute and the Royal Society of Chemistry have shown that teaching in physics and chemistry has been underfunded by around 20% over a long period of time<sup>43</sup>. Following a spate of departmental closures, HEFCE provided short-term, extra funding at this level for some vulnerable subjects, including physics and chemistry. As a result, departments are now breaking even, many of them for the first time in decades, and it is clear that the current level of funding is a better match to the real cost of teaching these subjects. However, the extra funding is not permanent and, although HEFCE has indicated that it will continue for the next few years, its withdrawal would be a retrograde step that could lead to further closures of physics departments.

10. The tension between teaching and research is apparent to anyone with experience of HE. The majority of, although by no means all, academics consider research to be more important to them and their careers than teaching. The plethora of various research fellowships (such as those offered by the Royal Society, among others, which have been of great benefit to the UK in helping to retain its leading researchers) and the paucity of teaching fellowships is testament to that situation. A recent addition to the tension, as a consequence of the introduction of fEC, has been the possibility of researchers claiming part of their salary on research contracts, and potentially using this as a means to buy themselves out of teaching. The advent of fEC, therefore, is likely to lead to the most prolific researchers spending less of their time teaching. While this might arguably improve research outputs, it is probably better to leave the balance between teaching and research to be decided by the internal management structures within the universities rather than have it distorted by the unpredictability of research funding.

11. The Institute accredits all UK physics degrees<sup>44</sup>. Our experience in physics is that there is considerable integration of teaching and research and that academics are always keen to introduce leading edge science into their teaching, which is important as that provides the stimulus, potential excitement and enthusiasm for undergraduates. Indeed this process has led to problems, in that curricula are becoming overburdened with material as more comes in, but little is squeezed out.

12. In physics and in science in general, there are some excellent examples of teaching innovation, such as the Physics Innovations CETL<sup>45</sup>, which is a joint project between the Open University (leading on electronic enhancements to learning) and the University of Leicester (leading on problem-based learning). However, there is a need for more of these projects across the UK. A major issue here has been the RAE, which has tended to focus activity in research and many staff who have had teaching interests have been made to feel second-class. Although some universities have now introduced teaching routes to chairs, the lack of an adequate funding stream and the culture of universities do not allow research and teaching to be seen on an equal footing. The Institute would like to see every department, certainly every physics department, to have at least one member of staff specialising in teaching innovation, which is common practice in American state universities. Perhaps, a more practical solution would be to encourage a community of such academics which can cater for a range of universities. Having someone active in pedagogy research available to a physics department would ensure contact with people active in frontline physics research. However, a way to pay for these academics will need to be determined.

13. The Institute's degree accreditation process requires visits to all physics departments and to some extent provides a guarantee of a high-quality minimum provision in the subject, although there is still considerable variation. Where external accreditation is not available, it is difficult to see how any minimum standard is maintained at the subject level.

14. The issue of determining excellence in research is one that has been the subject of numerous recent consultations as HEFCE attempts to find a fair and acceptable replacement for the RAE. We do not wish to add to that debate now. However, it is clear that there is no comparable measure of teaching excellence. The overly bureaucratic system of QAA subject visits did make a considerable difference to the support and administrative coherence of university teaching, although its effect on the actual teaching itself is arguable. But the subject visits were so disruptive and time consuming that no one should countenance their return.

15. Many universities take the issue of staff development seriously, within which the development of excellent teaching skills is a key factor that is resourced through the provision of time for training and the opportunity for mentored practice.

<sup>43</sup> [www.iop.org/activity/policy/Publications/file\\_21216.pdf](http://www.iop.org/activity/policy/Publications/file_21216.pdf)

<sup>44</sup> [www.iop.org/activity/policy/Degree\\_Accreditation/index.html](http://www.iop.org/activity/policy/Degree_Accreditation/index.html)

<sup>45</sup> [www.open.ac.uk/picetl](http://www.open.ac.uk/picetl)

16. The role of teaching fellows in universities is a very grey area. Often, in science subjects, the teaching fellow has funding because a senior member of staff has found a way to buy time out of teaching. However, there is almost no career route for such people as essentially all appointments to permanent academic positions in science are on the basis of research ability, although candidates may be expected to have had some experience in teaching. For the most part, any young scientist who specialises in teaching too early in their career is placing a significant barrier in the path of their subsequent progression.

#### DEGREE CLASSIFICATION

17. The QAA is essentially concerned with the quality and consistency of process and plays essentially no role in maintaining standards or in the comparability of standards between different universities. In addition, within a given university, although there is again considerable standardisation of process, there have been no attempts to have a common standard for degree classification. In fact, where some universities have tried to do so, usually introducing a one-size-fits-all approach to the treatment of marks, it has led to unfairness and obvious inconsistency of treatment. This is a very complex area where it is difficult to see how any realistic progress can be made and whether such attempts would be worthwhile. Different universities have different missions and these are generally recognised.

18. There is an issue with respect to differences in standards of degree classifications in such areas as teaching and eligibility for funding for further study, where it can be important to have achieved a first or upper second class degree. It may be that a more sophisticated mechanism of discrimination is required in these areas.

19. The system of external examiners leaves room for improvement. When the system works well, the external examiner is a critical friend, who can help improve courses enormously. However, the current system is open to abuse and would perhaps benefit from closer adherence to the QAA's code of practice on external examining.<sup>46</sup> It may be that external examiners should be organised in a different manner to ensure genuine independence and to promote greater consistency within a subject.

20. The Institute concurs with section 3.21 of Professor Paul Ramsden's contribution to the DIUS debate on the future of higher education, *Teaching and the Student Experience*,<sup>47</sup> that there appears to be no intellectually coherent reason for the current system of degree classification. In particular, the distinction between an upper and lower second, which occurs near the peak in the distribution of marks and which can be important for future careers, is arbitrary and unfair. Just about the only thing that can be said in favour of the current classification scheme is that it is historically stable. While it is not difficult to think of replacements that avoid the trap of arbitrary class distinctions, for example with an academic record, it is much more of a problem to invent a robust scheme that takes into account the variability between subjects and universities.

21. It is of concern that, in seeking evidence for the inquiry, the Committee did not mention once the Bologna Process; in no other European country would this be possible. We understand that the QAA will announce, in due course, that English degrees are compatible with the Bologna Process, an announcement that will presumably remove any pressure for change. However, colleagues from across Europe inform us that they do not consider our Masters' programmes to be at a comparable level to their own. This remark applies particularly to the four-year, integrated masters that form the professional graduate route in the UK in physics, chemistry, engineering and a few other subjects. In the continued absence of any sort of leadership in the UK on this issue, it is unlikely that there will be real analysis of potential problems. Nonetheless, there are already reports of employers questioning the comparability of our Masters' programmes and the large influx of mainland European scientists into UK academia may also be relevant. Our fear is that, by the time the problems of employability and, possibly, the reduced attractiveness of our programmes to international students are realised, it will be too late. Professor Ramsden in his report (section 2.9) states that the "Competition between UK and overseas universities to attract international students is likely to intensify..."; the UK's blasé attitude to the Bologna Process is an obvious disadvantage particularly for STEM subjects.

22. Plagiarism is undoubtedly a major problem in many areas. In mathematical subjects such as physics, mathematics and engineering, there is a particular issue in that in solving a problem, students will often independently use identical methods, which makes it very hard to decide if anyone has copied from another person. The tendency, therefore, is to concentrate more of the assessment into unseen examinations which removes the problem but which is regrettable from a pedagogical point of view.

<sup>46</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/section4/default.asp](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/section4/default.asp)

<sup>47</sup> [www.dius.gov.uk/policy/teaching\\_and\\_student\\_exp.html](http://www.dius.gov.uk/policy/teaching_and_student_exp.html)



## STUDENT SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

23. The Institute has considered the incorporation of undergraduate students into its degree accreditation process but rejected the idea on the grounds that their restricted experience of a single university and lack of knowledge of assessment and many other important issues would make them ineffective.

24. Non-completion of university programmes is a complex area. On the one hand, universities might be expected only to admit students who are capable of completing the course but, on the other, there will always be students who fall by the wayside and others who will find themselves in the wrong environment. So, the key question is: what is a reasonable completion rate? This issue is also intimately tied to WP. If universities are being encouraged to sweep their net wider to allow more access, it is likely that they will be taking more risks. They should not subsequently be penalised if their completion rate falls. In many European countries, the admissions process is much less selective than in the UK and the corresponding failure rates are higher. There is a strong argument that this system is more likely to preserve standards than one in which non-completion is seen as a failure of the system.

25. In physics, engineering and some other sciences, one of the most frequent reasons for non-completion is the lack of preparation for the mathematical content of the course. The physics in A-level physics is not described mathematically but it most certainly is at university. One way of combating this interface problem is to have teacher fellows—schoolteachers seconded for a year or so to university departments—who are able to work with academics on this issue. The Institute has piloted this type of approach as part of its HEFCE funded *Stimulating Physics* project.<sup>48</sup>

26. Despite widely expressed fears, it appears that the introduction of top-up fees has not inhibited students from entering university, although the long-term effect of the debts on postgraduate recruitment has yet to be revealed. It is also not clear how the job market will respond to the existence of such impoverished recruits. In engineering and physical sciences, four-year first degrees are now the norm for those who are taking the subject seriously. The extra year means another year of debt accumulation. Furthermore, PhD courses are now drifting towards four years and, while these may not cause students to accrue further debt, they do not allow loans to be paid off either. There is the prospect of STEM PhD graduates emerging at the age of 26 or 27 with no money and substantial debt. That does not appear to be a very attractive proposition.

27. It could be sensible, for example, for physics graduates who enter teaching to have their debt repayments made on their behalf so long as they remained in the profession. This approach could make it financially advantageous to enter teaching while removing the controversy associated with differential pay that schools seem to find so unappealing.

December 2008

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**Memorandum 21**
**Submission from the Royal Academy of Engineering**

## STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

1. This submission is based on first-hand experience gained by The Royal Academy of Engineering (Note 1) from its study on *Educating Engineers for the 21st Century* (Note 2) : through its National Engineering Project (NEP) and through its support for the launch of the 14-19 Diploma in Engineering in the London Boroughs of Southwark and Lambeth ( Note 3). The Academy is also undertaking further research on experience-led engineering degrees and has embarked on a further study on *Engineers for Enterprise* for DIUS resulting from Lord Sainsbury of Turville's recommendation in *The Race to the Top* his review of Government Science and Innovation policy (Note 4).

2. This submission has been reviewed by the Academy's Standing Committee for Education and Training (SCET) and reflects the policies and practices which they have developed and/or recommended. The views expressed below are based on experience gained in engineering and technology only.

## ADMISSIONS

3. The process of selection for admission to most Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) seems to work reasonably well. The engineering departments of the research oriented universities suffer the well publicised difficulties that the A level examination grades currently do not discriminate sufficiently among the upper quartile of candidates so that heavy reliance has to be placed on interview references or other indicators of engagement in engineering such as participation in extra-curricular engineering activities such as those operated under the Academy's Best Programme. It is hoped that the reintroduction of the A star grade will go some way to ease this problem. Otherwise it is anticipated that additional testing might have to be introduced as is already occurring in some universities for mathematics and physics candidates. Many believe that the selection process would be improved considerably if the Examination Boards could make full disclosure of actual performance on individual examination modules available to Admissions Tutors.

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<sup>48</sup> www.stimulatingphysics.org

4. The Academy is keen to broaden access to the engineering profession in particular in encouraging more women and ethnic minorities (Note 3). The Academy has gone to considerable lengths to ensure that the content of the 14–19 Diploma in Engineering will meet the requirements for entry to Higher Education (HE). The NEP is also establishing good practice for the development of appropriate Foundation Degrees and the delivery of HE through the FE Sectors.

5. In order to meet the Government targets for skilled personnel in the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) sectors it will be necessary to continue the drive to encourage more of our able youngsters to continue with STEM subjects in school, college and university and ultimately enter the STEM professions. The establishment of the High Level STEM Strategy Board is an effective start to implementing the Government strategy in this area and every effort must be made to ensure that it is properly resourced and implemented.

6. In addition, the work of HEFCE and more recently HEFCW in widening participation in STEM subjects must be acknowledged. HEFCE in particular has demonstrated significant commitment in this area. The Academy's London Engineering Project has demonstrated that engineering can be positioned as a viable career choice in the minds of young people regardless of their background, ethnicity or gender. The 14–19 Diploma in Engineering, with its strong uptake in more disadvantaged areas of England is well placed to offer such students clear pathways into the engineering profession.

#### THE BALANCE BETWEEN TEACHING AND RESEARCH

7. A major finding of the Academy's *Educating Engineers for the 21st Century* study is that the prestige and funding of teaching in research-active engineering departments has been compromised by a disproportionate emphasis on the research output of staff as a consequence of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). This has had serious repercussions on two levels: not only has the quality of current teaching been adversely affected, academic staff also now have little time or incentive to develop the type of new course content that will be needed in the future.

8. Remedial action is required to ensure that high quality teaching is perceived as central to academic career prospects and suitably rewarded through both remuneration and promotion. Appropriate measures would include: the provision of adequate funding for undergraduate teaching; the development of quantitative "best practice" criteria for assessing teaching quality, a task that could be devolved to the Engineering Subject Centre (engSC); and the inauguration of high profile award schemes by the professional institutions and other national and international engineering bodies to recognise and reward excellence in engineering teaching.

9. Amongst the most important findings of the study were the close correlation it showed between the views of industry and the universities on the major issues concerning undergraduate engineering education and the confirmation it provided of the enthusiasm of the universities for closer collaborative links with industry. University engineering departments, for instance, overwhelmingly concurred with the view that their courses need to provide more experience in the application of theoretical understanding to real applications of the type encountered in industry. The primary means of satisfying this objective is through effective design and project work in which students can see the opportunities and the necessity for innovation. But in turn such work makes a number of demands of its own including the provision of pertinent case study material from industry and the availability of adequate up-to-date laboratory facilities within the universities themselves. Further the teaching on such courses is far more labour intensive than traditional classroom lecturing. With current pressures on research performance (see 7 above) many engineering departments would be unable to provide additional teaching resources. There is also the issue of funding, which is currently a cause of great concern within the university engineering community. Engineering courses used to be funded by the HEFCE at a rate of twice the basic unit of resource, but over the period 2003–04 this ratio was reduced to just 1.7. However a consensus exists within the universities that this allocation needs to be at least 2.5 and possibly as much as three times the basic unit if engineering courses are to meet future requirements for enhanced design and project work.

10. Nevertheless the overall picture also contained some strongly positive elements. Nearly three fifths of the academic respondents, for instance, were exponents of the CDIO (Conceive, Design, Implement, Operate) approach to learning and teaching which puts an emphasis on articulating and solving problems rather than analysis, a highly appropriate approach for engineers. Around three quarters also expressed support for the introduction of new types of engineering course, such as biotechnology or nanotechnology. In addition just over half reported they had had contact with at least one or other of the HEFCE-funded Engineering Subject Centre (engSC) or the UK Centre for Materials Education.

11. Following Lord Sainsbury of Turville's recommendation (7.17) in his review of Government Science and Innovation Policy (Note 4) DIUS has asked the Academy, in collaboration with the engSC to undertake a study for the further development and implementation of experience-led engineering degrees. This is now underway and will report by November 2009.

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## DEGREE CLASSIFICATION

12. The Academy's SCET members commend the excellent work being undertaken developing the transcript system in line with the Diploma Supplement requirements under the Bologna process and welcome the additional detailed information this would provide for engineering graduates, their employers and their Engineering Institutions. However, they feel that this should supplement rather than replace the current Honours classification system.

13. The International recognition for UK qualifications in engineering has been hard won and well established for many years through FEANI in Europe and the Washington Accord agreements. This is the responsibility of the Engineering Council UK working with the Engineering Institutions. Together they have established a register of individually accredited university courses, based on the current Honours system, which meet the academic requirements of engineers to ensure that they can proceed to qualify as Chartered and Incorporated engineers. The four level Honours gradation (First, Upper Second, Lower Second, Third) system and the Pass degree are well understood by all stakeholders and there is no evidence that Examiners have any difficulty in administering this system. Employers find it a useful, simple metric of great use in the early recruitment process where they do not wish to be overburdened by large quantities of transcript data.

14. The members are also particularly sensitive to the high esteem in which UK engineering qualifications are held internationally and the large number of overseas students who elect to study here. The award of a UK Honours degree is held in high regard in many parts of the world and is considered to be greatly superior to a mere pass degree. This distinction should not be sacrificed.

## STUDENT SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

No comments to make.

## NOTES

1. The Royal Academy of Engineering [RAEng] brings together over 1200 distinguished engineers, drawn from all the engineering disciplines. Its aim is to promote excellence in engineering for the benefit of the people of the United Kingdom. ([www.raeng.org.uk](http://www.raeng.org.uk)).

2. Full details of the study and the supporting materials can be found at: [www.raeng.org.uk/education/ee21c/default.htm](http://www.raeng.org.uk/education/ee21c/default.htm)

3. The NEP started with the London Engineering Project pilot in Southwark in late 2005. This will work with five universities and 50 schools over 4.5 years. The pattern will be repeated, modified and enhanced, as appropriate, in six regions in England over the next ten years. The NEP supports schools with their raised profile for SET by providing students with access to hands-on SET activities in class, residential and other SET learning events out of school and a system for mentoring of students with a capacity for higher education and ability in SET. This attention paid on schools and groups so-far unengaged in engineering is seen as key to strengthening the engineering profession in the long-term. The NEP is led by the Royal Academy of Engineering with the generous initial support of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).

4. "The Race to the Top—A review of Government's Science and Innovation Policies" Lord Sainsbury of Turville (HM Treasury October 2007).

*November 2008*

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## Memorandum 22

### Submission from the Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning (IFLL)

#### STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

##### *Summary*

This submission addresses three issues:

- The need for more rapid progress in implementing a credit system for post-school education
- Mode-free funding as a means of promoting equity in HE participation: the need for a long-term approach
- The case for drawing the basic line between youth and adulthood at age 25.

The submission therefore relates primarily to the Committee's fourth theme, on *Student Support and Engagement* but also to the first theme, *Admissions*.

## BACKGROUND

The Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning (IFLL) is a broad-ranging initiative, sponsored by NIACE. Its independent Board of Commissioners is chaired by Sir David Watson. The Inquiry's main goal is to provide a strategic framework for the future of lifelong learning, with a horizon of 10-15 years. It will report in mid-2009; this submission is therefore by way of initial thoughts. We have gathered evidence on a wide range of themes, and are about to publish papers on these. Details can be found at [www.lifelonglearninginquiry.org.uk](http://www.lifelonglearninginquiry.org.uk), and copies of the IFLL leaflet are attached.

Lifelong learning includes education and training, formal and informal. The Inquiry's remit covers cradle to grave, but is focussed primarily on adults, including those in HE. A key strand in the Inquiry's work has been to draw up an overall picture of expenditure on lifelong learning. The review covers expenditure by government (all departments), employers, third sector and individuals. This has led us to some quite radical thinking on the balance and distribution of support for learning, which informs the comments below.

These are still initial reflections from the Inquiry. We are not yet at the stage of finalising or publishing our recommendations. However we have considered it useful to make an input into the Committee at this stage, especially given the Committee Chair's expressed wish to hear from people beyond the usual suspects.

### 1. *Faster progress towards a proper credit framework*

The case for a coherent and easily understood framework for accumulating credits which will run across all sectors is well known. It is a basic component of a lifelong learning strategy, since it is an essential condition for people to be able to move in and out of education without having to start each time at the bottom of the particular ladder; and to be able to move between institutions similarly. There is a particular need for it to increase coherence between further and higher education.

In 2002–03 over 11,000 of the 300,000 students who entered higher education institutions did so having been at a different institution in one of the preceding two years, with most of these students receiving no credit for their previous studies (HEPI 2004). Progress is much slower than it should be. The problem is not a technical but a cultural one. In other words, we know how to make a coherent system work, but there is a lack of political will, at system and institutional level. The flexibility which a proper credit framework brings will be all the more needed in the light of current economic turbulence and the effects this is having on employment: large numbers of adults will be seeking to improve their qualifications without having to commit themselves to a long stretch of full-time education.

*The Committee could help to address this by making strong recommendations on the need for rapid implementation, to unblock the issue.*

### 2. *Mode-free funding: the immediate need for a long-term target*

Part-time students are a significant part of the student population (Watson 2009). In 2005–6 there were nearly 200,000 part-time UK undergraduates, out of a total of 1,148,655 (when postgraduates are included they form around 40% of the total). But this is in spite of a discriminatory funding regime.

At long last the case for better support for part-time students is getting more of a hearing, despite the ELQ setback. However the basic challenge remains to be met. Support for students who are not studying full-time should be as generous as that given to their full-time equivalents. This is on grounds of both equity and efficiency. Part-time students are no less deserving, and often come from backgrounds which are less orthodox than full-timers. By studying part-time, and often working at the same time, they can continue to contribute to the economy and reduce maintenance costs. Discriminating against them is completely irrational as well as unfair.

This argument directly addresses the Committee's concerns about meeting participation targets, and completion rates. Part-time students do have high non-completion rates, but with proper support these would drop.

We recognise that a shift to mode-free funding, where part-time students would be supported on the same basis as full-timers, cannot be achieved overnight. But equally it should not be put off indefinitely merely because it is not immediately achievable.

*The Committee could make a major contribution to lifelong learning by recommending the adoption of mode-free funding as a long-term goal, to be achieved over the next decade.*

### 3. *25: a rational dividing line for HE policy and administration*

Higher education includes an increasingly diverse student population. Drawing a sensible dividing line between the initial phase of life, including education, and the adult phases (also including learning) is not merely a matter of anthropological interest. A major goal for the Inquiry is to achieve a better balance in the distribution of learning opportunities across people's lifetimes. To this end we are addressing the issues of how support for learning might be rationally organised to reflect the differences between youth and adulthood.

Chronological age is always going to be unsatisfactory as a means of making this division. However policies will, realistically, never be age-free. Therefore we should choose, as the fundamental dividing-line, the least arbitrary age. The Inquiry's thinking is going strongly in the direction of 25, for the following reasons:

- Very many young people continue their initial explorations of personal and professional identities until then. Increasing numbers are staying longer in full-time education. In 2008 there were 449,000 full-time students in HE aged between 21 and 24; many others have a pattern of dipping in and out, mixing education with work. It makes sense to recognise this extended process rather than sticking to an outmoded 21 as a transition point. But by 25 this empirical pattern is usually coming to close; and normatively, it may be a good idea to reinforce this by marking it as the close of the initial phase, without being too rigid.
- This pattern extends beyond those who follow the conventional educational path. Enabling those who have not succeeded initially to return to learning is a fundamental challenge which HE policy should address. Strikingly, most young people who engage in criminal activity grow out of this by around 25. Inclusive policy, including but going beyond education, is more feasible if the threshold is set at this point, with opportunities for people to return to education as adults.
- Neuroscientific evidence supports this, showing that the brain reaches full maturity also around this age, later than was commonly supposed.
- Finally, all other dividing lines are significantly less appropriate. Of course many people are fully adult well before 25, and have decided on their careers, established families and so on. But the ages of 16,18,19, 21 all suffer from worse drawbacks, which do not recognise the realities of current life.

There are two particular implications if this step is taken seriously:

- a. The *evidence base for HE policy* will be differently structured, in ways appropriate to demographic and social change and which will enable better solutions to the issues identified by the Committee. Data should be systematically gathered on the basis that 25 is a key dividing line. Of course there will be age sub-divisions of those below 25. But with 25 as the line, and due attention paid to those older than it, we will get for the first time a proper basis for looking at the balance between youth and adult (or initial and continuing) education and training.
- b. *Individual entitlements to learning* can be designed, to reflect the different needs of youth and adults. The Inquiry is likely to reach conclusions on the need for individual entitlements as a means of promoting personal learning. It will be far more coherent if we have a reasonably clearcut and justifiable basis for designing an adult system.

We would be happy to elaborate on these points, or other aspects of the Inquiry's thinking. Please contact the IFLL Director, Tom Schuller, [tom.schuller@niace.org.uk](mailto:tom.schuller@niace.org.uk).

#### REFERENCES

HEPI ( 2004), *Credit Accumulation and Transfer and the Bologna Process*, Oxford: Higher Education Policy Institute.

Watson, David (2009) "Universities and Lifelong Learning" in Peter Jarvis (ed.) *Routledge International Handbook of Lifelong Learning.*, pp102–113.

December 2008

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### Memorandum 23

#### Submission from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

##### STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

##### 1. Introduction

1.1 The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) was established in 1997 to provide independent assessment of how higher education institutions in the UK maintain their academic standards and quality.

1.2 The primary responsibility for academic standards and quality rests with individual institutions. QAA reviews and reports on how well they meet those responsibilities, identifies good practice and makes recommendations for improvement.

1.3 We visit institutions to conduct our audits, make judgements and publish reports, but we are not an inspectorate or a regulator and do not have statutory powers. We aim to ensure that institutions have effective processes in place to secure their academic standards, but we do not judge the standards themselves.

1.4 QAA publishes a *Code of practice*<sup>49</sup>, which guides institutions to ensure students have a good learning experience and achieve a worthwhile qualification. We use the *Code of practice* as a reference point in our audits of institutions.

1.5 We are also responsible for the national frameworks and mechanisms that are used by institutions to design and assure the quality of their courses and degree standards.<sup>50</sup> While the freedom of institutions to design and run their own courses is important, it is equally important that degrees from different institutions across the UK are broadly comparable.

1.6 Based on the evidence available, through individual audits and thematic analysis of series of audits, QAA believes that the UK has a fundamentally sound higher education system. Institutions are committed to maintaining academic standards in ways that meet the needs of today's world, and to providing students with an experience that is worthwhile in itself and that enhances their career prospects.

1.7 We believe that the sector's reputation is enhanced by the fact that it has an effective system of external review which can, and does, highlight areas where there may be concerns. Experience shows that most institutions respond swiftly and appropriately to our concerns.

1.8 We have restricted this submission to those areas for which QAA has some responsibility or particular expertise, and to our work in England only.

## 2 Responsibilities for assuring quality

2.1 HEFCE has a statutory responsibility to secure provision for assessing the quality of education provided in institutions for whose activities it provides, or is considering providing, financial support. To do so, it contracts annually with QAA to carry out external reviews. Academic standards are the responsibility of individual autonomous institutions, which work within an agreed Quality Assurance Framework.<sup>51</sup>

2.2 QAA is an independent body. Our audits are funded in part through the contract with HEFCE, and in part through subscriptions paid by higher education institutions.

2.3 QAA also independently publishes a series of papers known as *Outcomes from institutional audit*. This offers a broader analysis of the themes, strengths and weaknesses that can be identified from groups of audit reports and aims to promote good practice.

2.4 The current arrangement of responsibilities has great strengths. HEFCE delivers large sums of public money to institutions, and it is right that it should be required to seek assurance that this money is being spent on providing high quality education. Institutions need a way of demonstrating that their autonomy is meeting national expectations. QAA has the expertise to provide that assurance and to raise concerns and recommend action where necessary.<sup>52</sup>

## 3 Admissions

3.1 Section 10 of QAA's *Code of practice* supports institutions in developing effective admission policies. The evidence from audit reports shows that generally this is being implemented effectively by institutions.<sup>53</sup> The reports identify strengths in outreach activity, the use of management information systems to monitor recruitment and admissions, and the care with which procedures are carried out.

3.2 Our audit reports show that, increasingly, institutions are developing better ways of improving access and widening participation. To a large extent this means that they are satisfying the intention of the *Code of practice*; that procedures used to attract, recruit and admit students should be clear, fair, explicit and applied consistently.

3.4 We have seen notable features of good practice, ranging from engagement in local community activities and involvement in partnerships at a regional level, to the development of links with local employers and targeted support for particular groups of students. Successful strategies for retaining students form an integral part of many widening participation initiatives.

### *Widening participation through Access to HE*<sup>54</sup>

3.4 As well as promoting good practice, QAA manages the recognition of Access to HE courses, through which students with few, if any, qualifications can be prepared for higher education. These are successful in facilitating access and helping the sector widen participation.

3.5 In 2007, 4.5 per cent of all applicants accepted for places through UCAS were students with an access qualification; a total of 14,590.

<sup>49</sup> *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* is available at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeofpractice](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeofpractice)

<sup>50</sup> See [www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure)

<sup>51</sup> The Quality Assurance Framework is agreed by HEFCE, Universities UK, GuildHE and QAA

<sup>52</sup> See QAA's self-evaluation report for the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), and ENQA's review of QAA: attached, and [www.qaa.ac.uk/international/ENQA/](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/international/ENQA/)

<sup>53</sup> *Outcomes from institutional audit: Recruitment and admission of students, Second series*: [www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/institutionalAudit/outcomes/series2/RAS08.asp](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/institutionalAudit/outcomes/series2/RAS08.asp)

<sup>54</sup> Access to HE is a registered trademark

3.6 The majority of Access to HE students are aged 19–30. Analysis<sup>55</sup> shows that while, in general, students from more privileged backgrounds are more likely to enter higher education, those with an access qualification are more likely to be from a deprived background. UCAS data shows that 46.7 per cent of English access applicants came from the most deprived areas (by index of multiple deprivation) compared with 23.8 per cent of other applicants.

3.7 UCAS also reports that a higher proportion of applicants from access courses (31.5 per cent) were non-white than applicants in general (21.7 per cent). The proportion of Black applicants was nearly three times higher among access applicants than among non-access applicants.

#### 4 *Teaching and research*

4.1 One of the greatest strengths of UK higher education is its diversity, with institutions tailoring their methods of teaching and learning to their different objectives and strengths.

4.2 Since 2002, QAA has conducted 187 institutional audits. Until 2005, five judgements of limited confidence were made and one of no confidence. Since then, we have made one judgement of limited confidence in the quality of learning opportunities, and three of limited confidence in standards.<sup>56</sup> In all cases the institutions made the necessary improvements in the expected timescale.

4.3 Audit reports show that strategies to improve the quality of teaching often centre on the provision of comprehensive staff development programmes. They might offer certified teaching and learning programmes for new staff, many accredited by the Higher Education Academy; a wide breadth of development opportunities for other staff; and programmes of peer review for developing teaching excellence.<sup>57</sup>

4.4 There is, however, greater variability in development opportunities for part-time and visiting staff. A number of reports have also noted that training for postgraduate research students with teaching responsibilities is not always thorough.

4.5 Students' learning experiences are, however, shaped not only by the quality of their teaching. As well as commending levels of academic guidance, our audit reports have commended student support (including pastoral support), links with industry and with other professional bodies, and opportunities for student engagement with quality assurance systems in their institutions.

#### 5 *Degree classification*

5.1 A reliable and consistent way of describing students' achievements is crucial to all in the higher education community and beyond. QAA has argued that the current system of degree classification no longer provides this.<sup>58</sup> We support the Burgess Group recommendations on the replacement of the current system with the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR).

5.2 However, it would be a serious mistake to confuse a flawed classification system with falling academic standards. Irrespective of the classification system, QAA is confident that a graduating student with a UK degree will always have achieved at least a basic and appropriate academic standard.

5.3 This confidence derives from the fact that there are nationally agreed expectations about the generic standards of academic awards (eg honours degrees). These are set out in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ),<sup>59</sup> and must be met by institutions before qualifications are awarded. QAA's audits include a check on this.

5.4 Nonetheless, increases in the numbers of students achieving firsts and upper seconds have led to allegations of "degree inflation", and have contributed to an undermining of confidence in the degree classification system.

5.5 One explanation for this phenomenon is that as teaching and learning methods increasingly focus on supporting students to achieve the intended learning outcomes of their course, so methods of assessment have also changed. Institutions publish the assessment criteria necessary for achieving particular standards and students arrange their learning in ways that will enable them to meet those criteria.<sup>60</sup>

5.6 At the same time assessment has moved away from a "norm referenced" approach whereby students were assessed in comparison with their peers of the same year, with a certain proportion achieving the higher grades, towards a system whereby all students meeting the criteria for a high grade are awarded that grade.

<sup>55</sup> *Key statistics 2008* is available at: [www.accesstohe.ac.uk/partners/statistics/2008/keyStats.asp](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/partners/statistics/2008/keyStats.asp)

<sup>56</sup> During 2005–2007 there were also 30 separate audits of collaborative provision, which returned two judgements of limited confidence

<sup>57</sup> *Outcomes from institutional audit: staff support and development arrangements, Second series*: [www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/institutionalAudit/outcomes/series2/StaffSupDev.asp](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/institutionalAudit/outcomes/series2/StaffSupDev.asp)

<sup>58</sup> *Quality matters; April 2007: The classification of degree awards*: [www.qaa.ac.uk/enhancement/qualityMatters](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/enhancement/qualityMatters)

<sup>59</sup> See [www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/)

<sup>60</sup> *Outcomes from institutional audit Series 1 overview, paragraphs 47-52*: [www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/institutionalAudit/outcomes/closingoverview08.asp](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/institutionalAudit/outcomes/closingoverview08.asp)

5.7 In order to maintain confidence in the value of degrees, QAA has taken steps to ensure that there is a clearer mechanism through which individuals and organisations are able to alert QAA when they feel that academic standards are being jeopardised.<sup>61</sup> The scheme, known as “Causes for Concern”, has been widely publicised. QAA publishes the outcomes of any cases that progress to a full enquiry.

*The effectiveness of QAA in monitoring degree standards*

5.8 In the UK, degrees are legally “owned” by individual institutions, which are the awarding bodies responsible for academic standards. QAA does not control or directly monitor the standards of individual degrees, but it does check the ways in which institutions discharge their responsibilities for maintaining standards.

5.9 Within this framework, QAA’s audit processes show that confidence can be placed in institutions’ stewardship of academic standards. Our audits pay close attention to this area, and our *Code of practice* covers assessment (section 6), external examining (section 4), and programme approval, monitoring and review (section 7).

5.10 We are also responsible for the national frameworks and reference points that are used by institutions to design and assure the quality of their courses and the standards of their degrees.

5.11 These include the FHEQ, which describes the nationally agreed levels of achievement represented by higher education qualifications. It is important to distinguish between these national reference points and the specifics of individual institutions’ grading systems.

5.12 We publish subject benchmark statements,<sup>62</sup> which set out expectations about standards of degrees in particular subjects and are used by programme leaders to help them design their courses. QAA has also produced guidelines to help those preparing programme specifications,<sup>63</sup> which are public statements of what students can expect to experience and gain from a particular course at a given institution.

5.13 QAA’s audits start from the principle that institutions are individually responsible for the academic standards of the degrees they award.

As part of our audits, we check to ensure that students are provided with clear assessment criteria, that the process is transparent, and that assessment boards operate fairly and do not put academic standards at risk.

5.14 Almost all audit reports show that there can be confidence in the measures institutions take to safeguard the academic standards of their awards.

5.15 These measures include the implementation of consistent assessment policies and criteria, the provision of feedback to students, and the use of external examiners.

5.16 However, the majority of audits carried out between 2004 and 2006 included recommendations linked to aspects of assessment practice.<sup>64</sup> Specifically, several made reference to the practices of assessment boards, with a few raising concerns about the equity of treatment of students.

5.17 Our reports also highlight challenges in the arrangements for joint and combined honours students.<sup>65</sup> For these students, it is particularly important that they are provided with clear and timely information and with high levels of academic and personal support. In a few audit reports, it has been noted that classification rules could make it less likely that students on joint and combined honours are able to achieve a first class award.

5.18 We believe that QAA is monitoring effectively whether individual universities are maintaining the standards of the degrees they award, bearing in mind the freedom of action implied by institutional autonomy.

*The relationship between degree classification and portability*

5.19 UK higher education deservedly enjoys a very good reputation internationally. QAA has helped to ensure that UK academic standards are recognised in Europe and around the world.

5.20 As part of the Bologna Process, which is working towards a common framework for higher education across Europe, QAA is now completing the process of verifying that the FHEQ is compatible with the *Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area*.<sup>66</sup>

5.21 This will assist with student (and labour) mobility around Europe to the extent that UK degrees will be recognised more readily as part of the same framework as degrees from elsewhere in Europe.

<sup>61</sup> See [www.qaa.ac.uk/causesforconcern](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/causesforconcern)

<sup>62</sup> See [www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark)

<sup>63</sup> *Guidelines for preparing programme specifications* (2006): [www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/programSpec/](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/programSpec/)

<sup>64</sup> *Outcomes from institutional audit: Assessment of students, Second series*: [www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/institutionalAudit/outcomes/series2/AssessmentStudents.asp](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/institutionalAudit/outcomes/series2/AssessmentStudents.asp)

<sup>65</sup> *Outcomes from institutional audit: Arrangements for joint, combined and multidisciplinary programmes, Second series*: [www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/institutionalAudit/outcomes/series2/ArrangementsJCMP.asp](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/institutionalAudit/outcomes/series2/ArrangementsJCMP.asp)

<sup>66</sup> Report of the FHEQ self-certification advisory group, November 2008



5.22 However, in the longer term, the portability of UK higher education awards will depend on the availability of transparent information about students' achievements (preferably through the HEAR and the compatible European Diploma Supplement<sup>67</sup>) and course content (through programme specifications).

## 6 Student support and engagement

6.1 QAA is committed to engaging with students, and we do so in a number of ways.

6.2 In 2007 we appointed our first student Board member. Students will soon be included as full members of our audit teams; we shall be consulting students on the development of a new method of audit to replace the current process; and we are keen to help students participate in quality assurance in their institutions. We have reported on students' participation in institutions' own internal reviews,<sup>68</sup> and our audit process invites written submissions from students.

6.3 In spring 2008 we undertook a pilot project involving student observers on six audit teams. The pilot showed that students felt comfortable and confident with the process, and that they could participate effectively as full members of the team. They emphasised that they should not focus on "student issues", but should add a student perspective to the whole process.<sup>69</sup>

6.4 Auditors also commented favourably on the pilot, while recognising that student auditors would change the nature of "peer review" as it currently operates.

6.5 A consultation is currently underway on the final proposals and taking into account the need for full training, we hope to have students as full members of audit teams by early 2010.

6.6 QAA works closely with the National Union of Students on joint events to support student representation and to help students understand the process of audit. Feedback received from these events is very positive.

### *Non-completion by students*

6.7 Not all students successfully complete their courses. But no student should fail to complete because of inadequate teaching or the lack of academic or personal support.

6.8 QAA's audits look at the level of support provided to different groups of students.<sup>70</sup> Reports from 2004–06 show an increasing amount of activity focused on supporting students from backgrounds currently under-represented in higher education.

6.9 There is no evidence that this is at the expense of supporting other groups of students, but institutions with a strong commitment to widening participation and with a consequently diverse student body face particular challenges in retaining students.

6.10 Some institutions have developed separate student retention strategies, and many have been identified by audit as examples of good practice. For example, a project may refer students to specialist staff for counselling, mathematics support or essay-writing skills; others recognise the special significance of a student's first year, and continue to provide support for Access to HE students through the student recruitment office during this time. In one case, a university monitored non-attendance, and targeted support through a caseworker to those students deemed most likely to withdraw.

6.11 Careers guidance is also an important element of support and retention. Our *Code of practice* encourages institutions to show students how the skills and knowledge they gain during their studies will help them in their future careers. Careers guidance is most effective when it is provided in close collaboration with employers and takes account of developments in the world of work.

6.12 In addition to preparing students for employment, it is expected that careers advice of this sort will demonstrate the worth of completing their studies. The *Code of practice* also encourages institutions to cater for the special needs of students who may be disadvantaged in the labour market.

6.13 QAA will publish revised guidelines on Personal Development Planning (PDP) in early 2009. PDP helps make the outcomes of learning more explicit. When students are clear about what is expected of them and what they, in turn, might expect of higher education, the quality of learning improves. The process can strengthen students' capacity to reflect upon their own learning and achievement and to plan for their own personal, educational and career development.

<sup>67</sup> See [www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Publications/Bookshop/Documents/Diploma%20Supplement.pdf](http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Publications/Bookshop/Documents/Diploma%20Supplement.pdf)

<sup>68</sup> *Student membership of audit and review teams: learning from periodic review*: [www.qaa.ac.uk/events/smart08/StudentPaper1.asp](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/events/smart08/StudentPaper1.asp)

<sup>69</sup> *Student membership of audit and review teams: feedback from student observers and team members* (2008): [www.qaa.ac.uk/events/smart08/StudentPaper3.asp](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/events/smart08/StudentPaper3.asp)

<sup>70</sup> *Outcomes from institutional audit: institutions' arrangements to support widening participation and access to higher education, Second series*: [www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/institutionalAudit/outcomes/series2/SupportForWidening.asp](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/institutionalAudit/outcomes/series2/SupportForWidening.asp)

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## 7 SUMMARY

7.1 UK higher education has good quality assurance processes in place, and there can be public confidence in the structures and systems that institutions use to maintain academic standards and deliver a high quality learning experience for their students. This has been achieved in the context of ever-rising student numbers, an increasing diversity in the student population and limited resources.

7.2 QAA externally verifies and reports on institutions' performance in assuring their quality and standards. When we identify areas of concern, we recommend action. Institutions take our recommendations seriously and make the necessary improvements swiftly. More broadly, QAA identifies developments in HE that might impact upon quality and standards and alerts institutions to these.

7.3 Institutions are committed to upholding the standards of the degrees they award. We are confident that a person who has a degree from a UK university has achieved an appropriate academic standard.

7.4 On degree classifications, however, QAA believes that the system currently in place does not provide the required level of information about achievement for students or employers and we welcome the work of the Burgess Group and the HEAR initiative.

January 2009

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### Memorandum 24

#### Submission from the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information, the Open University

*Submission to the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee in connection with its inquiry on "Students and Universities"*

The Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI) conducts research on higher education policy and on the broad relationships between higher education and society, both in the UK and internationally. This submission draws on this research and, in particular, on the following four recent projects:

- What is learned at university? The social and organisational mediation of university learning (Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council).
- The flexible graduate in the knowledge society (Funded by the European Commission and the Higher Education Funding Council for England).
- An evaluation of lifelong learning networks (Funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England).
- A study of student engagement (Funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England).

Our submission follows the four headings used by the Committee in its call for evidence. In it we note

- the diversity of today's students, the contexts for their learning, and the outcomes of their studies;
- the unfortunate tendency for this diversity to be viewed only in terms of a reputational hierarchy of institutions;
- the frequent gap between policy intentions and the values and attitudes of those who have to carry them out;
- the importance of recognising learner perspectives which may differ in important respects from those of policy makers and academic staff;
- that there is evidence to suggest that teaching in UK universities is well-regarded by students but that student achievements may not be as great as in some other European countries;
- the range and diversity of learning outcomes are hardly captured by the degree classification.

#### ADMISSIONS

1. Regarding the implementation and success of widening participation initiatives, the CHERI interim evaluation<sup>71</sup> of Lifelong Learning Networks<sup>72</sup> acknowledged the efforts that many institutions are making in their practices and processes for supporting the admission of *vocational learners* into higher education. However, while these "system" changes may help to make a difference for vocational learners, changing the hearts, minds and behaviours of individual academics and admissions tutors are much greater challenges. Although targeted funds may be useful levers, there are questions around what happens when such short-term funding ceases—do institutions "revert to type"?

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<sup>71</sup> CHERI (2008), *Evaluation of Lifelong Learning Networks*. Bristol: Higher Education Funding Council for England

<sup>72</sup> Lifelong Learning Networks are groups of higher education institutions and further education colleges covering a city, area or region in England. These networks have been established through funding from the Higher Education Funding Council for England. Their policy objective is to improve the coherence, clarity and certainty of progression opportunities for vocational learners into and through higher education.

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## THE BALANCE BETWEEN TEACHING AND RESEARCH

2. In a CHERI review of literature on excellence in teaching and learning,<sup>73</sup> we noted that the learner perspective is given relatively little attention in discussions about excellence (and indeed by the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee in this inquiry). We also noted that teaching and student learning are distinct phenomena and this is not often acknowledged in policy documents. In the TLRP SOMUL project,<sup>74</sup> it was evident that students placed greatest emphasis on learning outcomes related to personal development and the acquisition of social capital rather than subject-based knowledge as provided by their teachers.

3. More directly on the subject of the relationship between teaching and research, there may be a growing tension between the ways knowledge is organised for the purposes of teaching (with increasing emphasis on employment-driven multidisciplinary courses) and for the purposes of research (with increasing “mode 2” trans-disciplinary user-engaged research). The primacy of individual academic disciplines as the basis for the organisation of academic staff for both teaching and research purposes may be challenged as a consequence. We note that some universities now have separate structures for the organisation of their teaching and of their research.

4. On the quality of teaching provision in UK higher education, we can note the results of international comparisons (including the views of mobile “Erasmus” students who are able to compare the UK with other European higher education systems from first-hand experience) which suggest that the quality of teaching appears to be relatively high within UK universities whilst the level of demands made on learners and the achievements of those learners may be relatively low.<sup>75</sup>

5. The TLRP SOMUL project already referred to has noted both commonalities and diversities in the learning outcomes of students from different types of higher education institution. Differences between institutions do not map simply onto reputational hierarchies of institutions but reflect a variety of social and organisational mediating factors to be found in the contexts of learning for today’s students.

## DEGREE CLASSIFICATION

6. Our own research into the student experience (in particular the TLRP SOMUL project referred to above) suggests a multiplicity and diversity of learning outcomes that can hardly be captured by a single measure, such as the degree classification. Work on student profiles, transcripts and similar developments undoubtedly capture more adequately the full range of learning outcomes achieved by today’s students. Whether these are fully understood and utilised outside of higher education is another matter. Degree classifications in combination with institutional prestige continue to be used as a probably rather inaccurate surrogate for what has been learned in university. As we have noted elsewhere, “where” one has studied tends to count for more than “what” has been learned in the UK.<sup>76</sup>

## STUDENT SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

7. Our current study on student engagement for the Higher Education Funding Council for England (reporting shortly) took a rather narrow definition of student engagement in that it focused on

...institutional and student union processes and practices, such as those relating to student representation and student feedback, which seek to inform and enhance the collective student learning experience, as distinct from specific teaching, learning and assessment activities that are designed to enhance an individual student’s engagement with their own learning.

8. Nonetheless student representation and student feedback processes are important aspects which aim to involve students in providing feedback about the courses they have studied; in contributing to developments and improvements in learning and teaching; and in participating in institutional decision-making processes. The student engagement study has found that these processes are widespread, although practices vary both within and between institutions. Within some institutions there is such variety of practice that we would question the existence of adequate systems for monitoring the effectiveness of these processes. We would also question the extent to which the roles, responsibilities and relationships between the main actors involved are widely known and understood among staff and students. We would also suggest that questions of purpose need to be addressed to enable a broader enhancement agenda for the role of students in these processes.

9. However, there is also the more general point about how the experiences of students differ both between and within higher education institutions (see for example, Little and Greenwood, 2008<sup>77</sup>). The TLRP SOMUL project and other research has found a range of forms of engagement of students with their

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<sup>73</sup> Little, B, Locke, W, Parker, J and Richardson, J (forthcoming), *Excellence in Teaching and Learning: a review of the literature*, York: Higher Education Academy.

<sup>74</sup> *The Social and Organisational Mediation of University Learning (SOMUL)* is a project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council as part of its Teaching and Learning Research Programme.

<sup>75</sup> CHERI has recently completed a report for HEFCE on the “Comparative Student Experience” drawing on recent European research.

<sup>76</sup> The relative importance of institution attended versus subject studied is explored in a series of reports on the European “Reflex” prepared by CHERI and recently published by HEFCE.

<sup>77</sup> Little, B and Greenwood, M (2008), *Report to Foundation Degree Forward on the impact of foundation degrees on students and the workplace*. London: CHERI and Learning and Skills Network.

higher education. These vary according to the type of institution attended but also according to factors such as the age and circumstances of the individual student (eg undertaking paid work, domestic responsibilities, living at home versus living “in hall” or other university accommodation), subject of study and how study programmes are organised.

10. As already indicated, there is some evidence to suggest that the educational experience of higher education students in the UK is in some respects somewhat less than “world class” when compared with its counterparts elsewhere in Europe. With the Bologna process of harmonisation between different higher education systems, differences may become increasingly visible. While this may shatter some myths and any complacency about the superiority of UK higher education, it should also provide plenty of opportunities to learn from the contrasting experiences of others. Thus, we recommend to Government and HEFCE that further attention be given to the growing amount of research evidence on the differences (and similarities) between the higher education experiences provided by different national systems.

*December 2008*

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## Memorandum 25

### Submission from the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education

“STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES”

#### 1.0 Summary

The following response has been prepared by the Steering Group of ALDinHE. The Association exists to represent the views of professionals working directly with students and academics to promote effective learning in Higher Education.

- Admissions and transitions to Higher Education are points of fundamental importance for students. Support for entering and engaging with HE and disciplinary cultures is needed. A “Learning Development” (LD) approach provides effective support for students and therefore needs to be recognised and better resourced within HEIs. Pre-entry, induction and first year experience initiatives with an LD focus will support retention and progression for the diverse range of new learners.
- Research is a key aspect of learning. LD professionals are well-placed to support the government’s agenda for higher level skills through working with students in all learning contexts. Research can be undertaken from the start of HE through making links to work-based learning, professional placements or other external activities such as volunteering.
- In considering the issues of degree classification, LD professionals can help the sector by offering a perspective based on valuing the full range of students’ achievements and experience through processes such as PDP.
- As an approach to student support and engagement, LD calls for students’ experience of their learning to be brought to the centre. LD shows that skills are best learned when embedded in subject context. The HE sector as a whole would benefit significantly by having sufficient LD professionals working alongside other academics and students to achieve more effective learning outcomes.

#### 2.0 Introduction

ALDinHE is the association for Learning Development professionals which has grown out of the JISCmail discussion list, the Learning Development in Higher Education Network (LDHEN—see [www.jiscmail.ac.uk/ldhen/](http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/ldhen/)). Participants in both LDHEN and ALDinHE are united by their interest in and commitment to the development of student learning and the provision of opportunities for students to develop their skills for study and their awareness of academic practices. (See <http://www.aldinhe.ac.uk/> for more information about the work of the Association)

The membership of ALDinHE is drawn from learning development and study support units in over forty HE institutions, while the wider LDHE Network represents almost all of the UK’s universities and higher education intuitions. The group also has subscribers beyond the UK, in countries such as Ireland, Hong Kong, Germany, Belgium and Australia. An early achievement of the network was the successful bid for a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, the sixteen institution partnership, “LearnHigher”.

The work we refer to as “Learning Development” (LD) is an increasingly recognised field of practice in higher education in the UK. It focuses on the skills for learning that students require to complete successfully their programmes of study; specifically how students learn in their subject context, what they find problematic, and the potential barriers to successful learning that may arise from current structures, teaching and support practices. LD therefore concentrates on situated skills for written and oral communication, information management, analysis, critical thinking and creativity. We emphasise the importance of consultative work with subject specialists and other HE staff to embed skills for learning in the curriculum.

### 3.0 Admissions

We argue that the transitions associated with entry to HE programmes often represent a “make or break” experience for students. It is therefore vital that HEIs in general take full account of the wide range of entry qualifications and pre-HE learning experiences which potential students are now likely to present.

- Students are entering HE with a wide range of educational experiences and approaches to learning. It is important to ensure that admissions policies and procedures take account of this in order to provide wider and more equitable access to HE for those with the ability to benefit. This will guard against the perpetuation of disadvantage for those without traditional qualifications and avoid unduly favouring the A-level route. More active awareness of this diversity will enable those responsible for programmes of study to accommodate and build upon the full range of students’ learning experiences.
- Targeted pre-entry LD initiatives run in conjunction with admissions departments could help prospective students gain a better understanding of, and preparation for the unique character of learning at HE level. Such work is also likely to underpin better rates of retention throughout programmes. Appropriate learning support around transition can also help to pre-empt any unforeseen additional pressures on learning support services.
- Examples of appropriate initiatives related to admissions could include:
  - creating more opportunities for school pupils to shadow university students
  - providing taster sessions of university learning
  - visits by student ambassadors to schools
  - online collaboration between university students and local schools

### 4.0 The balance between teaching and research

- LD aims to help students to understand that universities are dedicated to the creation of new and applied knowledge, as well as the transmission of existing knowledge. Curriculum design that enables undergraduates to participate actively in research from the start of their degree fosters this awareness and increases student motivation and achievement.
- Rather than an overly instrumental or surface-level approach to study, an LD perspective seeks to encourage a deep engagement with learning by inducting students into their “communities of practice”. LD recognises that both research and work experience can help to fulfil these functions. This in turn helps students to understand and more effectively navigate HE.
- CPD and initial teacher training programmes for teaching and learning support staff in HE contribute to and draw upon the growing body of research into the student experience. Ongoing CPD supports effective LD in building both the capacity for research into learning as well as learning through research.
- LD professionals are in a good position to support the government’s agenda for higher level skills through integrating subject knowledge with the skills gained through research, dissemination, innovation and cross-disciplinary collaboration (eg in extended group-work).

### 5.0 Degree classification

- We would encourage better representation of the skills gained through the HE experience than is currently evidenced by the degree classification system. We would endorse a re-opening of the debate on degree classification in order to demonstrate how the graduate identity encompasses the skills that employers and society require. Improved integration of personal development planning (PDP) into the curriculum provides opportunities to do this.
- Plagiarism often results from instrumental approaches to learning and a misunderstanding of the aims of higher education. It can be driven by assessment practices where students’ induction into academic conventions is incomplete. As learning developers we seek to refocus the debate to concentrate on strategies which address the potentially alienating effect of an unfamiliar culture. LD therefore emphasises the importance of improved opportunities for explicit skills development in areas such as referencing and information literacy.

### 6.0 Student support and engagement

Student support is the area to which the LD community can make the greatest contribution in support of the Committee’s inquiry. The main aim of LD work is the enhancement of students’ higher skills, giving students enhanced employability and life chances beyond university study. Skills for research, communication, self-awareness and critical thinking ensure that students benefit as fully as possible from their experiences of, and employment beyond, higher education. We subscribe to the UNESCO statement of 2002:

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*“Higher education must place students at the centre of its focus within a lifelong learning perspective so that they are fully integrated into the global knowledge society of the twenty-first century. Students must be considered as equal and fundamental partners and stakeholders in their own education, we believe that students need to be seen as equal partners in their own learning”. (UNESCO, 2002)*

6.1 *The effectiveness of initiatives to support student engagement in the formulation of HE policy, and how the success or otherwise of these initiatives is being assessed*

A number of small-scale studies have been undertaken into the impact of LD, and the LDHEN JISCmail discussion provides rich qualitative evidence that LD work is effective. A current review is examining the impact on retention of different approaches to supporting students through study advice and personal development planning. We believe, however that it would be useful to undertake more systematic research to determine how LD can best serve student support and engagement in higher level learning.

6.2 *How the student experience differs in public and private universities*

We have no information to offer in direct response to this question.

6.3 *Examples of reasons for, and potential strategies to reduce, the non-completion of higher education programmes by students*

In our collective experience non-completion is a complex and many-faceted phenomenon, but evidence suggests (eg Tinto, 2006, Yorke 2000) that explicit support for students in developing skills for study as part of their programmes can have a positive impact on retention and completion of university study. Such initiatives are most likely to be successful when learning developers work collaboratively with subject specialists to embed support within programmes. Ample evidence for this is available from the LDHEN and the LearnHigher CETL, with a rich variety of examples of support, especially in pre-entry and first year contexts (eg the “Stepping Stones” programme at Bournemouth and “SAPRA” in Bradford). Other interventions known to be effective are those concentrating on formative assessment, and initiatives which familiarise students with examples of successful study practices and assignment work by other students—eg in peer learning or “PALS” schemes. At the University of Plymouth the “WrAssE” project is building an online library of examples of successful student assignments for use in learning about academic writing.

6.4 *The adequacy of UK higher education (HE) funding and student support packages, and implications for current and future levels of student debt*

Significant concern has expressed by LDHEN members over the last few years about the long-lasting impact of debt upon students, both in their increasingly instrumental attitudes to higher education generally, and their ability to devote sufficient time to study whilst simultaneously working to supplement their incomes.

6.5 *Any further action required by the Government and/or HEFCE to ensure that UK HEIs offer students a world class educational experience*

To build on the UK’s world-class higher educational experience, we think that considerably more could be done to encourage HEIs to offer systematic and effective support for learning. A learning development approach suggests that such work should be seen as central to university learning rather than peripheral, “bolt-on” or remedial. Engagement with inquiry into their own learning processes is valuable for students within any subject curriculum, and underpins knowledge acquisition and application for lifelong learning.

As a community of practice with over 350 subscribers to our JISCmail list, we can draw on the collective experience of our members in delivering direct and indirect forms of student support. ALDinHE is therefore in a position to provide the Committee with further information and examples of successful models of LD across the HE sector as and when required. Finally, we recommend that the committee reviews the UNESCO document referred to above (“The role of student affairs and services in higher education”) as a useful resource in relation to the issues of supporting and engaging students in HE institutions. (UNESCO (2002) [ONLINE] <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001281/128118e.pdf>

December 2008

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**Memorandum 26**

**Submission from the Medical Schools Council**

**STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES**

The Medical Schools Council represents the interests and ambitions of UK Medical Schools as they relate to the generation of national health, wealth and knowledge through biomedical research and the profession of medicine. As an organisation it occupies a unique position embracing medical undergraduate education, the entirety of health related research and a critical interface with the health service. Optimal patient care will not occur without a commitment to research to address unmet patient needs—and a commitment to the education of the next generation of doctors.

Together with the hard copy of this submission, we have supplied Select Committee members with a copy of our recent book—*Improving Lives, 150 Years of UK Medical School Achievements*. The book provides the clearest possible demonstration of the profound contribution of UK Medical Schools to the well being of Society. The ground-breaking advances emanating from Medical Schools which have doubled life-expectancy over the last 150 years, continue apace. In summary, our evidence presented below demonstrates that UK Medical Schools

- Are making good progress in seeking to select those applicants who will make the very best doctors of the future
- Are sharing best practice in seeking to attract applicants representative of the full spectrum of society
- Are working with the GMC to ensure that the education provided develops doctors who are fit to practise and who have the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours that will prepare them for a changing world over the course of their careers
- Are developing common records of achievement and are working together to develop improved assessment processes
- Are ensuring that the education of medical students occurs in a research rich environment that equips them always to question the evidence base and creates practitioners of the future, keen both to participate in and to support research.
- Are instilling in students their obligations always to enhance their scope of practice and to lead developments in ever-improved patient care.
- Require acknowledgement in the Research Excellence Framework, of funds received from the National Institute for Health Research and paid to NHS organisations to support joint research initiatives
- Would welcome greater commitment to education and research by NHS institutions. In particular we suggest that a demonstrable commitment to education and research form part of the NHS Operating Framework and that the Care Quality Commission requires evidence of this commitment in its annual appraisal of Trusts.

#### ADMISSIONS

1. The UK Clinical Aptitude Test (UKCAT) was conceived to improve the fairness and objectivity of the Admissions process for medicine. It arose partly from a widespread feeling that A-levels were failing to discriminate between candidates at the upper end of the scale of academic ability and also because of the additional worry that A levels appeared to be testing an ability to learn facts rather than an aptitude for critical thinking and problem-solving. A new tool for selection for medicine offered the opportunity to select on the basis of characteristics that medical schools require in those who will make the very best doctors of the future: the ability to handle complexity and ambiguity, to cope with stress, to be empathetic. It was also hoped that it would help to widen access to medicine by identifying potential in applicants from less-advantaged educational backgrounds and avoid the problems associated with under-estimation of A level scores in such students.

The UKCAT test is an appraisal of aptitudes, not of knowledge, measuring verbal reasoning, quantitative reasoning, abstract reasoning and decision analysis. Being a test of aptitude, not of knowledge of any curriculum, this should mean that candidates from all educational backgrounds are competing on equal terms and that the advantage from specific teaching for the test is minimised. It has now been used for three application rounds and evidence is emerging that it is meeting these objectives. A fee is charged for the test to meet the cost of delivery and of a research programme to probe its performance but students on Educational Maintenance Allowances or on income support do not have to pay the fee.

2. Widening Participation/ Access—Medical Schools have been at the forefront of a range of initiatives to encourage school children from less privileged backgrounds to consider medicine as a career. Initiatives include adjusted entry criteria for those from areas of educational disadvantage, summer schemes in medicine for students from local schools and targeted outreach work where medical students visit local secondary schools, providing mentoring and aspirational role models to whom secondary school children can relate. Furthermore some schools offer four year graduate programmes in medicine and 6 year programmes which include a foundation to medicine/ pre-medical year; both of these types of courses offer individuals from a broader range of academic backgrounds the opportunity to study medicine. The Medical Schools Council is in the process of updating its database of widening access initiatives, better to reflect achievements and good practice in this area across the UK and hopes to have completed the project by spring 2009.

3. Fitness to Practise—The GMC's primary responsibility is to protect patients and so it will not admit on to the Medical Register a person deemed unfit to practise. Medical students need to understand that the highest standards of professional behaviour are required from them. The Medical Schools Council and the

GMC are working closely together to define the attitudes and behaviours required of medical students and to make clear both to applicants and to students that behaviour that might be tolerated in students on a non-medical course is unacceptable in a future medical professional.

4. The MSC is also working with the GMC as it revises *Tomorrow's Doctors*—the framework for medical education in the UK.

#### THE BALANCE BETWEEN TEACHING AND RESEARCH

5. The population of clinical academics in the UK has declined since 2000—however the first signs are emerging that initiatives taken to stem the decline are starting to have an effect. It will be essential to ensure that clinical academia—with its challenging mix of teaching, research and service delivery—remains an attractive career option—particularly for women who now make up 60% of the student population. In the meantime, a great deal of teaching of medical students inevitably takes place in the NHS. It is vital that Trusts are correctly recompensed for this activity—and that teaching is seen as an important activity that is factored properly into job plans. The MSC welcomes the move towards greater transparency in the allocation of SIFT (the service increment for teaching). However it will be essential that the proposed new model—in which the a uniform per capita allocation will be made—has a mechanism to prevent destabilisation of those Trusts which for historical reasons, currently receive very much more than the proposed revised figure, an excess that largely supports tertiary services.

6. *150 years of UK Medical School Achievements*, demonstrates the important contribution from every single Medical School in the UK. The MSC welcomes the increased funding for bio-medical research and the acknowledgement of the importance of research both to UK plc and to individual lives. Translational research is often published in journals which, in previous RAEs had not been deemed high impact. The new Research Excellence Framework must adequately capture and recognise research for patient benefit—and it must recognise funds competitively awarded by NIHR—as of equal value to, for example those awarded by the Research Councils

7. Education, Research and Service Delivery form the three pillars of the NHS. The culture of target delivery militates against a commitment to the apparently less pressing needs of education and research. This situation will not change until Trust Chief Executives are incentivised to take education and research as seriously as service delivery. This should be a key objective for the new Care Quality Commission, and should be incorporated into the NHS Operating Framework. The Secretary of State for Health, in his response to Sir John Tooke's Inquiry into Modernising Medical Carers, accepted that SHA CEOs should be appraised annually on the steps taken to nurture the health/education relationship. It would be helpful if the results of such appraisals could be published in order that the local community might monitor the commitment to fostering ever closer working.

#### DEGREE CLASSIFICATION

8. Medical degrees are not classified in the UK and the MSC wishes this system to continue. Medical Schools support the introduction of a Higher Education Academic Record—and are actively involved in constructing a template for a common record of achievement. It is intended that such a record could help inform allocation of posts in the Foundation Programme—which takes place immediately after the end of the undergraduate degree.

9. The GMC is responsible for quality assurance of the medical education programmes offered by the UK's Medical Schools—through QABME—the Quality Assurance of Basic Medical Education wherein Schools are inspected in detail by a team of visitors twice every 10 years. Medical Schools are however keen to provide further evidence of the consistency of the products they deliver. They have recently created the Medical Schools Council Assessment Alliance and will be working together to develop a pool of examination questions.

January 2009

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#### Memorandum 27

##### Submission from the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit, Roehampton University, London

Written evidence in relation to:

- the balance between teaching and research
- student support and engagement

#### SUMMARY

- Research funding is traditionally seen as more prestigious than funding to develop or explore teaching methods or rewards for teaching excellence, because promotion still prioritises a traditional research profile.



- The focus on the RAE draws attention away from the scholarly, professional approach to researching teaching learning and assessment and the development of an infrastructure to successfully implement institutional change. We are at risk of being unprepared for the challenges of 21st century HE.
- Pedagogic development programmes for new academic staff are in place here and elsewhere, many aligned to the UK Professional Standards Framework but often they are not compulsory and not entirely valued by the institution. Ironically new staff often don't attend because they are too busy teaching and thus teach with no training, no awareness of the scholarship and research in this area. They research as professionals and teach as amateurs.
- In the current culture, established academic staff are not encouraged to enhance and develop their understanding of learning teaching and assessment even though professional frameworks exist through bodies such as SEDA (Staff and Educational Development Association).
- The changes to student populations, the development of new technologies for learning and new funding arrangements all require new approaches to learning teaching and assessment which go beyond the medieval lecture and seminar arrangement.

#### RESPONSES TO PARTICULAR ISSUES

##### *1. Levels of funding for, and the balance between, teaching and research in UK HEIs, and the adequacy of financial support for the development of innovative teaching methods and teaching/research integration*

1.1 The focus on the RAE draws attention away from a scholarly, professional approach to researching teaching, learning and assessment and the development of an infrastructure to successfully implement change. There is little incentive to be a caring, supportive motivating teacher.

1.2 We do need to find ways to support academic staff who, in their day to day teaching, are developing new methods and integrating teaching and research in exciting ways. Bidding for special teaching projects at university level and national level is sometimes seen as an additional task which they don't make time for because promotion is most commonly linked to one's research profile.

1.3 Inevitably in a university like ours the funding for research makes it difficult to adequately fund the development of early career researchers and the production of resulting publications. Research funding is not easy to secure (and becoming more difficult) but when staff do manage it, it does release them from some other duties. We often lose excellent teachers to research. What we desire are academic staff who can do both.

##### *2. The quality of teaching provision and learning facilities in UK and the extent to which they vary between HEIs*

2.1. While wholeheartedly welcoming the increase in student numbers, a University needs to invest in enhancing the teaching and learning experience. This is an area that has been neglected nationally and we continue to rely on outmoded methods and classrooms even though a growing body of research points to new and more cost effective, technologically rich, personalised pedagogies. Enhancement is rarely seen as a core activity and can be vulnerable to changes in HEFCE funding (such as TESS moving into core funding next year).

2.2. Teaching provision and facilities can vary enormously across a University as well as across HEI's. This is an equity issue.

2.3 An urgent priority is to maintain and enhance the professional development of new academic and academic support staff and the ongoing professional development of established staff through observation of teaching, development and scholarship programmes and promotion and appraisal frameworks which value such pedagogic development.

##### *3. The suitability of methods of assessing excellence in teaching and research and the impact of research assessment on these activities*

3.1. We recognize the value of schemes such as the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme, however significant research points to notions of the "teaching team", "communities of learning and of enquiry" and the wider holistic experience of the student. At this university we have encouraged group Teaching Fellowships to recognize this but the funding for these may be cut as Teaching Quality Enhancement Funds are replaced by TESS.

3.2. The impact of the RAE is well known—a drain on resources and on staff energy which could have been used to achieve the very outputs it was measuring. We are working at Roehampton to develop a promotion route for leadership in learning and teaching and as part of this we will identify the kind of teaching evidence a lecturer might use.

4. *the availability and adequacy of training in teaching methods for UK academics and the importance of teaching excellence for the academic career path, including consideration of the role of teaching fellows*

4.1. Like most other universities we offer a programme for new staff and new academic support staff recognized by the HE Academy and SEDA and aligned to the UK Professional Standards Framework. Those who take this route regularly speak of its value. We are excited by the creation of SEDA's Professional Development Framework but frustrated that most academic staff do not expect to engage with pedagogic professional development through their career. Few staff take the option of a promotion route for leadership in learning and teaching or of becoming a Teaching Fellow because the research route is so entrenched and nationally the sector constantly battles to encourage the majority of established staff to engage with learning and teaching issues. The evaluation of the National Teaching Fellowship scheme indicates how difficult it was for some to bring about pedagogic change having received their award. There needs to be more encouragement and esteem for pedagogic research and continuing professional development. Yet at the same time, we do not want to create separate posts—those who mainly teach and those who mainly research.

5. *the responsibilities of the Government and HEFCE in assuring (a) the quality of teaching provision and learning opportunities in UK HEIs; and (b) the balance between teaching and research in HEIs*

5.1. HEFCE could aid the sector by looking again at university HR infrastructure to support and enhance professional development in teaching. We still have a long way to go to develop robust mentoring, induction, promotion and appraisal frameworks.

5.2. Government needs to ensure that enhancement of learning and teaching and assessment remains at the core of the university enterprise if universities are to succeed and flourish with new types of students and new delivery methods. The value added to students by an institution would be a useful measure.

5.3. Any changes to the RAE need to militate against the distorting effect of the current exercise.

#### STUDENT SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

6. *The effectiveness of initiatives to support student engagement in the formulation of HE policy, and how the success or otherwise of these initiatives is being assessed*

6.1 Our experience is that many students would like to be more involved in policy formation and as co-researchers of the student experience. Too many university decisions are made without real evidence (see Lewis Elton's submission) and this would be a welcome development. The Scottish student engagement projects have been positively evaluated and could bring a benefit to the English system. We have found that the NSS provides an opportunity to engage with students on analysis and policy formulation and in doing so ensures that students feel valued by the institution.

7. *Examples of reasons for, and potential strategies to reduce, the non-completion of higher education programmes by students*

7.1. We are looking at a mix of hard and soft strategies to improve non completion through relationship building using our personal tutor system and by enhancing the technological structures for record keeping and communicating with students. It may be time to consider that the full time three year degree model needs to be revised as students drop in and out over a longer period of time. We may also find, with a recession that more mature students enter University perhaps more for professional development and interest than with the aim of gaining a degree. Such a market would of course come into conflict with current funding and assurance mechanisms. In addition it is clear that teaching methods have become much more personalized and student centred in schools and colleges and Universities can thus be quite a shock to many students. More needs to be done to build upon the work of the Lifelong Learning Networks to enhance teaching in the HE sector and to learn from the school and college sector.

8. *Any further action required by the Government and/or HEFCE to ensure that UK HEIs offer students a world class educational experience*

8.1 While welcoming the investment in recent years for the initial preparation of teachers in HE, we feel that further investment is essential to build capacity and develop those who lead and manage teaching staff and teaching innovation.

8.2 We also believe that there needs to be a focus upon on HR frameworks in universities to ensure long term professional scholarly pedagogic development for all those involved in supporting student learning.

8.3. Once former ring fenced funds for learning and teaching innovation become core funding then they are vulnerable to calls on that funding from across the University. Momentum can be lost and projects can stall.

## ENDORSEMENTS

We endorse the submissions of Professor Lewis Elton and SEDA.

December 2008

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**Memorandum 28**
**Submission from the University Alliance**

## STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

The University Alliance is a group of 24 Universities (20 in England, four in Wales) including pre- and post-1992 institutions who are not members of the Russell, 1994 or Million+ groups. English members of the Alliance are Bournemouth, Bradford, De Montfort, Gloucestershire, Hertfordshire, Huddersfield, Institute of Education, Kent, Lincoln, Liverpool John Moores, Manchester Metropolitan, Northumbria, Nottingham Trent, Open, Oxford Brookes, Plymouth, Portsmouth, Salford, Sheffield Hallam, West of England; our Welsh members are Aberystwyth, Glamorgan, UWIC, Newport.

Our evidence follows the structure given on the Committee website: [http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary\\_committees/ius/ius\\_301008.cfm](http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/ius/ius_301008.cfm)

## ADMISSIONS

*the effectiveness of the process for admission to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), including A-levels, Advanced Diplomas, apprenticeships and university entrance tests*

1. Our institutions have a mix of “selecting” and “recruiting” courses and believe that the current arrangements for undergraduate admissions through UCAS work well, and enable universities to optimise their positions each year with a considerable degree of certainty. We already accept a wide range of qualifications and will encourage applicants with Diplomas to apply to us. However, we are concerned that the system is becoming more complex, and that students are confused as there is a lack of clarity about the nature and purpose of newer qualifications. For example, Diploma names make them appear to be sector specific, yet they are being promoted as alternatives to more general A-level qualifications.

*the UK’s ability to meet government targets for Higher Education participation and the relevance of these targets*

2. The present constraints on funded numbers will prevent the achievement of the 50% target; our members expect a downturn in employer-based participation during the economic downturn.

*the implementation and success of widening participation initiatives such as Compact agreements, and the impact of the current funding regime on these objectives*

3. Alliance members are successful in widening participation, and welcome continued funding of initiatives such as Aim Higher.

*the role of the Government in developing and promoting fair access and admissions policies for the UK Higher Education sector*

4. Alliance members support fair access and admissions policies. We believe that the present student funding arrangements (both those run centrally and those of individual institutions) are unnecessarily complex and may limit the ability of students from under-represented groups to make a reasoned choice between institutions. The government will wish to monitor and incentivise fair access schemes, but their development should be the responsibility of autonomous institutions.

## THE BALANCE BETWEEN TEACHING AND RESEARCH

*levels of funding for, and the balance between, teaching and research in UK HEIs, and the adequacy of financial support for the development of innovative teaching methods and teaching/research integration*

5. Alliance members are all research active and benefit to varying extents from QR funding (as determined by the 2001 RAE). We oppose any further intensification of selectivity in research funding, and particularly any attempt to move away from the current policy of funding excellence wherever it is found. We are well placed to develop staff research profiles, recognizing that some will then move on to work at more research-intensive institutions. However, in areas of excellence we also attract staff from more research-intensive universities. We oppose the introduction of earmarked streams of funding for the development of innovative teaching methods and teaching/research integration, as our preference is to ensure that teaching is adequately funded to enable institutions to make these investments out of their block grants.

*the quality of teaching provision and learning facilities in UK and the extent to which they vary between HEIs*

6. We believe that the quality of teaching provision and learning facilities in the UK is high as evidenced by the relatively small number of serious issues raised in institutional visits by QAA. However, the position is fragile as both infrastructure spending and staff-student ratios are threatened by the level of capital and recurrent funding. There will always be variability between institutions, depending on the investment history and estate condition of particular HEIs. Adequate and predictable capital funding (or recurrent funding sufficient to service capital needs) is always needed by every institution.

*the suitability of methods of assessing excellence in teaching and research and the impact of research assessment on these activities*

7. We support the use of the national Student Survey to gain information on the quality of the student experience. QAA reviews tend to be too detailed, and not focused sufficiently on developmental issues. It is very important that the quality of teaching and of the student experience are measured in relation to the output. Simple measures of inputs, such as contact hours, can be very misleading where students are given support in a variety of ways, including through major investments in electronic resources. Alliance members support the use of a Research assessment process which includes a significant element of periodic peer review. We have many instances of innovative and selective investment in research, and a periodic RAE is helpful in gaining external input on the success of our investments. We will be concerned if the research assessment methodology focuses significantly in bibliometric indices because these are often flawed and open to manipulation through self citation or agreements to cite.

*the availability and adequacy of training in teaching methods for UK academics and the importance of teaching excellence for the academic career path, including consideration of the role of teaching fellows*

8. Our members expect new teachers to receive training through a postgraduate certificate or equivalent. There are problems with gaining independent assessments of teaching contributions which are comparable with the relatively straightforward peer review of research. Alliance members strongly value the teaching contribution of staff and support the work of the HE Academy in advising on appropriate methodologies for rewarding for teaching excellence.

*the responsibilities of the Government and HEFCE in assuring (a) the quality of teaching provision and learning opportunities in UK HEIs; and (b) the balance between teaching and research in HEIs*

9. The fundamental responsibility for both quality and the balance of activity lies with autonomous institutions, though external assurance is also necessary (QAA, NSS, RAE). Government and HEFCE control funding streams and therefore are bound to influence the priorities of institutions.

#### DEGREE CLASSIFICATION

*whether the methodologies used by UK HEIs to determine degree classifications and the distribution of degree classes awarded are appropriate, the potential methodologies for the standardisation of degree classifications within, and between, HEIs, and the effectiveness of the Quality Assurance Agency in monitoring degree standards*

10. The most effective form of assurance of standards lies in the external examiner system, and the use of external assessors in the validation of programmes. Alliance members support the development of more detailed statements of student achievement (such as transcripts) but are concerned that many employers want a simple summary measure to make at least their first selection of potential graduate employees.

*the advantages and disadvantages of the UK's system of degree classification and the introduction of the Higher Education Academic Record*

11. See above.

*the actions that universities, Government and others have taken, or should take, to maintain confidence in the value of degrees awarded by universities in the UK*

12. See above.

*the relationship between degree classification and portability*

13. Alliance members believe that it is very important to increase the portability of credit between institutions, particularly for students who are also in work and whose place of employment might change. Degree classification is not a major issue here: the questions lie in the acceptability of credit across institutions.

*the extent to which student plagiarism is a problem in HE, and the availability and effectiveness of strategies to identify, penalise and combat plagiarism*

14. Alliance members have robust mechanisms for the detection of plagiarism, and do not believe that the issue compromises the overall quality of qualifications achieved. We believe that the longer term solution lies in ensuring that students are appropriately trained in the appropriate conventions to be used when quoting the work of another. This can be a cultural issue, particularly for some students from overseas.

#### STUDENT SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

*the effectiveness of initiatives to support student engagement in the formulation of HE policy, and how the success or otherwise of these initiatives is being assessed*

15. We do not see strong engagement of students in the formulation of HE policy at a national level. The introduction of the new rules relating to ELQs, and the more recent changes in the student finance regulations bear no evidence of student consultation.

*how the student experience differs in public and private universities*

16. We have no evidence to offer.

*examples of reasons for, and potential strategies to reduce, the non-completion of higher education programmes by students*

17. We believe that completion rates could be improved if there was parity of funding between full- and part-time routes and if there were more straightforward ways to transfer between full and part-time study without forfeiting financial support. The UK has very high completion rates in comparison with other countries and this is evidence of the high level of personal support given to students in our universities.

*the adequacy of UK higher education (HE) funding and student support packages, and implications for current and future levels of student debt*

18. Alliance members are concerned to ensure that the current level of public funding for teaching, including the capital element is sustained or increased. As mentioned above, some aspects of our current excellent provision would be threatened by funding cuts. We are concerned at the level of student debt, and would not wish to see changes that materially increase that burden.

*any further action required by the Government and/or HEFCE to ensure that UK HEIs offer students a world-class educational experience*

19. Continuing recognition of the importance of institutional autonomy and of the importance of all types of institution to the achievement of national priorities for skills development, research, innovation and economic progress.

We are concerned that new immigration rules, including the points based immigration system will restrict the ability of academic experts to work in the UK, and so reduce opportunities for UK students to have a fully international experience with exposure to the best academics from across the world.

January 2009

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### Memorandum 29

#### Submission from the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) Programme

##### STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

##### Summary

- The SPA Programme leads on fair, professional good practice in admissions and works with higher education providers to enhance their practice, and to recommend they produce clear admissions policies which are transparent to applicants and their advisors.
- The applicant experience underpins the fairness agenda, and SPA is raising awareness in institutions for a strategic approach to providing a good service for applicants.
- The Schwartz Report Review, December 2008, highlights the progress made on fair admissions in higher education.
- SPA continues to work on admissions tests and the need for institutions to be transparent as to how they use tests as part of admissions decision-making.
- Improvements made by the HE sector led Delivery Partnership include the work of SPA on feedback to unsuccessful applicants and the development of more and better Entry Profiles.

- All staff involved in admissions, both academic and administrative need to be trained and have professional development opportunities.
- Progression to higher education relies on good information, advice and guidance for applicants and the use of contextual data as part of holistic assessment.
- There is already a huge amount of partnership working by higher education institutions with schools and colleges throughout the UK, but devolution and the impact of legislation is making admissions more complex.

1. *The effectiveness of the process for admission to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) including admissions tests*

1.1 The admissions to higher education process is the responsibility of each individual university and college of higher education as independent bodies, as laid down within the Higher Education Act 2004 for England and Wales, the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005, with similar legislation for Northern Ireland. The Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group's (Schwartz) Report *Fair Admissions to Higher Education: Recommendations for Good Practice*, 2004, acknowledged that institutions should be able to set their own criteria, choose their own assessment methods, and select their own students. However, it recognised it was important that everyone has confidence in the integrity of the admissions process, and access to higher education matters to many people, as does fair admissions.

1.2 One recommendation from the Schwartz Report was the need for a central source of expertise and advice on admissions issues for higher education provider institution (universities, colleges of higher education and further education colleges offering higher education programmes). The Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) Programme was established in May 2006 to lead on the development of fair admissions, providing an evidence base and guidelines for good practice and in helping universities and colleges maintain and enhance excellence and professionalism in admissions, student recruitment and widening participation across the HE sector. SPA is a small independent programme, funded by all UK HE funding councils until 2011 and works throughout the UK to support institutions to review their policies and procedures to make them more transparent; to use fair methods that are open and accountable via internal monitoring and evaluation structures and are undertaken and managed by professional staff, whether they be academic or administrators. SPA is increasingly having an impact on the professionalism of admissions within HEIs, as has been borne out through the work of the Programme's external evaluator. Over the next three years SPA will focus more on working with senior management teams within institutions on topics concerning modernising admissions and the associated good practice.

1.3 As institutions are responsible for their own admissions policy and procedures there is a diversity of approaches in this area which reflect institutions' missions and teaching and learning strategies, processing may be centralised or decentralised, and there is also diversity in the range of applicants applying. In assessing applicants' ability, motivation and potential to succeed in higher education the majority of courses at the majority of institutions will make decisions for full-time undergraduate courses on the basis of the UCAS application, and offers will be made to all those who meet the entry requirements. Only at a small number of institutions (and even within these institutions often only for some courses) where there are many well qualified applicants, may admissions decision-makers use additional factors as part of the decision-making process. The range of information they use will depend on the level of competition for, and type of, course the student applies for and the demands of the course. It could include the use of interviews, auditions, material evidence or portfolios, school performance, admissions tests, assessment of prior experiential learning, and other relevant factors in the applicant's background as part of holistic assessment of the individual applicant.

1.4 In addition to full-time undergraduates HEIs also consider and admit applicants to part-time courses, postgraduate taught and research courses, applicants studying at the institution or at a distance, such as work based learners. The type of students applying therefore also vary, they maybe 17 or 18 year olds, mature students, those with no qualifications considered on the basis of assessed experiential learning, those with disabilities, care leavers, those with little or no experience of higher education in their family and many others. HEIs have policies and procedures to cover the types of courses and students they consider to ensure decisions are made fairly and consistently.

1.5 SPA believes that "the applicant experience" and institutions' customer service and support plays a role here. There has been much progress on what makes a good student experience within HEIs, but the front end of that debate, the applicant and their experience of the institution they apply to is the start of the student journey. This underpins fair admissions practice—and is central to ensuring applicants have the information they need to make their applications and make the right choices for them and that institutions get the applicants they want. SPA is starting to explore these issues and their implications and has identified four stages:

- Pre-application
- Application
- Post-application (Offer making and relationship building; Reject and applicant feedback)
- Transition.

SPA is working on good practice and raising awareness of the need for institutions to have an integrated approach to the applicant experience and is disseminating this information via conferences and events. The applicant experience is the first part of strategic enrolment management that some institutions have introduced. Other work undertaken in this area includes the QAA Enhancement Themes in Scotland, which looked at transition and the first year experience.

#### 1.6 *Schwartz Report Review 2008*

- (a) The Schwartz Report Review, which examined the implementation by universities and colleges of the principles of fair admissions outlined in the Schwartz Report 2004, was undertaken in 2008 and published on 10 December 2008. This review was commissioned by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) in response to the Schwartz Report recommendation to Government, that a further review be undertaken after three years. The review was undertaken by a research team based at Sheffield Hallam University and managed by the SPA Programme.
- (b) The researchers found that a number of the principles in the Schwartz Report had been successfully adopted by the higher education sector, particularly in relation to the areas of transparency, staff training and continuing professional development, aspects of professionalism and the use of technology to share resources and information.
- (c) The Review Report highlights the positive changes that have taken place in admissions to higher education over the last three years, however there is more to be done to improve transparency of admissions policies and procedures for applicants and their advisors and SPA will work with institutions on this. The Review Report is on the SPA website: [www.spa.ac.uk/schwartz-report-review08.html](http://www.spa.ac.uk/schwartz-report-review08.html)

#### 1.7 *Admissions tests*

- (a) One of SPA's objectives has been to review the use of admissions tests by higher education institutions in the UK and in particular issues related to the validity and rationale underlying the use of tests and the need to be transparent about how test results are used to add value to the admissions decision-making process. SPA made a written submission to the Education and Skills Select Committee Inquiry into Testing and Assessment in June 2007, and this document and background to the work of SPA in this area is on the SPA website at <http://www.spa.ac.uk/admission-tests/index.html>
- (b) In 2008 SPA identified a total of 67 tests in use in the UK. This is an increase of ten on the 57 recorded in 2007—these are not new tests but are due to institutions' increased transparency regarding their use of tests as part of the admissions process. SPA has demonstrated that admissions tests are not a big part of HE sector admissions decision-making. Tests are used by about 0.7% of the 49,000 courses in the UCAS scheme and by a small proportion of institutions (about 16% of the 309 HE providers in the UCAS scheme for 2009 entry).
- (c) SPA issued two good practice briefings highlighting some of the issues around tests in December 2008. One was for schools and colleges, the other for HEIs.
- (d) It is important to note that admissions tests, where used, only form part of the admissions decision-making process as they provide only one piece of information about an applicant. Details of the tests and the briefing documents can be found on the SPA website at <http://www.spa.ac.uk/admission-tests/index.html>

#### 1.8 *HE sector led Delivery Partnership.*

- (a) The HE sector led Delivery Partnership was set up in 2006 to take forward a number of reforms to the current applications system arising from the Government recommendations for improving the HE applications process. These changes were aimed at improving the transparency, efficiency and effectiveness of the current process for both applicants and HEIs.
- (b) *Feedback to unsuccessful applicants on request.* SPA and UCAS have been instrumental in supporting HEIs in taking forward the work on feedback to unsuccessful applicants and the development of more and better quality Entry Profiles (EPs). The Delivery Partnership has agreed that enhanced feedback, together with an increasing number of clear and transparent EPs developed by HEIs for applicants on UCAS Course Search, should go a long way towards changing any perceptions of unfairness in admissions by some stakeholder groups.
- (c) *Entry Profiles* give applicants more information about the course entry qualifications/ levels and required criteria such as personal skills and qualities, relevant work experience, motivation, audition, interview or admissions tests. EPs are web-based, written by universities and colleges, located in UCAS Course Search. EPs help match applicant's pre-HE study with the HE courses, and help applicants to tailor post-16 study more precisely to HE needs. There is evidence now that

applicants are more likely to apply for a course with an EP than one without (UCAS August 2008). The Delivery Partnership set a target for 100% of courses to have EPs by September 2009, the current figure is just over 83%. SPA and UCAS are currently supporting HEIs to achieve this.

The impact of the Delivery Partnership's work has overall had a positive effect on the admissions processes to higher education and these reforms will be evaluated in 2010–11.

### 1.9 *Training and Professional Development*

All of the issues around admissions are underpinned by the need to ensure that all staff involved with admissions decision-making, student recruitment, schools and colleges liaison etc. are trained and have access to continuing professional development. This is particularly important in terms of interviews, and other assessment techniques requiring specific skills, in order to ensure reliability and fairness and in the light of the continuing increasingly complex nature of admissions decision-making.

### 1.10 *The use of electronic information*

- (a) The effectiveness of the process for admission is supported by the increasing use of electronic information exchange. For example the move to paperless applications through UCAS or at least "paperlite" processes, 99.9% of UCAS applications are now sent to HEIs electronically, but in the majority of cases a printed paper form is also still sent. There are good examples of institutions where limited use of paper for admissions has been introduced and is successful.
- (b) Increased use of electronic information is developing rapidly, for example the importance of HEI websites; admissions and student record systems and the move to web based xml-links with UCAS etc. allow greater flexibility in information and systems available to HEIs. The potential for UCAS Apply to be tailored to individual HEI needs is becoming a reality.
- (c) Using their own institution data and statistics obtained via UCAS, HESA and other sources as well as national data provide rich sources of information for institutions to inform their widening participation, marketing, targeting, recruitment, tracking, monitoring and evaluation of admissions policies. This includes the Unistats website (previously TQI) which includes the National Student Survey results with more links being made from this site to UCAS Course Search.

## 2. *The role of the Government in developing and promoting fair access and admissions policies for the UK Higher Education sector*

2.1 *Admissions Policies* As referenced in paragraph 1.1 above, admissions are the responsibility of universities and colleges themselves. SPA was established to work with HEIs to develop and share good practice and HEIs must publish admissions policies for applicants and equip all in admissions to implement policy consistently. SPA is aware from its visits to HE providers and its research on websites etc. that generally HEIs publish their admissions policies, however, the level of detail tends to vary. SPA is currently working on guidance to support HEIs in further developing their good practice and in reviewing, and publishing a transparent and fair admissions policy. These policies may include the use of additional or contextual factors; a wider range of qualifications at level 3 as part of holistic admissions decision-making; and publication of information for applicants about local and regional partnership arrangements, compacts, progression agreements etc.

2.2 Monitoring and evaluation of policies in admissions, and the practices involved in admissions decision-making via internal admissions, teaching and learning or other committees is an important part of quality assurance and accountability of the admissions policies and procedures within institutions. Institutions need to ensure they know that policies are understood and are being followed and monitored. This should also be covered through the institution's adherence to the precepts within the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) Code of Practice on admissions to HE (2006).

### 2.3 *Widening Participation Strategic Assessments (England)*

SPA, alongside Universities UK, GuildHE and other stakeholders has been involved in discussions with HEFCE and OFFA with regards to bringing together an institution's access agreement, widening participation strategy together with a high level statement on admissions. HEFCE guidance for institutions on these Widening Participation Strategic Assessments will be issued in January 2009.

### 2.4 *National Council for Educational Excellence (NCEE) Recommendations*

- (a) Highlights from the NCEE HE strand which impact on admissions include the need for more and better information, advice and guidance (IAG) in schools and colleges. This refers to IAG in relation to subject choices and progression routes to HE as part of the applicant experience. It will be important for HEIs to be involved in discussions with DCSF/DIUS on taking this forward and with all the UK administrations, given IAG with regard to progression to higher education is a UK wide issue.
- (b) HEIs are also recommended to use more information to select applicants including additional and contextual data. SPA has worked with UCAS on the complex and sometimes controversial issues



surrounding the use of different types of contextual data. Currently many institutions use contextual data for monitoring purposes after the applicant has been admitted, and some admissions staff use contextual data as part of the decision-making process. In taking this recommendation forward there are a number of issues that HEIs will need to consider such as ensuring fairness and equity to all applicants, that the data used is reliable and valid and that admissions staff are trained in how to interpret and use the data. SPA will continue to develop these points of principle to support institutions in their decision-making process.

### 3. *Issues around widening participation in higher education*

3.1 The Schwartz Report highlighted that generally there was no evidence of bias against students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds or from particular schools and colleges (Schwartz Report 2004, Section C1, page 8) and that it was the differential rates of application rather than bias in admissions procedures that was the main cause of under-representation of disadvantaged groups at some institutions. More recently this has been reinforced by research undertaken in 2008 by the Sutton Trust for the NCEE which reported that the main cause of low representation in higher education by certain groups was most likely due to poor prior attainment and lower aspirations before the age of 16.

3.2 This needs to be addressed by HEIs working with schools and colleges and a great deal of good practice in these areas can be evidenced by what HEIs are achieving through Aimhigher and the Lifelong Learning Networks in England, though Reaching Higher in Wales and Learning for All in Scotland. HEIs have many ways in which they are already working together to raise aspiration and academic attainment amongst young people resulting in increasing the participation in higher education. The compact agreements with schools and colleges that many HEIs have and the progression agreements with colleges through the Lifelong Learning Networks in England have already shown what can be achieved by HEIs working in partnership with schools and colleges. These go much further than “fair access” which is sometimes narrowly defined in terms of getting more applicants from poorer backgrounds in to certain universities, rather than addressing the much larger number of students with level 3 qualifications who never progress to higher education. Recently 13 universities agreed to start work on sharing how they can recognise each others compact arrangements and this is a welcome development.

3.3 Detailed case studies of a number of compact agreements which highlighted a number of good practices were published by HEFCE in September 2008. The purpose of this report was to provide information about compact schemes, raise awareness of them across the sector, show how they contributed to outreach and recruitment activities, and set out some key principles for their use and further development. It was published as an HEFCE issues paper September 2008/32 and can be seen at [http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2008/08\\_32/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2008/08_32/)

### 4. *Impact of Devolution*

SPA, UCAS and UUK are UK wide, but an increasing number of initiatives and developments are going forward that are “administration specific” further complicating the admissions scene for applicants and universities which recruit UK wide. The increasingly different requirements, aspirations and priorities of the four different administrations of the UK, and the impact of initiatives implemented by them on cross border applications make this ever more complex. These issues include student finance—tuition fees and bursaries, application numbers and demographics, changes in the 14–19 curriculum, differences in the emphasis within widening access/widening participation work and in the role of FE and skills.

### 5. *The impact of legislation*

The complexities around the different aspects of legislation and administrative processes in public life make the admissions process more complex. This includes equality and diversity, safeguarding and child protection, contract law around offer making, the new processes regarding criminal record checks etc., which again may differ in the devolved administrations.

*December 2008*

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## Memorandum 30

### Submission from Dr Rob Penhallurick<sup>78</sup>

#### INQUIRY INTO STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

##### Main points:

- This submission is concerned only with degree classification
- Credentials and concerns of the writer

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<sup>78</sup> Swansea University.

- Examples of problems: consistency of grades, extenuating circumstances claims, plagiarism, MA schemes
- Concluding summary

1. I make this brief submission specifically on the matter of degree classification and standards. It is not in any way exhaustive, but merely a short personal summary and illustration of issues. It arises out of concerns that I have on what I perceive to be evidence of relaxation of traditional standards in awarding grades and degrees in universities in England and Wales.

2. My credentials are as follows: I have worked in higher education since 1983, including a five-year spell in a Finnish university; I have had a good deal of involvement with the “quality” agenda; I took part in several audits (internal and as external auditor), and was on the list of QAA subject reviewers; I have been a head of department, and deputy head of school; I have been an external examiner at undergraduate and postgraduate level. I am also a parent, whose three children are, one by one, attending university.

3. My concerns derive from observations and lengthy experience. I do not refer to statistics, I refer to my experience. This means that my comments are, from a certain point of view, sensitive in nature, and could be linked to practice at certain institutions. I do not wish these comments to be taken as grievances against individual institutions, because (i) I believe the examples that I refer to are representative of common practice, and (ii) if I felt I had a grievance then I would pursue it at the local level first.

4. In summary, my belief is that a typical degree awarded in the Arts & Humanities (I cannot speak for other areas) is worth less than its equivalent of even five years ago, and certainly less than ten or twenty years ago. This is despite the proliferation of quality controls, some aspects of which, I believe, contribute to declining standards.

5. The UK university system has, over the last two decades especially, changed from an elite system to a mass system. This inevitably means that the intake to academic degrees has changed. Student numbers have risen considerably, and staff resources have become stretched. Departments no longer simply accept only the highest quality candidates. A highly developed quality assurance system has gradually been introduced. Its benefits are, in summary, a greater systematization and regularization of procedures. Its weaknesses are, in summary, that it masks falling standards, offering staff a refuge from rigorously and fairly applying their expert judgements on the quality of student work.

6. For example, one of the generally accepted axioms of the quality agenda is that delivery and assessment should be matched to the quality and character of intake. If a department or institution fails to do so it runs the risk of appearing to be out of step with what appears to happen in other institutions—it may appear to be awarding too few firsts, for example. Thus statistical comparisons become a major mechanism for “ensuring” consistency of quality. This can occur at cross-institutional level or it can occur down to departmental level, where statistical analysis allows comparison of marks across modules. However, what this means is that, no matter what the level of intake in any given year, the spread of results will remain the same from year to year. This promotes a fallacious understanding of standards. As a consequence, over time, standards are eroded. In the Arts and Humanities, there are clear, easily identified requirements for a good piece of written academic work, which can be summarized as “What grades mean”. Thus, for example, a 1st-class piece should, amongst other things, be free of linguistic errors, and should contain excellent specialist knowledge and a clear line of argument. A piece that is poorly written and shows no specialist knowledge should get a very low fail. These are requirements that can be consistently applied, down the years, whereas matching assessment and grading to intake leads to varying standards, down the years, but gives the appearance of consistency. At the lower end especially, there is a growing reluctance to use the full range of marks. Staff are not encouraged to stand by their expert judgement. Institutions fear student appeals more than they worry about compromising staff judgements.

7. Another example is the misuse of “extenuating” or “mitigating circumstances” or “impaired performance” claims. It is absolutely correct that students who experience difficulties should receive full and proper support, in order to complete their work, by means of extended deadlines and such. The modularization of degrees and a much greater emphasis on coursework rather than final exams means that the numbers of cases of personal and other difficulties affecting students’ work has increased enormously. Exam boards as a matter of course are told of such cases. A disturbing trend is for students’ marks to be adjusted (sometimes within regularized limits) upon the acceptance of an extenuating circumstances claim. The exam board is then asked, in effect, to ratify an imagined mark—that is, to imagine how that student would have performed if things had been different. This—as I believe boards are discovering—is a road with no end.

8. Plagiarism, it is accepted, is a widespread problem. Institutions need clear and firm procedures for dealing with unfair practice. However, a worrying trend is for institutions to allow students who have been found guilty of plagiarism to resit the modules concerned, a procedure which treats cheating in the same way as honest failure. Possibly, this stems from a fear of legal action, as students who perpetrate plagiarism often claim ignorance as a defence.

9. At MA level, universities have been under pressure to recruit more students, particularly non-EU students who pay much more in fees. The result is that new MA schemes have been introduced whose major advantage (to institutions) is their cost-effectiveness. Schemes can be introduced which share modules with

other schemes, thereby minimizing resourcing problems and maximizing recruitment. The academic content of these schemes—as dictated by intake—is sometimes more appropriate to diploma than to postgraduate level.

10. In all of this we see universities, and their staff, under pressure to maintain an outward appearance of consistent standards. I have chosen a small number of the more obvious and easily summarized symptoms. The pressure ultimately is financial—institutions do not want their recruitment levels to fall. But in reality, standards have fallen, because of a lack of courage, a failure to stand by the long-standing hallmarks of good academic work. Staff know it, and employers know it. Numbers of firsts have gone up. The 2.ii and 3rd are endangered species. At any level, in any context, staff are discouraged, by statistical systems as much as anything, from awarding low fails. Thus it appears as if standards are rising, but the real effect is to devalue degrees.

December 2008

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### Memorandum 31

#### Submission from the Catholic Education Service for England and Wales

##### INQUIRY INTO STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

###### Summary

1. The diversity of higher education provision in England and Wales is a major strength of the system because it enables students to choose the type of higher education institution (HEI) in which they want to study. Church colleges, including Catholic HEIs form an important part of this diversity.

2. Church colleges enable students to elect to study within an institution whose mission and structures are informed by the Christian faith and values. This is particularly important for students preparing for careers such as teaching and social work or studying for degrees in theology. Church colleges make a notable contribution to the supply of teachers and educational leaders in both the community and faith based sectors. However, church colleges also appeal to students of other faiths and none.

3. It is important that funding arrangements do not militate against small institutions or unreasonably reduce choice and diversity by the impact of funding mechanisms.

4. The introduction of the policy on ELQs has had implications for those studying for Ministry and, although data has yet to be collected, we suspect on other aspects of student recruitment and study.

5. Chaplaincies form an important part of student and staff support. They contribute to the unique character and experience in many HEIs, whether of a religious foundation or otherwise.

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Catholic Church has a long tradition of involvement in the provision of higher education in England. A Catholic higher education foundation is understood as an *academic institution which in a rigorous and critical fashion assists in the advancement of human dignity and cultural heritage through research, teaching and services offered to local, national and international communities. Ex Corde Ecclesiae 1990 para 12: quoted in The Canon Law Society of Great Britain and Ireland The Canon Law: Letter and Spirit, p 442*

1.2 There are three Catholic HEIs in England. They are:

- Newman University College which has an excellent record for the quality of its courses and consistently has one of the best graduate employment rates of UK colleges and universities. In recent years very positive inspection reports have been received from the QAA and OFSTED, including an “outstanding” grade, for its latest inspection. The relatively small class sizes at Newman enables an interactive teaching style and the staff to student ratio enables students to have individual attention and support.
- St Mary’s University College, Twickenham with over 3,000 students has a strong academic record with an excellent track record of placing graduates in good employment or appropriate postgraduate study. It offers a range of foundation, undergraduate and postgraduate programmes across a wide variety of subject areas, as well as short vocational courses. Research and postgraduate study attract students from all over the country. St Mary’s has also been numbered in the top universities in student satisfaction surveys.
- Leeds, Trinity and All Saints is a Higher Education Institution with just under 3,000 students. It received a glowing report from its latest Quality Assurance Agency Institutional Audit Report (2003). It has “good” Ofsted scores for its primary teacher-training programmes. 100% of newly qualified Primary Education teachers surveyed who trained there rated their training as very good or good (TDA NQT Survey 2007). According to the National Student Survey (2006) Leeds Trinity history students are officially the “most satisfied” history students in the country. 95% of all graduates from Leeds Trinity are in employment or further study within six months of leaving and the college came top in the “best for jobs” Sunday Times list.

1.3 Additionally there are a number of HEIs which are joint institutions with other providers or which have other clear Catholic connections or foundations. These include:

- Heythrop College, University of London <http://www.heythrop.ac.uk/>
- Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool <http://www.hope.ac.uk/>
- Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology, Cambridge <http://www.margaretbeaufort.cam.ac.uk/>
- Maryvale Institute, Birmingham <http://www.maryvale.ac.uk/>
- Roehampton University, London <http://www.roehampton.ac.uk/>
- University of Wales, Newport <http://www.newport.ac.uk/>
- Ushaw College, Durham <http://www.ushaw.ac.uk/>

1.4 Catholic HEIs play a pivotal role in training teachers for Catholic schools and providing ongoing professional development. They also have a strong focus and good track record in providing courses related to community care, such as youth ministry, youth work, counselling and health. Students at Catholic HEIs come from diverse backgrounds. For example about 25% of the Newman students are Catholic and about 11% of its students are Asian.

The widening participation agenda has been successfully embraced by all Catholic HEIs and Newman is a good example of a college whose ethos and personal support makes it attractive to women of diverse ethnic backgrounds and non-traditional entrants of HE.

## 2. DIVERSITY AND CHOICE

2.1 (See 1.4) The variety of higher education institutions in England and Wales is an important aspect of provision. Because of the different types of institutions students can elect to study in a context that best fits their needs. Church colleges which include Catholic, Anglican and Methodist colleges enable students to study at an institution which is informed by respect for religious beliefs and values. This makes them attractive to many beyond the Catholic sector and also helps in promoting community cohesion.

The Catholic HEIs have also demonstrated a positive impact on diversity and choice in the way in which they have been in the vanguard of foundation degrees, often recruiting from under-represented groups. Catholic HEIs play an important role in preparing teachers to teach in Catholic schools.

2.2 The three Catholic HEIs are relatively small institutions. As in the case of Newman College, this means that they can offer students interactive and individualised teaching. It is important that funding for HEIs takes account of the needs of small institutions.

## 3. ELQs

3.1 The Government's policy on not funding qualifications for those students who already possess an equivalent qualification will increase the cost of degrees for some students preparing for Ministry or lay service in the Church. HEFCE has been very helpful in facilitating the development of alternative routes, such as Foundation Degrees but there remains some concern about this issue.

## 4. CHAPLAINCIES

4.1 Chaplaincies are an important part of student support. In the Catholic colleges and in the older established universities there may be a separate Catholic chaplaincy or a Catholic (ordained or lay) working in an ecumenical or inter-faith chaplaincy. They provide students with advice and support on a variety of issues and also support staff.

4.2 The Church of England supported by many of the main faith communities in the UK, published on 15 January 2008, a report into the work of university and college chaplains, *Faiths in Higher Education Chaplaincy*. Among a range of insights and recommendations, it calls on Higher Education Institutions and the Government to continue to invest in chaplaincies to help them further their significant contribution to social cohesion. <http://www.cofe.anglican.org/info/education/hefe/he/faithsinhe/fihcrep.pdf>

December 2008

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## Memorandum 32

### Submission from the National Union of Students

#### “STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES” INQUIRY

##### INTRODUCTION

The National Union of Students (NUS) is a voluntary membership organisation comprising a confederation of local students unions, or similar organisations, in colleges and universities throughout the UK. We have 600 constituent members, which is virtually every college and university in the country. As such we represent the interests of over seven million students; more than two million of whom are studying at UK higher education institutions (HEIs)<sup>79</sup>. NUS is one of the largest student organisations in the world.

NUS welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Innovation, Universities, Skills and Science Select Committee’s inquiry into “Students and Universities”.

##### SUMMARY

- NUS strongly supports participation in higher education from all those who have the potential to benefit from it. To this end, we would support the development of post-qualification admissions (PQA), the creation of a national bursary scheme and more rigorous widening participation (WP) policies.
- NUS believes that the 2009 higher education funding review must be wide and deep enough to address significant changes to the sector and the student demographic, and to allow the creation of an equitable and sustainable funding system. The review must recognise current and projected student debt levels, the case for greater public funding and disparities in funding and support for part-time students.
- The higher education sector faces huge challenges from changes in the student demographic and patterns of study. These challenges must be confronted and the sector must become more flexible, particularly in admissions and credit accumulation frameworks.
- More concentrated work is needed to ensure information, advice and guidance (IAG) is clearly understood and that applicants and students can navigate their way through the higher education system. This is particularly important for mature applicants and those intending to study part-time.
- Sustained investment in student engagement is needed at both local and national levels to ensure the learner voice is at the heart of higher education. The creation of higher education policy should involve genuine and wide student engagement.

##### ADMISSIONS

1. NUS strongly supports participation in higher education from all those who have the potential to benefit from it. In addition to the economic benefits there are many social benefits of a better educated society as highlighted in a 2003 HEFCE report<sup>80</sup>.

2. The number of people going on to higher education has significantly increased over the last thirty years and yet, during that period, the proportion of those going from the lowest socio-economic groups has barely increased. In 2005, the most advantaged 20% of young people were up to six times more likely to enter higher education than the most disadvantaged 20%<sup>81</sup>.

3. In addition to widening participation it is essential that the admissions process is both fair and seen to be fair. NUS believes that a system based on predicted grades, especially where over half of these grades are inaccurate<sup>82</sup>, should be changed as soon as it is practical to do so. A post-qualification application (PQA) system is essential to ensure confidence in the university admissions process.

4. The 2004 Higher Education Act enshrined the responsibility for admissions with individual institutions and so the improvements in the processes are the responsibility of each institution. However, with 169 HEIs across the UK, each with responsibility for their own admissions procedures—as well as the knock-on impact on schools, colleges, exam boards—it is clear that to implement a PQA process we need significant political pressure from the Government to overcome the vested interests of different parties.

5. NUS would also stress that grades should not be the sole determinant in any application process. HEIs should be making admissions based in significant part on assessing the potential of the individual.

<sup>79</sup> For the sake of brevity, the terms university, universities, HEI and HEIs are used interchangeably in this document. It is also worth noting in addition that about 8% of all HE students are taught in FE colleges and with the recent passing of the 2007 Further Education and Training Act, which allows FE colleges to apply for foundation degree awarding powers, this number will continue. For more information from NUS on HE in FE please see the NUS (2007) *Higher Education Handbook* <http://resource.nusonline.co.uk/media/resource/HEHandbookWeb.pdf>

<sup>80</sup> HEFCE (2003) *Revisiting the benefits of higher education* [http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/2003/rd05\\_03/rd05\\_03.doc](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/2003/rd05_03/rd05_03.doc)

<sup>81</sup> HEFCE (2005) *Young Participation in Higher Education* [http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2005/05\\_03/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2005/05_03/)

<sup>82</sup> Schwartz, S. (2004) *Admissions to Higher Education Review* <http://www.admissions-review.org.uk/downloads/finalreport.pdf>

6. The information, advice and guidance (IAG) provided to applicants is essential in ensuring that they attend the right institution and pursue the right course for them; these are two of the key reasons cited by students for not continuing their studies<sup>83</sup>. This information should provide reliable and independent information about courses and the financial support that they will receive. NUS therefore calls for a single source to provide all necessary information for potential applicants, whilst advice and guidance should be further personalised. It is vital that part-time and mature applicants receive appropriate IAG.

7. UCAS should provide information about part-time and postgraduate courses, and where appropriate should provide an application route.

8. Rising standards in schools, with more young people achieving higher A-level grades, has made it harder for universities to choose between well-qualified applicants and has resulted in a number of institutions introducing entrance exams. NUS is concerned that these exams are often an extra barrier for those from families with no experience of higher education and that certain well-resourced schools will be able to provide additional coaching and preparation for their pupils.

9. A-levels are seen as the usual route to higher education for younger applicants, yet less than half of young people take this qualification. Of those that achieve at least two pass grades, the vast majority already go into higher education. It is therefore important both to increase the number of young people staying on to take A-levels and to ensure that HEIs do more to accept students with different qualifications.

10. If higher education is to truly deliver on the ambitious and progressive targets for widening participation it will need to become a lot more flexible in its provision of courses and HEFCE will need to be more flexible in the institutional funding for courses with more funding for modules and smaller chunks of credit.

11. Many HEIs do much excellent work in widening participation, and it is important to ensure that schemes such as AimHigher are properly funded to ensure that this work can continue and be enhanced. It is also important to ensure that this work happens at a much younger age, as highlighted in the recent NCEE report<sup>84</sup>. It is not just a question of raising aspiration, but of raising achievement.

12. The Government also created the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) through the 2004 Higher Education Act. OFFA aims to “to promote and safeguard fair access to higher education for under-represented groups in light of the introduction of variable tuition fees in 2006–07.”<sup>85</sup> It is increasingly clear that OFFA does not have the powers or resources to meet that aim.

13. NUS is concerned that differential bursary offers are available to students attending different institutions, and we are concerned that bursaries are being allocated on criteria not related to financial need<sup>86</sup>.

14. The current bursary arrangements are complex, and create difficulties for students in making comparisons between different packages of financial support on offer at different institutions. This is evident from the operation of the first year of the new finance regime, in which 64% of HEIs distributed less than they anticipated on bursaries and 12,000 eligible students missed out on receiving them<sup>87</sup>.

15. NUS has called for a national bursary scheme, supported by other groups such as the Million + group of university vice-chancellors and the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) think tank in its September 2008 report<sup>88</sup>.

## QUALIFICATIONS

16. NUS believes that, following Lord Dearing’s Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education<sup>89</sup> in 1997 and through the more recent findings of the Burgess Review<sup>90</sup>, the current system of honours degree classification is not fit for purpose.

17. According to the findings of the Burgess Group, higher education faces the challenge of developing consistent reports on student achievement that describe the full range of accomplishment and can live alongside simpler summative judgments<sup>91</sup>.

<sup>83</sup> NAO (2007), *Staying the course: The retention of students in higher education* [http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/nao\\_reports/06-07/0607616.pdf](http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/nao_reports/06-07/0607616.pdf)

<sup>84</sup> NCEE (2008) *National Council for Educational Excellence: Recommendations* <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/ncee/docs/7898-DCSF-NatCouncilEd.pdf>

<sup>85</sup> OFFA (2008) <http://www.offa.org.uk/about/>

<sup>86</sup> Callender, C. (forthcoming) *Institutional Aid in England: Promoting Widening Participation or Perpetuating Inequalities?*, p.11

<sup>87</sup> NAO (2008), *Widening participation in higher education*, p.35 [http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/nao\\_reports/07-08/0708725.pdf](http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/nao_reports/07-08/0708725.pdf)

<sup>88</sup> HEPI (2008) *Financial support in English universities: a national bursary scheme* <http://www.hepi.ac.uk/downloads/37NationalBursaryfull.pdf>

<sup>89</sup> NCIHE, Dearing, R. (1997), *Higher Education in the Learning Society*

<sup>90</sup> UUK (2007) *Beyond the Honours Degree Classification: The Burgess Group Final Report* [http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Publications/Bookshop/Documents/Burgess\\_final.pdf](http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Publications/Bookshop/Documents/Burgess_final.pdf)

<sup>91</sup> UUK (2007), *Beyond the Honours Degree Classification: The Burgess Group Final Report* [http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Publications/Bookshop/Documents/Burgess\\_final.pdf](http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Publications/Bookshop/Documents/Burgess_final.pdf)

18. The “student experience” now includes many opportunities for non-formal learning that are critical to students’ progression and employability. These include volunteering activity, student union involvement and part-time work. NUS believes that HEIs should recognise and record these achievements and help students articulate the knowledge and skills that they have gained as part of a more holistic exit document.

19. NUS supports the introduction of the Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR) as a positive step toward reforming the degree classification system and is pleased to be working with the HEIs currently trialling the system. Significant further investment is however needed to ensure that the system develops adequately, and can eventually be presented as a credible alternative to the current system.

20. Despite problems with the degree classification system, UK higher education awards highly respected degrees. It is important that confidence is maintained in the system, academic quality and standards are continuously improved and that the honours system is reformed to support this.

21. It is clear that plagiarism and collusion are issues faced by every HEI. NUS is committed to ensuring students are aware of and appreciate the value and importance of academic integrity. We believe that “punishments” and “penalties” are usually unhelpful in combating these issues and often take up significant amounts of valuable staff time.<sup>92</sup> Institutions should instead focus their resources on deterrence through effective induction and training.

#### TEACHING AND RESEARCH

22. The NUS Student Experience Report 2008 showed that students receive on average 15 contact hours a week and undertake 16 hours of private study<sup>93</sup>. However, the number of contact hours students receive and the number of hours spent on private study, are both significantly influenced by subject area, institution type and year of study<sup>94</sup>. It is however important to note that we should not only be looking at the inputs students receive, but also at their learning outcomes.

23. The most concerning area is the divergence in contact hours by subject by type of institution. For example, medical and life sciences students in Russell Group universities receiving 21 hours contact a week compared to 17 hours a week in post-1992 universities and the seven contact hours that mass communications and documentation students receive in Russell Group universities compared to the 14 hours in post-1992 universities<sup>95</sup>.

24. The NUS Student Experience Report showed that whilst there was high satisfaction in the learning facilities and resources there were a number of disparities amongst different resources and by year of study. For example whilst 71% of all students believe that quiet and individual study meets their needs, this rises to 76% for first years and drops to 67% for final year students. The two broad areas where there was least satisfaction of learning resources was facilities for group study areas (67%) and facilities for practical work (54%)<sup>96</sup>.

25. The importance of closing the feedback loop is also highlighted by the NUS Student Experience Report, with 92% of students being given the opportunity to provide feedback about their course of whom only 51% believe that the feedback is acted upon<sup>97</sup>.

26. The NUS Student Experience Report also shows that students are generally very happy with the quality of their teaching and learning experience with 85% rating this as good or excellent<sup>98</sup>. It is however concerning that there are significant differences between how students would rate the quality of their interaction with professors, senior lecturers, researchers and postgraduates with those rating it as good and excellent 53%; 68%; 20% and 24% respectively<sup>99</sup>.

27. NUS supports the further professionalisation of teaching in HE through initiatives such as HEA fellowships, programmes in teaching for academics and the UK Professional Standards Framework<sup>100</sup>. It is however worrying that this report also showed that a recent HEA survey of 2,500 staff showed that academics “continue to believe that teaching is under-rewarded and unrecognised by universities and colleges in comparison to research” and that promotion can be obtained on research achievement alone.

<sup>92</sup> Carroll, J. (2002b), *Deterring student plagiarism: where best to start?* In: Rust, C. ed., *Improving Student Learning Symposium* (Oxford: Oxford Brookes University).

<sup>93</sup> GfK/NOP (2008), *NUS/HSBC Student Experience Report*, <http://www.nus.org.uk/PageFiles/4017/NUS%20Student%20Experience%20Report.doc>

<sup>94</sup> GfK/NOP (2008), *NUS/HSBC Student Experience Report*, pp. 15–26 <http://www.nus.org.uk/PageFiles/4017/NUS%20Student%20Experience%20Report.doc>

<sup>95</sup> GfK/NOP (2008), *NUS/HSBC Student Experience Report*, p.22 <http://www.nus.org.uk/PageFiles/4017/NUS%20Student%20Experience%20Report.doc>

<sup>96</sup> GfK/NOP (2008), *NUS/HSBC Student Experience Report*, p.47 <http://www.nus.org.uk/PageFiles/4017/NUS%20Student%20Experience%20Report.doc>

<sup>97</sup> GfK/NOP (2008), *NUS/HSBC Student Experience Report*, p.29 <http://www.nus.org.uk/PageFiles/4017/NUS%20Student%20Experience%20Report.doc>

<sup>98</sup> GfK/NOP (2008), *NUS/HSBC Student Experience Report*, p.14 <http://www.nus.org.uk/PageFiles/4017/NUS%20Student%20Experience%20Report.doc>

<sup>99</sup> GfK/NOP (2008), *NUS/HSBC Student Experience Report*, p.25 <http://www.nus.org.uk/PageFiles/4017/NUS%20Student%20Experience%20Report.doc>

<sup>100</sup> Paul Ramsden, HEA (2008) *Teaching and the Student Experience* [http://www.dius.gov.uk/policy/teaching\\_and\\_student\\_exp.html](http://www.dius.gov.uk/policy/teaching_and_student_exp.html)

28. NUS is also concerned that the bulk of research funding is concentrated in a small number of institutions. This concentration has become much more acute over time; research funding in the upper decile has increased by 83% in the last 10 years, compared to the median increasing by 49% in the same period<sup>101</sup>. Research activity is crucial to the development of effective pedagogy and to be taught by research active academics is an important distinguishing feature of the UK HE system.

29. The NUS, University and College Union (UCU) and National Postgraduate Committee (NPC) employment charter for postgraduate student academic and academic-related staff calls for postgraduates that teach to be given fair and equal access to employment opportunities and work related training and opportunities for continuing professional development<sup>102</sup>.

30. The primary responsibility for assuring quality of teaching provision and learning opportunities in UK HEIs should be placed on the institutions themselves. However, the Government, through HEFCE, plays a vital role in monitoring those standards and maintaining integrity of UK HE.

31. NUS believes that HEFCE should play a more active role in broad oversight of the Quality Assurance Framework; ensuring its integrity for the future. However HEFCE should leave assurance enhancement and audit work to the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) who are better placed to deliver these projects effectively.

#### STUDENT SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

32. Student engagement occurs in the formulation of HE policy at both institutional and national level. Many HEIs are increasingly listening to the learner voice, though there is much more that can be done to engage students in the HE policy making process.

33. NUS believes that the learner voice is vital in the formation of policy at all levels. As “users” of education, students must be engaged in its future development. At a national level, NUS works closely within the higher education sector to ensure that students’ views are put across to Government and its agencies. We are keen that NUS’ unique independent, representative and organisational role in the formation of higher education policy continues and is extended to ensure students are at the centre of the formation of HE policy.

34. The formation of the National Student Forum (NSF), a sounding board for the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, was welcomed by NUS. However, a body established and managed by a Government department should not be seen as a representative organisation. The current “user group” projects initiated by DIUS should recognise and incorporate the role of genuine and wide student engagement. The establishment of and consultation with the NSF should not be seen as a proxy for genuine and wide student engagement by Government or its agencies.

35. NUS recently published the report “Broke and Broken: a critique of the higher education funding system”, which argues that the current system is inequitable and unsustainable, and that the 2009 review of funding should be broad enough in scope to consider the current funding system as a whole, including fees and student support, as well as viable alternatives to the current system<sup>103</sup>.

36. There should be no review of the current HE funding system that does not include serious consideration of part-time students, whom make up over 40% of higher education numbers<sup>104</sup>. Yet, of those studying part-time, 77% receive no financial support at all<sup>105</sup>.

37. Part-time students should be able to access loans for their fees, which are repayable after finishing their studies on a similar basis to full-time undergraduate home students in England. Part-time students should be able to access loans for their living costs. There should also be greater regulation and capping of the fees charged by institutions for part-time study.

38. NUS is also concerned about the support available to other groups, such as student parents. A forthcoming piece of NUS research will examine the current levels of support for student parents and make recommendations in relation to other forms of support, such as childcare<sup>106</sup>.

39. No student should drop out of higher education because they cannot afford to stay the course or because the support they need is not available. Non-completion due to factors outside an individual’s control is therefore a concern and it is vital to ensure that safeguards exist to ensure students are provided with adequate support. However, NUS is concerned that non-completion of a higher education course is too often considered a failure.

<sup>101</sup> NUS (2008) *Broke and Broken*, p.11  
<http://www.nus.org.uk/PageFiles/3115/Brokeandbroken.pdf>

<sup>102</sup> NUS/UCU/NPC *Employment Charter for postgraduate student academic and academic-related staff*  
[http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/0/5/pg\\_employmentcharter\\_1.pdf](http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/0/5/pg_employmentcharter_1.pdf)

<sup>103</sup> NUS (2008) *Broke and Broken: a critique of the higher education funding system*  
<http://www.nus.org.uk/PageFiles/3115/Brokeandbroken.pdf>

<sup>104</sup> UUK (2006) *Part-time students in higher education*  
<http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Publications/Bookshop/Documents/policybriefing0.pdf>

<sup>105</sup> UUK (2006) *Part-time students in higher education*  
<http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Publications/Bookshop/Documents/policybriefing0.pdf>

<sup>106</sup> NUS (forthcoming), NUS Student Parents Research



40. Many students choose not to continue their studies for good reasons, and often choose to return at a later date. It is vital that the credit and qualification system allows this flexibility. This is just one of the reasons why NUS believes the current credit accumulation and awards system is not fit for purpose.

41. Within the context of increasing undergraduate debt, it is important to ensure that applications for post-graduate study do not decline, particularly given their importance for the future of UK academia. NUS therefore calls for a full review of the postgraduate student support, the fees regime and access to funding either as part of or in addition to the 2009 review.

42. NUS is deeply concerned by current levels of graduate debt. Push.co.uk have estimated graduate debt will increase to £20,000 by 2010–11<sup>107</sup>. In 2005, Barclays stated that if debt continued to increase at the rate it had between 2003 and 2005, it would reach £20,000 by 2010–12. These figures were calculated without any adjustment for an increase in tuition fee rates<sup>108</sup>.

43. NUS is concerned by the prospect that debt levels will increase further still if the cap on variable fees is raised. HEPI has projected that if the variable fee cap was set at a maximum of £7,000, we might expect an average annual fee of £4,300. Over the course of a three-year degree and with the average loan for living costs, they would acquire a public debt of £25,000, once interest has been added for three years<sup>109</sup>.

44. NUS believes public investment in higher education must increase significantly. The OECD's Report, *Education at a Glance 2008* showed that the UK remains below the average for public investment in higher education, and below some of the UK's major competitors, with 0.9% of GDP invested<sup>110</sup>. HEIs must feel confident in making the case for greater public funding and the Government must respond to it<sup>111</sup>. If the UK is to remain one of the world's leading providers of higher education, it must continue to invest in both its HEIs and its students.

December 2008

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### Memorandum 33

#### Submission from the University of Buckingham

#### DEGREE CLASSIFICATION

##### Summary

- The QAA should be abolished
- The external examiners' system should be strongly reinforced
- A research agency—to allow employers to compare degrees from different universities—should be established

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

Trust in traditional British university degree classifications is now so low that, after two centuries, we are having to replace them with the Burgess Report's HEAR transcripts. But unless we sustain proper mechanisms of trust, those transcripts, too, will soon be found wanting. Why has trust in our traditional degree classifications been lost? The fault lies with the supplanting of the power of external examiners with the power of QAA. The external examiners should be restored to power, and the QAA should be abolished.

#### 2. BACKGROUND

British higher education was once one of the UK's USPs. Even today, after two centuries of competition from Germany, the US *et alia*, the universities of the Russell and 1994 Groups retain considerable international prestige. But that prestige is waning, and much of the fault lies with the degree inflation they have fostered. The QAA maintains that the new system of mass higher education is responsible, and the QAA is right—but not for the reasons it proffers. The QAA maintains that the creation of the new universities has forced the universities of the Russell and 1994 Groups to inflate their grades to provide their graduates with a competitive advantage. And the QAA maintains that that inflation has been further fuelled by the universities' competition in the league tables.

3. But those arguments are empty. Everyone knows that a degree from a university of the Russell and 1994 Groups is more substantial than one from a new university, so—left to themselves—the older universities would have continued to pride themselves on their discriminatory degree grading. But with the

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<sup>107</sup> Push (2008) *Student Debt Survey*;

<http://www.push.co.uk/document.aspx?id=4719B2F9-3C10-493D-A6D4-D963947DF84F&section=&l2section=>

<sup>108</sup> Barclays (2005) *Graduate Debt Survey*

<sup>109</sup> NUS (2008) *Broke and Broken: A Critique of the Higher Education Funding System*

<sup>110</sup> OECD (2008) *Education at a Glance*

[http://www.oecd.org/document/9/0,3343,en\\_2649\\_39263238\\_41266761\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.html](http://www.oecd.org/document/9/0,3343,en_2649_39263238_41266761_1_1_1_1,00.html)

<sup>111</sup> HEFCE (2003) *Revisiting the benefits of higher education*

[http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/2003/rd05\\_03/rd05\\_03.doc](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/2003/rd05_03/rd05_03.doc)

creation of the new universities in 1992 came also the introduction of the QAA's predecessor body the Higher Education Quality Council and, moreover, the tasking of the Funding Councils with inspection of the universities' teaching, Teaching Quality Assessment (TQA).

4. Those centralised national audit functions and institutions were created because nobody trusted the new universities to conduct themselves properly, but in a spirit of equity they were also extended to the old universities. The British universities thus lost an eight-century tradition of self-government, and the irony is not that—as mythologised—the polys became universities but rather that, under the 1992 legislation, the universities became polys.

5. The QAA claims that it does not infringe self-governance but that it simply monitors the universities' own adherence to their own codes of self-governance. That claim is simply false. In practice (see its own voluminous literature) the QAA imposes a monolithic system on governance on the sector in the centralising traditions of continental Europe.

6. British universities have long treasured quality, and under their external examiners' system, now about two centuries old (and almost unique to the UK; Ireland, South Africa and Australasia possess it, but neither North America nor continental Europe do, to their reputational cost) their quality was long assured. But with the intrusion of centralised national quality agencies, the external examiners system has been allowed to lose authority. Yet the external examiners' system is superior to the QAA as it is annual, comprehensive, and conducted by experts who inspect on the ground.

7. The external examiners' system needs, therefore, to be reinforced and restored to centrality. It would be legitimate for the Government to seek—by the creation of a new agency—to assure itself that the system had been properly restored. More importantly, it would be appropriate for the new agency to be primarily a research agency, concerned with providing potential employers with guidance over the true parity of different universities' degree classifications.

8. The faults of the QAA are comprehensive. It is like its partner OFSTED, which gave Haringey Council's children's social services the top marks in its recent audit but which harasses effective children's social services for failures of box ticking. I have outlined some of the QAA's faults in appendices 1 and 2, which are recent newspaper articles, but there are more.

## 9. CONCLUSION

The QAA should be abolished, and the external examiner system should be restored to centrality and power.

*December 2008*

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## Memorandum 34

### Submission from the Staff and Educational Development Association

“STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES”

#### *Summary*

A. The introduction of professional pedagogic development programmes for new staff was important and has been successfully implemented across the sector.

B. The sector now needs to invest heavily in maintaining the professional development of those new staff, and in supporting the professional pedagogic development of established staff. This is an urgent priority.

C. The professional pedagogic development of middle and senior managers—those who manage and lead the main teaching programmes and the innovation and enhancement work—has been neglected. This has to change.

D. The effects of the RAE have severely damaged the quality of student learning, by delaying and inhibiting the growth of a scholarly approach to researching teaching and learning and the development of the infrastructure required to successfully implement change, enhancement and reform.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Staff and Educational Development Association welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to this timely enquiry, especially focussing on the balance between teaching and research.

1.2 SEDA's mission is “supporting and leading educational change”. It is the professional association for staff and educational developers in the UK, promoting innovation and good practice in higher education.

## 2. ABOUT SEDA

2.1 SEDA's work is organised around six values:

1. An understanding of how people learn
2. Scholarship, professionalism and ethical practice
3. Working in and developing learning communities
4. Working effectively with diversity and promoting inclusivity
5. Continuing reflection on professional practice
6. Developing people and processes

2.2 Through its Fellowship and Associate Fellowship schemes SEDA provides accreditation for people involved in academic staff and educational development in higher education, both in the UK and internationally. The schemes are for staff who help lecturers, support staff and their institutions to develop and enhance the quality of the student learning experience. SEDA also has development programmes for both new and established staff in educational development.

2.3 SEDA established the Teacher Accreditation Scheme which then accredited courses and programmes such as the Postgraduate Certificates in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. They were described in the Dearing Report of 1997 as the basis on which professional qualification for teachers should be built and are now in place in almost every HEI in the UK. They are taken in the main by new or inexperienced staff, and in various forms enable them to reach Standard 2 of the National Standards Framework.

2.4 SEDA has gone on to create the Professional Development Framework, through which institutions gain recognition for their professional development programmes and the individuals who complete them. SEDA has recognised a wide range of these programmes, covering many aspects of the professional work of all staff in higher education. At present it offers 16 awards and has recognised 19 institutions which are running 38 programmes. SEDA is engaged in the active development of this area of its work.

## 3. PROPOSITIONS

3.1 SEDA believes that teaching and supporting student learning in Higher Education is a profession in its own right. As most practitioners in Higher Education are already members of a profession, we propose the concept of "the dual professional". We believe that every member of a profession has a responsibility to contribute to the future of that profession, whether through research, teaching or other means. We believe it is essential for the future of UK Higher Education that a substantial proportion of those who work within it should fully engage in scholarly pedagogic professional development.

3.2 SEDA believes that all students have the right to be taught well and welcomes the sustained investment in recent years into programmes for the initial preparation of teachers and others. Further such investment is essential to build capacity.

3.3 However, SEDA is also concerned with the long-term professional, scholarly pedagogic development of all those established staff who teach and support students' learning. At present too low a priority is given to this, it suffers from a lack of recognition, arrangements for its support are fragmented and it requires more significant investment. SEDA believes this is a major challenge for the sector. Greater effort in this area is essential for the successful implementation of further change and reform.

3.4 SEDA believes that a second major challenge is the professional pedagogic development of all those who lead and manage teaching staff and who design and implement change and innovation in teaching, learning, assessment and the curriculum.

3.5 SEDA believes its Professional Development Framework, which has at its heart the enhancement of the student experience, provides one means by which such development can be structured, measured and quality assured. It enables the sector to meet the requirements of all three levels of the UK Professional Standards Framework.

3.6 SEDA also believes that it is essential that the sector swiftly develops both an academic route (Certificate, Diploma, Masters, PhD) and a professional route to pedagogic qualification. SEDA is heartened by the expansion of the DProf and the EdD awards in HE, which successfully combine academic and professional development.

3.7 However, SEDA also believes the introduction at this time of compulsory qualification and registration for established teaching staff in HE would be counter-productive. There is still much more the sector can do through the implementation of good promotion and reward structures. At present a voluntary strategy will be far more effective than one driven by legislation. The target must be that established teaching staff achieve Standard 2 of the UK Professional Standards Framework.

3.8 SEDA's final proposition is that that the necessary development of a scholarly approach to pedagogy challenges the existing model of quality assurance, which depends heavily upon peer review. This is already under challenge as the sector diversifies. SEDA thinks it is essential that the culture of scholarly, professional pedagogic development should inform the quality assurance process, for example in the selection and

preparation of discipline-based reviewers and especially of external examiners. SEDA assumes it is reasonable to expect external examiners to be qualified, and has developed an award within its Professional Development Framework for this purpose.

#### 4. SPECIFIC RESPONSES

##### 4.1 *Level of funding:*

SEDA, along with many other agencies in the sector, believes that well-funded higher education is essential both for individual students and for general benefit to the economy and society. However, as that unit of resource has declined since the 1970s, it is SEDA's members who have been at the forefront of the work to maintain quality, while wholeheartedly welcoming the significant increase in student numbers. That long process of change has revealed the need to move away from traditional and in many ways inappropriate pedagogies towards models of learning more suited to today and the future. The development of a scholarly approach to pedagogy has enabled professionals more effectively to evaluate costs against the quality of learning and outcomes, and will enable them in the future to make best use of resources.

##### 4.2 *Balance between teaching and research:*

The effect of the funding model derived from the Research Selectivity (now Assessment) Exercise since 1986 has had a real and damaging impact on the quality of the student experience. In the face of elements such as prestige, fear, career advancement and money it has been hard to hold the line that educating students and caring for their intellectual and personal growth is one of the noblest and highest callings in a civilised society.

The deleterious effects of the RAE has penetrated throughout the system and diverted even specifically teaching-focussed institutions. The level of funding is not the issue—it is the flexibility of research funding and the fixed nature of teaching funding which causes the imbalance. It is especially grievous that research into pedagogy has been belittled and that committed subject teachers have found it impossible to develop an equivalence either in their generic or discipline-based pedagogic research to their discipline-based research.

##### 4.3 *Financing of innovation:*

Much of the financing of innovation has been less efficient than it could have been through the absence of a scholarly pedagogic culture able to incorporate project outputs in a systematic and managed way. In many universities the current analysis is that the core teaching processes are working well, the prestige of the institution is high, and innovation is an enhancement activity rather than the core of essential reform. In these places the claim is made that modest incremental improvement will be sufficient to guarantee high quality. SEDA's view is that a more critical approach is required, and that funding both to devise and then embed innovation is a necessary part of a bigger package of simultaneous developments.

##### 4.4 *Teaching/research integration:*

Too many institutions have diverted energy and funding into a thin interpretation of this issue—namely that as long as its staff keep abreast of the latest developments they can teach them to their students. An associated development has been the growth in research-led universities of a substantial amount of student-tutor interaction being carried by postgraduates (many of whom have attained Standard One of the UK Professional Standards Framework by engages with elements of the PG Certificate courses described in 2.3). A more imaginative development, which SEDA supports, has been the incorporation of research activities and processes within undergraduate study. Students learning in “research mode” should be central to the curriculum.

We endorse the view, recently outlined by Healey and Jenkins (in the University & College Union Newsletter, October 2008), that “all undergraduate students in all higher education institutions should experience learning through and about research.”

##### 4.5 *Teaching provision and facilities:*

Many institutions, buildings, rooms and spaces have been built to deliver a range of pedagogies that are becoming progressively less appropriate. SEDA would strongly urge future investment to be in flexible and adaptable provision, supporting the development of social learning spaces which are more suitable for the student centred learning approaches in which students become producers and not just consumers of knowledge. There is no doubt that for some staff the rigidity of the provision and the assumptions that go with it make significant educational change harder than it needs to be.

##### 4.6 *Methods of assessing excellence in teaching:*

The significant educational research in the last 20 years has been into the quality of student learning, and away from more traditional assumptions about the concept of the excellent teacher. It has revealed in growing detail how the different elements of the programme interact with each other and emphasised issues of programme design, assessment and outcomes, revealing the vital importance of well-managed course teams which themselves include many roles beyond simply that of the lecturer. While recognising the value

of some of the recent steps to identify and reward individual excellence, SEDA expects in the next few years the emphasis will move towards the excellence displayed by schools, departments and programme teams, incorporating such features as cooperation, scholarly enquiry and evaluation, and leadership.

In terms of promotion and reward, while many HEIs have developed notions of equivalence between teaching and research in their procedures, embedding these in practice has been a slow process, and today the picture is patchy across the sector. While staff in a few institutions are reasonably confident that a commitment to developing their teaching will benefit their careers to the highest level, many are still hesitant and sceptical. In some institutions, choosing the teaching route is seen as a public acknowledgement of the weakness of their research status. Those who wholeheartedly choose the teaching route more frequently speak of the personal satisfaction of working with students and becoming progressively more professional in one of the great vocations.

## 5. ENDORSEMENTS

5.1 SEDA has had sight of, and endorses, the submission from Professor Lewis Elton.

5.2 *Degree classification and plagiarism.* SEDA has chosen to confine its comments to the Committee's questions about the balance between teaching and research. However, SEDA wishes to stress that the outcomes of the enquiry into degree classifications and plagiarism will make significant changes to assessment processes, therefore to curriculum design, teaching and learning activities and the quality of student learning. This alone will require a major investment in the professional pedagogic development of established staff to support the changes which are long overdue. SEDA wishes to endorse the approach taken by the Assessment Standards Knowledge exchange (a Centre of Excellence for Teaching and Learning) in its "Assessment Standards: A Manifesto for Change".

December 2008

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## Memorandum 35

### Submission from the Open University Students Association

#### STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

##### 1. Executive Summary

1.1 This submission confines itself to the aspect of the report dealing with the adequacy of funding and student support packages.

1.2 There is no objective justification for the continued discrimination against part time higher education students.

1.3 This discrimination blights the opportunities of students and potential students at the individual level.

1.4 At the level of society it undermines the espoused values of lifelong learning and responsible citizenship.

1.5 At the level of the economy it undermines the objectives of achieving a world class skilled workforce.

1.6 We think that the artificial, and increasingly meaningless, divide between so-called full time and so-called part time students should be ended.

##### 2. Brief Introduction to Submitter

2.1 OUSA represents all students registered to study with the Open University. This includes approximately 172,000 students from the UK.

##### 3. Factual Information

3.1 We have on a number of occasions asked government representatives for a definition of part-time students. It will doubtless be clear to this Committee as to why we have not been furnished with a meaningful response.

3.2 At this juncture, we would suggest that the only meaningful definition of part-time students is the one which is used to prevent our students, and thousands of other students like them, from having access to the same level of financial support as those defined as full-time students.

3.3 There appears to be considerable misinformation and a lack of high quality, factual information about this category of students. Although we acknowledge the considerable improvements that have been made in financial support for our students from the late 1990s, it is a fact that those students who don't qualify for such support have to pay the whole of their study costs up front. The overwhelming majority receive no support from their employers. In our experience, most undergraduates studying without support or encouragement from their employers are doing so to enable them to have the opportunity for a career which can develop and use their potential. We can't see that any amount of persuasion of employers is going

to have any impact in such cases. At the same time such students are seldom in the kind of paid employment which makes it easy for them to fund what can be a considerable sum in course fees before coming to the range of other costs involved in studying. There also appears to be no understanding that even students studying from a distance have to have some time when they can be free of child and dependent care in order to concentrate on their studies, or have to fund travel considerable distances to take part in day schools and tutorials. It is sadly a commonplace for us to deal with students who are having to take time out of their studies for no other reason than that they can't afford to continue, either at all or in the shortest time they would be capable of achieving their award, but for want of the funds. At the level of the individual, this seems to us to be an appalling way to treat those who are taking responsibility for their own learning and achievements.

3.4 On a related point, our students exemplify those people who can turn aspirations for a culture which promotes lifelong learning and responsible citizenship into reality. Logic suggests that they should be supported rather than having financial obstacles placed in their way.

3.5 Whilst our students, like other part time students, have a range of objectives in studying, it is clear to us that a considerable majority have very clear vocational purposes. We are aware that much has been written about the contribution which part-time higher education students are already making to the economic imperative of up skilling the work force. It is also clear that for a wide range of reasons, not only financial, this mode of study is going to be increasingly important to any aspirations for a workforce skilled to compete on a world class basis in the future. If that is true, the sense would be to provide incentives to support and encourage such students instead of seeing the continued divide between part time and full time as providing a convenient way of saving money.

#### 4. *Recommendations for Consideration*

4.1 OUSA commends the views of our colleagues in NUS who made this statement in their excellent report "Broke and Broken" published in September 2008 "There should be no review of the current HE funding system that does not include serious consideration of part-time issues. Talk of a genuine learning society is cheap unless it is matched with a structure for part-time study that is fair and accessible. A new settlement for part-time learning is therefore desperately needed."

4.2 OUSA believes that the continuing divide between the treatment in financial support of part-time and full-time students is discriminatory, arbitrary, anachronistic and dysfunctional. We hope that the committee will share this view and conclude that it should be ended without further delay.

*December 2008*

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### Memorandum 36

#### Submission from the British Medical Association

##### STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

1. The British Medical Association (BMA) is a voluntary, professional association that represents doctors from all branches of medicine all over the UK. It has a total membership of over 140,000, rising steadily, including more than 2,800 members overseas and over 22,000 medical student members.

2. The BMA's comments draw on the work of the Association's Medical Students and Medical Academic Staff Committees.

##### ADMISSIONS

3. Medical school application procedures should be open and transparent, and should include clear measures for medical student selection, in order for candidates to understand on what criteria they are being assessed.

4. It is important to ensure that high calibre candidates gain entry to medical school. It is also important that any potential barriers to entering medicine are addressed, including the lack of encouragement or aspiration at an early stage in a students' education, the fear of debt, and any potential barriers to entry at application stage.

5. There should be flexibility on entry requirements to medical school, to encourage a wide diversity of capable applicants. Some medical schools currently have schemes in place to encourage those from lower socioeconomic groups to apply to medicine, whilst others have access courses for those whose background is not science based. These schemes should be assessed, developed and extended where possible.

6. The BMA would welcome the introduction of criteria other than solely academic achievement for entry to medical school. Such criteria or testing must be evidence-based, and open to audit and long-term evaluation, and should include a comprehensive equality impact assessment. There are currently significant barriers to entry to medical school for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and the cost of any additional criteria or testing in particular should not be a barrier to entry.

7. Despite admissions to higher education increasing over the last few years, those from lower socio-economic groups have increased very little. The Government has made a commitment to widening participation in higher education, with various initiatives to encourage those from lower socio-economic groups to enter higher education. The BMA fully supports this aim. However, the evidence suggests that initiatives taken so far appear to have had limited impact.

8. The most recent figures from UCAS<sup>112</sup> 2008 demonstrate that the proportion of higher education applicants (age 18 and under) from lower social class backgrounds has moved very little, with the figures showing that applications were up by only 0.7%, from 29.4% in 2007 to 30.1% in 2008. This slight upward trend can be partly explained by the inclusion of Nursing and Midwifery students into the statistics for the first time.

9. The figures for participation in medicine from those from lower socio-economic groups are worryingly low. The BMA's survey of medical students' 2007<sup>113</sup> shows only 13% of respondents came from social classes IIM (Skilled Manual), IV (Semi-Skilled), and V (Unskilled), with only 5% coming from the lowest groups IV and V. The BMA produced a report in 2004 on the Demography of Medical Schools, an update of which is expected to be published in 2009.<sup>114</sup>

10. Some of the key themes underpinning the Government's widening participation agenda include attainment and aspiration. Any initiatives addressing these issues are welcomed. However, only 19% of those from lower socio-economic backgrounds gain two or more A-levels and only 30% of children from lower socio-economic backgrounds achieve five or more GCSEs.<sup>115</sup> Of those who achieve up to eight good GCSE passes, only one in four working class young people end up not going into higher education. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)<sup>116</sup> found that people living in the most advantaged 20% of areas were five or six times more likely to enter higher education than those living in the least advantaged 20% of areas. We believe much more can be done improve on this, including looking at the fundamental causes of low participation by those from lower socio-economic groups in higher education.

11. The BMA believes that, although there are multi-factorial issues in relation to widening participation in higher education, affordability and the fear of debt have a disproportionate impact in medicine. Financial considerations play a larger role in medicine because of the higher levels of debt incurred than those on shorter courses. The length of the course and the inability to work part-time because of the demands of the course, play a key part in this. Additionally, it is often not possible for medical students to study locally and live with parents.

12. A study, commissioned by the Sutton Trust,<sup>117</sup> investigated the impact of financial considerations on 16 to 20 year old students' decisions about participation in Higher Education. The study reported that almost two thirds (59%) of students who decided not to pursue Higher Education cited avoiding debt as a major factor in the decision.

13. The study also found that bursaries only make a difference when they are large. Nearly two thirds of students reported that a £2,000 bursary would have a major influence on their decision making regarding choice of university. Crucially, among low income students, the figure was almost 85%.

14. The Government has said that it plans to begin a review process of the current £3,000 cap on tuition fees. A decision on this is expected in 2009, and any change is likely to be implemented in 2010. There is concern that the review will result in the cap being lifted. We believe this would severely exacerbate medical student debt. We are concerned that able individuals may be deterred from studying medicine because of the fear of the additional debt, which in turn could adversely affect equality of access to higher education.

15. Results from the BMA's annual medical student finance survey 2007 demonstrate that final year medical student debt is over £20,000. Thirteen per cent of respondents had total debt exceeding £25,000, and amongst fifth and sixth year students this proportion was considerably higher at 26% and 44% respectively. Six percent of respondents had total debt exceeding £30,000.

#### BALANCE BETWEEN TEACHING AND RESEARCH

16. Academic medicine has two core functions: to train the next generation of doctors and to research into pioneering healthcare techniques for future generations of patients. It also has a key role in synthesising and delivering the knowledge all doctors need to keep up to date and in providing educational support for doctors in difficulty. It is a vital not only to the NHS and healthcare provision in the United Kingdom generally, but also to the economic and financial well-being of the UK.

17. High quality training of medical students and the life-long learning of all doctors are crucial to the effective functioning of the NHS and must not be compromised. Traditionally, teaching (of medical students and of those undertaking masters degrees and doctorates) has formed a large part of the workload of full-time medical academic staff, but the reduction in the size of the academic workforce combined with an

<sup>112</sup> [http://www.ucas.ac.uk/website/news/media\\_release/2008-04-23](http://www.ucas.ac.uk/website/news/media_release/2008-04-23)

<sup>113</sup> BMA Survey of Medical Student Finances 2006/07.

<sup>114</sup> <http://www.bma.org.uk/ap.nsf/Content/DemographyMedSchls>

<sup>115</sup> Widening participation in Higher Education, Department for Education and Skills, 2005.

<sup>116</sup> HEFCE, young participation in higher education, 2005.

<sup>117</sup> Sutton Trust, P Davies *et al*, knowing where to study: fees, bursaries, and fair access, 2008.

increase in student numbers means that increasingly those working in the NHS are having to play a greater role in the teaching and supervision of medical students than in the past. Despite the growth in student numbers, medical education has suffered from raids on its funds during times of financial difficulty and may do so again in the worsening financial climate. The proposed reform to the funding of medical education outlined in the Next Stage Review may also lead to further instability.

18. It is welcome that, through the Office of the Strategic Coordination for Health Research (OSCHR), there is a new focus on transparency of research funding and on the funding of translational research. OSCHR's role is to facilitate agreement between the Departments of Health and Innovation, Universities and Skills and the Medical Research Council on the allocation of the single, ring-fenced health research fund and on the overall strategy for UK health research.

19. Encouragingly, highly effective collaborations between the NHS and the Higher Education Sector are also starting to emerge drawing on international models. The combination of a sufficiently large patient population and a critical mass of researchers in certain parts of the country provide one basis for a new model of collaboration between the NHS and Universities. The Academic Health Science Centre (AHSC) bringing St Mary's NHS Trust, the Hammersmith Hospitals NHS Trust and Imperial College London under united governance arrangements offers unparalleled opportunities to improve patient care through collaboration and innovation to bring out new ideas, evidence and products.

20. However, the recent significant developments in research infrastructure and funding will be to little avail without continued support for the implementation of the recommendations in *Medically and Dentally-Qualified Staff: Recommendations for training the researchers and educators of the future* (UK Clinical Research Collaboration, 2006). For the first time a clear training pathway for medically qualified academic staff was outlined and with it an unsurpassed opportunity to harness the enthusiasm of young doctors emerged.

21. Such enthusiasm may be eroded, however, if attention is not paid to the working arrangements of the next generation of teachers and researchers. Both University and NHS employers must invest sufficiently in the next generation of clinical academics to make the career pathways attractive, or risk the chance to ensure a vibrant future for UK academic medicine. The landmark Follett Report showed the way forward, clarifying the dual obligations and joint working conditions of the two sectors. The BMA has published data about employment practice in higher education in the *Good University Employment Guide* in part to act as an incentive for improvement.

22. Despite recent improvements, there has been a dramatic fall in the academic workforce over the past decade. The number of senior academic trainees and fully qualified academics stands at only 2,937—a fall of 27% since 2000 (Medical Schools Council 2007). In addition, clinical academics are an aging group and one in which women remain under-represented at the highest levels, with only 11% of professors being women. The ageing workforce compounds the overall decline in numbers and gives the impression that academic careers are not worth pursuing by younger generations of doctors.

23. The relatively unattractive nature of academic posts is part of the reason for the decline in numbers. For example, academic trainees fall behind their wholly clinical colleagues in the salary scale because of the time they spend in the research component of an academic training post. There is also evidence that, despite the translation of the 2003 consultant contract into the higher education sector, clinical academics do not have pay parity with clinical colleagues. Of the stakeholders that are involved in academic training (universities, NHS employers and postgraduate deaneries), none appear willing to take responsibility for the academic and clinical training of Academic Clinical Fellows and Clinical Lecturers. The result is that academic trainees feel disillusioned about choosing an academic track.

24. The decline in the academic workforce has occurred at the same time as an unparalleled increase in the number of medical students and the establishment of new medical schools, especially in England. The intake in 2005 of over 5,000 students was 57% above the medical school intake in 1997 (Department of Health, 2004). With a current UK medical student population of around 30,000 students this equates to only one clinical academic per hundred medical students. This means that there is extra pressure on the remaining academics to deliver teaching to ever larger numbers of students on top of their clinical and research commitments. There has also been a new reliance on non-medically qualified staff to deliver medical education in universities and a shift of the responsibility to deliver medical teaching from medical schools to the NHS.

25. Medical education is carried out in many different situations. There are formal settings such as lectures in universities, hospitals and primary care settings. Very often smaller group environments, such as tutorials, ward rounds and clinics are used. The development of IT infrastructure also has seen the use of video conferencing and on-line learning, and there is a need to ensure these are fully and adequately supported. The range and depth of the learning experience is one of the strengths of UK medicine.

26. Changes to the way that the NHS is funded and structured could compromise that strength. The private finance initiative discourages the provision of minimum research or educational facilities, such as IT and teaching facilities, rooms for students and library facilities, because, by definition, such space and facilities do not generate a profit for the developer. In addition, new ways of delivering services in the NHS, such as the independent sector treatment programme, the care closer to home initiative and, more recently,



the proposals for polyclinics, often fail to incorporate education and research adequately into both their planning and implementation. This may mean that the NHS will lose valuable opportunities for clinical research, innovation and improvement.

27. We would argue, therefore, that an acknowledgement by policymakers and managers of the immediate and long-term value of education to the NHS is required. Specifically, trusts need to discontinue pressurising those involved in teaching to reduce teaching activities in favour of carrying out clinical duties.

28. Incorporating the delivery of medical education and the ability to undertake NHS research into new systems for delivering care requires:

- funding which acknowledges the additional costs of delivering education;
- providing the physical space necessary for delivering teaching;
- designing and supporting the teaching obligations of each new healthcare setting;
- employing appropriately trained staff to deliver teaching ; and
- ensuring access to and facilities for clinical researchers for research purposes

29. Discretionary funding available to the Higher Education Sector, available through the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), rests on the narrowly defined research performance of individual academics. Those medical academics with clinical commitments are likely to have a reduced research output because they have less time in which to deliver their research compared with those academics with no clinical commitments. This often has a negative impact on the tenure of medical academics, particularly, it seems, during periods when institutions are submitting returns for research assessments. Universities often employ clinical academics on short term contracts and can easily make staff redundant at the end of the contractual period.

30. Existing measures of research assessment have a tendency to reward laboratory-based projects and thus fail to measure adequately the contribution of many medical academics to clinical research. Furthermore, the RAE has contributed to a fall in the numbers of teaching academics because successive RAEs assess research and teaching in different ways. There is a danger that the RAE replacement, the Research Excellence Framework, will perpetuate the historical bias against clinical research and continue to undervalue teaching.

31. We would argue that the future measures of research excellence should:

- be based on peer review within the NHS as well as the higher education sector;
- take into consideration the competing time pressures on medical academics to deliver research volume;
- acknowledge the time it takes both to deliver tangible clinical outcomes and to measure the impact of clinical research;
- develop innovative ways of incorporating education into measurement; and
- seek to capture and recognise research that is undertaken for patient benefit more effectively.

32. It is important to recognise the unique nature of the medical academic at the interface between research, teaching and clinical practice. The medical education process will give a different slant to the research question; the clinical competencies that may be necessary for a medical academic could be different, more focussed, from those required of other physicians; and the medical academic will have insights into translational research which give added value to projects. Thus disaggregating the research and teaching roles into easily quantifiable packages may be useful administratively, but ignores the reality of the medical academic career.

#### DEGREE CLASSIFICATION

33. The Bologna Declaration has the potential to change the face of medical education as it currently stands, and consequently the experiences of the profession and those it serves. The BMA has a number of concerns over its potential impact on medicine. UK medical schools organise the structure of medical degrees in varying ways with different schools choosing an individual mix of theoretical and practical medical training throughout different years of study. This diversity could be jeopardised if a student cannot guarantee that they will be able to complete their entire five-year course in the same institution as universities will be forced to harmonise the content of their medical courses so that students who complete their bachelor degree at one university but their masters degree at another, are equipped with the same level of clinical experience. Universities will lose the flexibility and autonomy over the content of their medical qualification in order to conform to a perceived EU norm.

34. The financial implications for students must also be examined. Breaking up the five or six year medical degree is highly likely to result in students no longer being able to ensure funding for the full period. Students will be forced to re-apply for funding at the end of their four year bachelor degree in order to complete their medical qualification.

35. The BMA does not want the Bologna Process to result in a potentially fragmented medical degree which may challenge the integrity of the final medical qualification and thus undermine Directive 2005/36.

## STUDENT SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

36. Funding support is complicated for all students, and for medical students the system is especially so. Currently, it is almost impossible for a prospective medical student to calculate how much their education will cost and their entitlement to financial support.

37. The current student support system (post September 2006) was designed to support students on 3 year degree programmes. As medicine is a significantly longer programme it does not meet the needs of medical students. The fact that medical students have to apply for support through three separate systems, each with differing rules, confuses matters.

38. The huge complexity now present in the system means that fundamental improvements require a more joined up approach between the NHS Student Grants Unit and the Student Loans Company. A more systematic approach is necessary and further work is urgently needed to streamline the systems to bring them into line. Students should need to apply to one source only. The BMA has been working on improvements to the NHS Bursary scheme, along with other stakeholders and the Department of Health with a view to improving the support for medical students.

December 2008

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**Memorandum 37**
**Submission from Anand Raja,<sup>118</sup>**

## STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

*Executive Summary*

This paper is based on my experiences since I joined the student community at the University of Birmingham in October, 2007. Whatever the reasons, the University is failing in encouraging students to think independently and argue from their corner. Instead learning “facts” or worse data and teller clerk skills gets a heavy emphasis. The result is disorientation and disenchantment among the student community.

1. The Universities can be seen as an arena where people are mainly involved in the business of creating new knowledge. However, as we all know, knowledge is constantly created and recreated (your reading this is part of a process to reach a new understanding of an issue). Hence the so called “facts” and theories are always changing. At any given point in time, we cannot rest with a definite store of knowledge. To put it very simply, this realization is the largest guiding motive of research. Ironically a person who is truly knowledgeable will be a seeker of knowledge, knowing that the present stage of knowledge and understanding is uncertain and evanescent.

2. Since students are a part of the university, they should be a part of the process of seeking and creating knowledge. Only this can make the University experience worthwhile. Hence people who are interested in knowledge (which students should be) need to be trained to think and speak as individuals. Since there is no final knowledge that can be simply passed on, to create good students we need to cultivate the capacity and interest to create new knowledge.

3. However, what is happening is exactly the opposite. Students are given a picture of knowledge that is fixed and factual. Students are coached to attain a set of knowledge rather than as people who would create new understandings. Regardless of rhetoric and pretension to the opposite, neither the interest nor the capacity to seek knowledge for oneself are capacities that are sought to be created. I shall argue with evidence. I will quote specific cases but they are representative of the general situation.

4. Lectures are given with the intention of passing on sets of information and theories to students, and are half hearted in encouraging students to argue from their corner. The personal tutoring system has been drastically cut to size. Also, exams are increasingly based one’s ability to remember facts and information rather than create new ideas.

5. The idea that truth and facts and theories that stand for it are evolving in their nature is an attitude that needs being cultivated in any student. The form our lectures take do not seem intentioned to cultivate this idea. I will quote from a lecture in abnormal psychology, which I will use as a representative example for the rest of the paper. In a given lecture, we will be taught the nature of the mental disorder of schizophrenia. The lecture will start with giving a working definition of schizophrenia, then quote the symptoms of schizophrenia, and to add on to that would quote figures on the prevalence of schizophrenia. The students will not be encouraged to think of the many weaknesses and complications of the classification “schizophrenia”. The students will not be encouraged to think that the classification being talked about is itself developing in its nature. The insistence will clearly be on giving a picture of the world as it truly is (*a picture no one actually has*), rather than creating individuals who would aspire to create new understandings.

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<sup>118</sup> The author is a second year undergraduate student in Psychology at the University of Birmingham. He is in receipt of the University of Birmingham International Office Scholarship 2007–2010.

6. Another odd against cultivating the idea of knowledge being prospective is a reduction in the opportunities of face to face discussions with capable tutors.. Group discussions or individual discussions with capable tutors are the best opportunity to bring new ideas to the table, argue and create new knowledge. It is in discussions that the prospective nature of truth is clearly revealed. You only need to switch in to the most mediocre TV talk in to realize this.

7. Written examinations have become the preferred means of evaluating student progress, and students are writing a far lesser number of essays or reports than the past generations did. However, we need to ask what should their form be? In most cases examinations emphasize collection and cramming a lot of information and regurgitate in the exams. To keep with the abnormal psychology example, the examination would consist of multiple choice questions. Not an insignificant number of questions would test your memory for data. A typical question would look like: what is the total percentage of schizophrenics in America and one has to choose from a number of options. Such examinations incentive learning transient “facts” rather than thinking and arguing in the process of creating new understandings.

8. This is compounded by the fact that as assessment becomes more examination based, which in turn are based on facts, the incentive for continuous learning and comprehensive perspective taking of issues is reduced. Since getting good marks becomes a function of cramming facts for examinations, studying gets reduced both in content, to the very essential textbooks and the time around examinations.

9. So the capacity to think critically is not being cultivated, and there is little incentive in getting engaged with the course. As the course becomes increasingly data based, and chunks of information are supplied out to be swallowed and regurgitated in the exams, it does not need a great imagination to understand what the mental state of the student body would be like.

10. Socrates, in a different context, once said that to attain knowledge if we were to observe every aspect of a phenomenon, the sheer quantity of information would “blind our souls.” As lectures start being concentrated more on facts and reduces students to passive recipients of knowledge, the disenchantment with lectures starts to shoot through the roof. Sometimes this is reflected in decreased attendance, but a generally dulling and disengaging of the mind from the lectures is apparent to both the student and teaching fraternity. Students increasingly find themselves attracted to idle pastimes and wasteful activities. For the sake of students themselves, this needs to be corrected.

11. Sociologist Frank Furedi has somewhere pointed out that the search for truth is as important as truth itself. As student body is disengaged from that search, its inclination towards debating their way through this process goes. Also the singular focus on facts and theories and not speculation in teaching and assessment in courses leads to a “whatever” attitude towards ideas and debate in particular and learning in general.

12. As a solution, we can easily begin by making sure that examinations do not measure the student’s capacity to remember information, but to think critically. To work with the abnormal psychology example, this would mean replacing the question about percentage of Schizophrenic Americans into one which asks you to critique the nature of classification of disorders.

13. The importance of creating students who are interested in thinking critically is imperative for creating new knowledge. The current emphasis on unreflective “facts” and “theories” which produces students who feel disengaged with the process of creating new knowledge is an unwelcome trend warranting immediate reversal.

*December 2008*

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### **Memorandum 38**

#### **Submission from the University of Plymouth**

#### STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

##### 1.0 *Summary*

- It is important to ensure that admissions policies and procedures take account of the wide range of students’ educational experiences and approaches to learning in order to provide wider and more equitable access to HE for those with the ability to benefit.
- Long-term funding is a pre-requisite of ensuring the continued success of teaching innovation and to ensure that teaching is informed by research in the discipline and into pedagogy;
- The quality of teaching provision can be best enhanced by strengthening the National Professional Standards and the role of training in teaching methods for new lecturers;
- Continued support for the HEA subject centres, as well as schemes such as the NTFS and the CETLs, is essential to provide opportunities for staff to enhance and develop their career on the basis of teaching.
- When considering degree classification we need to consider a way of valuing the full range of students’ achievements and experience alongside the needs of interpretation of achievement and skills by the employer.

- Encourage student engagement in the formulation of HE policy and champion the development of a structure to support this mechanism.
- Non-completion is a complex and many-faceted phenomenon comprising students who take full advantage of the flexibility a modular scheme offers to e.g interrupt a full-time programme to take up employment continuing in a part-time mode; move from module gatherers to part-time mode alongside those who fail to progress.

## 2.0 Introduction

The University of Plymouth has had a long and successful record in teaching and learning innovation, as well as areas of research excellence. We have been successful in the award of 11 National Teaching Fellowships and four Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs), plus a share in a fifth, the most of any UK institution. The university was also selected as the host institution for the Higher Education Academy Subject Centre in Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences (GEES) and as of 2009, following a robust national selection process, will be the Royal Statistical Society's new location for its Centre for Statistical Education. The national Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE), currently chaired by John Hilsdon, University of Plymouth, arose from a Plymouth initiative. We lead the sector in this and many other areas and therefore can provide informed feedback to the DIUS Committee inquiry into students and universities.

## 3.0 Admissions

*The effectiveness of the process for admission to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), including A-levels, Advanced Diplomas, apprenticeships and university entrance tests.*

3.1 Students are entering HE with a much wider range of educational experiences and approaches to learning than in previous decades. It is important to ensure that admissions policies and procedures take account of this in order to provide wider and more equitable access to HE for those with the ability to benefit. A preferred path is one where HEIs have the means to properly address transition to HE (eg through foundation years) with targeted skills development for a broader-based intake.

3.2 We would prefer to process applications post results as the process of admissions has become more of an administrative and logistical process—while there is a greater need to be more applicant focused to ensure we are selecting the right students.

*The UK's ability to meet government targets for Higher Education participation and the relevance of these targets*

3.3 It can be difficult to strike a balance between the appropriate selectivity for degree level work and continuing to develop different routes to BA Hons from Foundation Degrees etc. There are debates and relationships to be built with industry, commerce and the community to develop distinctive but diverse opportunities. There appears to be a disconnection between National Skills shortages and the Government targets for HE participation. The targets need to take a closer look at demands in industry in vocational areas—for example, the Government Skills Shortage Occupations List (June 2008).

*The implementation and success of widening participation initiatives such as Compact agreements, and the impact of the current funding regime on these objectives*

3.4 From our experience the activities are widely appreciated by schools—but initiatives need to have solid, longer-term objectives encouraging a sustained approach to building relationships with key institutions.

*The role of the Government in developing and promoting fair access and admissions policies for the UK Higher Education sector*

3.5 There needs to be consistency in making sure that those with a proven track record in this field are rewarded with the funding to do more in this area. There are reservations about the complexities of the new Diplomas and a perceived reluctance to differentiate between their appropriateness for different disciplines.

## 4.0 The balance between teaching and research

*Levels of funding for, and the balance between, teaching and research in UK HEIs, and the adequacy of financial support for the development of innovative teaching methods and teaching/research integration*

4.1 There have been a number of recent schemes which have supported teaching and learning innovation, and integration of teaching and research (CETLs, TLRP, TQEF etc.); however, these have generally been based around fixed-term project funding. For institutions such as ours, this creates a number of difficulties relating to the inconsistency between funding for teaching and for research. It appears that funding for teaching and learning innovation and success is not available on the basis of previous successes in the same way that research-intensive universities are rewarded through the RAE/REF. Despite our many successes in teaching and learning innovation, there is a lack of on-going support for future developments.

4.2 To give an example, the impact of the CETL initiative, in our own institution has been substantial. The award of 4+ CETLs has meant that students have been introduced to an extraordinarily wide range of learning experiences, including the innovative use of mobile learning technologies; introduction to new environments via our immersive vision theatre, and sustainability-related placement opportunities. Further, we have been at the forefront of leading national dissemination events, sharing our developments with the sector at large and promoting the enhancement agenda. Whilst we are making strenuous efforts to ensure that these developments are continued and embedded into the curriculum, intermittent project funding remains the norm for teaching and learning developments. The tradition of providing project-based funding at the expense of long-term evaluation and embedding has led to the situation where intellectual property in the form of learning developments is not fully captured and exploited.

*The quality of teaching provision and learning facilities in UK and the extent to which they vary between HEIs*

4.3 It is extremely difficult to gauge the extent of variation in teaching quality in the UK. The best guarantee of equitability is the QAA audit, but even this sheds little light on the issue. The NSS provides some insight into the consistency of the student experience, though again it shouldn't be treated as definitive. If parity is seen as important, there is a need to investigate more carefully the ways of measuring or benchmarking current practice focusing on output/outcome measures rather than input measures.

4.4 Provision of learning facilities does not correlate directly with the assessment of the student learning experience. It is clear that institutions with higher levels of resources will score more highly on this measure. However there is no research which provides clear evidence that teaching quality is higher in such institutions.

*The suitability of methods of assessing excellence in teaching and research and the impact of research assessment on these activities*

4.5 As one of the leading modern post-1992 universities, we make strenuous efforts to ensure that our teaching and our research are aligned and viewed as complementary rather than competing agendas. Efforts to embed research-informed teaching have been enhanced by the recent distribution of TQEF funding focused specifically on this area, though this is now coming to an end. It is crucial that all HE teaching is informed by research; hence it follows that all institutions should support research. However the way in which research funds are distributed via the RAE threatens research developments in many universities, and limits the opportunity for new areas of research expertise to be opened up beyond the traditional research-intensive institutions. Undoubtedly, to some degree, the RAE has had a negative impact on teaching, as staff are encouraged to produce output which can be submitted into the RAE rather than focusing on teaching enhancement, writing textbooks and developing learning materials for the web, mobile devices etc. The difficulty of including pedagogic research in the units of assessment has also made this mode of research problematic and indeed it is explicitly discouraged by some panels.

4.6 There are obviously problems with assessing teaching excellence in the same way that there are problems and controversies around the way in which research excellence is assessed. However, this does not mean that assessment of teaching quality should not be attempted; simply that care should be taken to find a way of assessing teaching excellence which is measured via outputs, including the student experience. Excellence in teaching is currently assessed through initiatives such as the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme and the CETL scheme. However, whereas in research, such awards would be recognised by on-going funding through QR, there is no long-term benefit of similar successes in teaching and learning. This has led to the situation in many institutions where research is prioritised over teaching innovation, leading as it does to enhanced funding and reputational benefits.

*The availability and adequacy of training in teaching methods for UK academics and the importance of teaching excellence for the academic career path, including consideration of the role of teaching fellows*

4.7 The provision of training in teaching for new academic staff is highly variable across the country. Institutions such as our own have a long-established, HEA-accredited PGCert in learning and teaching in higher education, as well as a smaller-scale accredited training course for graduate teaching assistants. Our extensive provision in this area enables all teaching staff to gain appropriate training in teaching methods including: development of programmes and modules, assessment, student support, equality and diversity, use of learning technologies, and research-informed teaching, and enables discipline-specific training to be incorporated alongside more generic provision.

4.8 The role of the HEA in accrediting such courses is crucial to enable transferability between institutions and to enhance the quality assurance of such teaching and learning programmes. However, the lack of emphasis on National Professional Standards in teaching means that the benefits of training in teaching methods risks being diluted over time as there is no requirement for ongoing professional development; staff at the University of Plymouth however do have access to CPD throughout their teaching career. It is also the case that such initial training in teaching is not compulsory in all HEIs, and may be poorly supported and resourced in many institutions. Whilst the situation does seem to be changing gradually, there is no doubt that, historically, research has been the primary driver of academic careers, rather than teaching which is often viewed as under-valued. It is important that both teaching and research

gain support in all institutions—since the effective combination of the two activities is key to a successful higher education sector. A wider acceptance of the possibility of gaining a professorial appointment on the basis of teaching excellence would be helpful in this context.

*The responsibilities of the Government and HEFCE in assuring (a) the quality of teaching provision and learning opportunities in UK HEIs; and (b) the balance between teaching and research in HEIs*

4.9 Like many institutions, we run an internal teaching fellowship award scheme open to staff engaged in teaching and supporting learning within the institution. However, schemes such as this are potentially under threat owing to the phasing out of TQEF funding. In view of our track record, Plymouth is likely to continue to devote substantial resources to supporting teaching and learning initiatives; however we cannot be sure that the same commitment exists across the HEI system as a whole. HEFCE could take a stronger role in demonstrating support for teaching innovation and enhancement by ensuring that there is a distinct funding scheme for such activities, allocated on the basis of previous excellence in teaching and learning and reviewed in line with developments and outputs (including pedagogic research). It is crucial that the HEA continues to offer National Teaching Fellowships which act as a major driver in terms of offering individual staff an incentive to develop their career around teaching excellence. The HEA subject centres also offer a range of development opportunities (including funding and publication possibilities) for staff interested in enhancing teaching and learning. Continued support for these centres is therefore essential.

## 5.0 Degree classification

*Whether the methodologies used by UK HEIs to determine degree classifications and the distribution of degree classes awarded are appropriate, the potential methodologies for the standardisation of degree classifications within, and between, HEIs, and the effectiveness of the Quality Assurance Agency in monitoring degree standards*

5.1 The University currently uses the established degree classification systems for all its programmes. However, in the light of employer and student feedback as well as the Leitch and Burgess reports, the university is actively reviewing its approach. There is broad agreement with the principle of recognising the wider achievements of learners, particularly within the settings of work-based and practice-based learning, volunteering and part-time employment. A working party is currently debating the effectiveness of different strategies for recognising such informal learning, particularly using innovative technologies for capturing student experience. Whilst the university welcomes the work of the Burgess Group, it seems unlikely that the final report will propose a one-size-fits-all solution. Given that the university will support and implement a new-style transcript which provides much more information about attainment *within* the curriculum, the main focus of the university debate will be on the recognition of extra-curricular experiences and achievements which we know to be critical to the employability of our students.

*The advantages and disadvantages of the UK's system of degree classification and the introduction of the Higher Education Academic Record*

5.2 Classification needs to be reviewed taking into account an industry view. Some way of summarising and measuring achievement will be necessary if there is a move towards a transcript system. Employers need a basis for differentiating job applicants and are unlikely to want to scan through a long transcript and try to assess overall ability for themselves. If this summary measure is not to be a degree class, then it has to be something that is comprehensible to everyone.

*The actions that universities, Government and others have taken, or should take, to maintain confidence in the value of degrees awarded by universities in the UK*

5.3 It is confidence in the university system that ensures confidence in the value of the particular degrees awarded. This confidence depends upon the level of funding and the degree of moral support provided by government.

*The extent to which student plagiarism is a problem in HE, and the availability and effectiveness of strategies to identify, penalise and combat plagiarism*

5.5 The question of plagiarism is important but is a rare occurrence given the totality of learning experiences and innovative measures of learning now in place. We believe plagiarism can be minimised by using an experiential curriculum and imaginative assessment.

## 6.0 Student support and engagement

*The effectiveness of initiatives to support student engagement in the formulation of HE policy, and how the success or otherwise of these initiatives is being assessed*

6.1 The University of Plymouth encourages student engagement in the formulation of HE policy. We actively engage our students in many aspects of the university and are currently reviewing ways to enhance practice.

*Examples of reasons for, and potential strategies to reduce, the non-completion of higher education programmes by students*

6.2 In our collective experience non-completion is a complex and many-faceted phenomenon. These are chiefly, changes in personal circumstances, financial difficulties, or a realisation that the HE experience is not for them at that moment. Financial considerations and homelife issues are particularly strong reasons amongst mature students. At the University of Plymouth our strategies include: even better advice and guidance prior to enrolment so that expectations are realistic and effective decision making has taken place; effective use of the Access to Learning Fund and similar for financial support; good advice and guidance availability after enrolment; high levels of 1:1 contact between academic staff and students in the transition period; effective induction and transition programmes to raise aspiration and embed appropriate learning behaviours. Other interventions known to be effective are those concentrating on formative assessment, and initiatives which familiarise students with examples of successful study practices and assignment work by other students—eg in peer learning or “PALS” schemes. At the University of Plymouth the “WrAssE” project is building an online library of examples of successful student assignments for use in learning about academic writing.

*The adequacy of UK higher education (HE) funding and student support packages, and implications for current and future levels of student debt*

6.3 There would be benefit from greater clarity and consistency around the definition of “Part-time student” across agencies and policies. Currently, the funding and support for many part-time modes of attendance is inequitable compared with full-time students, both from fees, and from eg social services support. Frequently part-time students report that they fall between the myriad of definitions, usually to their detriment.

*Any further action required by the Government and/or HEFCE to ensure that UK HEIs offer students a world class educational experience*

6.4 The inadequacy of rural public transport affects many students in regions such as the South West, particularly mature returners, the disabled, and WP groupings. It is not an option for many students to move to live near to the campus. At the University of Plymouth we champion our extensive FE college network, developing excellent provision locally; and continuing to support and develop further ICT solutions to support this learning.

*December 2008*

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**Memorandum 39**

**Submission from Semta**

STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

*Summary*

1. Employers in Semta’s sectors have identified significant skill needs at higher levels. They are therefore concerned that the “offer” of universities is fit for purpose, both for traditional full-time first degree students, and for the increasingly diverse population who will benefit in the future.

2. Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics subjects may require additional support in the future, as the cost of delivery of these subjects at a high level must not influence the availability or quality of provision.

*Semta, the Sector Skills Council*

3. Industry owned and led, Semta aims to increase the impact of skilled people throughout the science, engineering and manufacturing technologies sectors.

4. We work with employers to determine their current and future skills needs and to provide short and long term skills solutions, whether that be training and skills development, or campaigning with government and other organisations to change things for the better. Through our labour market intelligence and insights from employers across our sectors, we identify change needed in education and skills policy and practice, and engage with key industry partners and partners in the education and training sector, to help increase productivity at all levels in the workforce.

5. The sectors we represent are: Aerospace; Automotive; Bioscience; Electrical; Electronics; Maintenance; Marine; Mathematics; Mechanical; Metals and Engineered Metal Products. We also have cross-sectoral responsibility for issues relevant to scientific skills.

6. Semta is part of the network of 25 employer-led Sector Skills Councils.

*Admissions*

## CHANGING THE MODEL OF DELIVERY

7. Through the Sector Skills Agreements (SSAs), Semta's employers have articulated their need to have more employees reaching high levels of skills. The findings of the SSA process point clearly to an increasing need for technical expertise at Level 3 and above, and improvement in leadership and management. Science and engineering employers are supportive of the continuing expansion of higher education, in those subjects and areas where skills are currently in short supply, and where future demands will create shortages.

8. However, they see little value in simple expansion of existing provision in the traditional three-year, full-time, first degree model. For HE to enter into a new relationship with business, this model cannot be the standard offering.

9. In changing the standard offer, the process of admissions will necessarily have to change. As the offer expands to incorporate more flexible learning, which is part-time and vocationally-related, so the background and prior achievement of people approaching universities will be different.

## SHORT, PROFESSIONAL, EMPLOYER-FUNDED COURSES

10. Where employers are co-funding courses, the university may not be able to stipulate strict entry requirements in terms of prior qualifications—the employer may wish to nominate employees who have a wide range of prior achievement.

## HELPING APPRENTICES PROGRESS TO HE

11. Even for traditional first degree admission, the planned expansion of apprenticeships will mean a larger number of individuals achieving Level 3 qualifications outside of A levels. Former apprentices who have completed BTEC National and Higher National qualifications, City & Guilds awards, and a whole range of NVQs at Level 3 will be considering if further study is an appropriate path for them. This will have implications for admissions services in universities, which will need to be clear and “fair” regarding which qualifications are appropriate for entry to which courses.

12. Former apprentices will also expect to have the option to continue their learning in the same “mode” as they have studied during their work-based programme. This usually means day-release arrangements, and work-based projects.

13. We believe that there is scope to expand apprentice progression to HE, through improving admission service understanding of the content and rigour of non A level qualifications, and through more flexible delivery methods.

## DIPLOMAS AND HE ADMISSION

14. As the lead SSC for the development of both the Engineering and Science Diplomas, and one of the SSCs involved in the development of the Diploma in Manufacturing and Product Design, Semta has experienced first-hand the difficulties in raising awareness and acceptance of qualifications outside A level. The inevitable conundrum is: how can HEIs confirm that a qualification is acceptable before any students have completed the course? And how can students choose a course without knowing that successful completion will enable them to progress to HE?

15. The Engineering Diploma Development Partnership has addressed this by the closest possible working with a wide range of universities, including Cambridge. Through their input and support, the Partnership has been able to devise content and assessment structures which will meet the highest standards of university entry. These efforts mean that students embarking on the Diploma in Engineering can be confident that their choice will place them on an equal footing with A level students. Indeed, some universities already consider elements of the Diploma in Engineering to be superior to A levels, particularly the Maths for Engineers optional module.

16. The proof of all this effort will come when Advanced Diploma students begin applying to universities in Autumn 2009. Until then, Semta and the Engineering Diploma Development Partnership will continue to work with consortia, universities, employers and students to ensure the Diploma opens as many doors as possible, and prepares candidates for the next step, whatever they might choose.

*The balance between teaching and research*

17. Semta remains unconvinced that funding for science and engineering taught courses adequately reflects the true cost of delivery for universities. Most first degrees relevant to our sector fall within “Band B” of HEFCE funding, with the cost weighting of 1.7, and some are eligible for extra funding under the “Strategically Important and Vulnerable Subjects” initiative. However, we still do not believe that this funding is sufficient to provide truly experiential learning through hands-on innovative study.

18. Providing such a learning experience requires funding sufficient to ensure:

- Capital expenditure on world-class facilities, maintained and operated by skilled technicians (an ongoing expenditure)



- Highly skilled tutors, with industry experience and the ability to communicate enthusiasm for both the theory and the practical
- Ongoing resource for utilities and non-reusable materials
- Active links with employers

19. We believe that the current Research Assessment Exercise and Teaching Quality Assurance activity are too intensive and disruptive, with universities torn between their responsibilities as both employers and teachers.

20. Career academics in research intensive universities are encouraged from an early stage to gain an international reputation, for both themselves and their institutions. We believe it is possible that this may pressure some individuals to neglect their teaching commitment.

#### *Degree classification*

21. For engineering subjects, many degrees are accredited by a relevant professional institution. This enables professional bodies to give credibility to courses, and to ensure standards are maintained across a range of higher education institutions. With professional status in engineering recognised and supported by these processes, quality is more consistent. It also increases student and parent confidence when selecting an institution/course for study.

#### *Student support and engagement*

##### ADDRESSING NON-COMPLETION

22. Student first degree “drop-out” is a significant concern to employers in Semta industries. We are well aware of the demands placed on students, particularly students of those subjects which are so vital to engineering and science companies—technology, mathematics, physical and biological sciences, and engineering. Surveys have repeatedly shown that the volume of work and amount of “class contact” time for these degrees is higher than in other subjects (eg *The academic experience of students in English Universities*, HEPI, 2007). However, this is not necessarily the sole cause of failure to complete.

23. We believe that students are more likely to complete their course where a number of factors are in place:

- Confident and effective teaching by tutors with industry knowledge and enthusiasm
- Practical projects which demonstrate the “real world” application of theory
- Excellent facilities which give them confidence that their studies are preparing them for work in exciting fields and companies
- Links to employers and companies who are able to support delivery of the curriculum, through a range of means (visits to workplaces, workplace projects, visiting tutors from industry, careers information, etc).

24. A further factor in completion, that of financial support, cannot be ignored. Given the recognised higher workload in STEM subjects, we believe that students of these subjects may benefit from additional loan and grant arrangements. This would enable them to reduce any additional part-time work to support their studies which is financially necessary. The additional cost of delivering a STEM subject is reflected in the per-student funding which the university receives—perhaps students should receive the same consideration.

*December 2008*

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### **Memorandum 40**

#### **Submission from the Institution of Engineering and Technology**

##### STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

###### *Summary*

- The changing nature of school education is putting new pressures on the traditional teaching methods of universities.
- The result of focusing the majority of university funding on the Research Assessment Exercise has diverted attention away from teaching.
- The levels of funding allocated by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) fall significantly short of the cost of teaching many engineering disciplines.
- There is little or no standardisation across universities regarding degree classification methodology.
- The current degree classification system is in need of review.

- Universities must take responsibility for eradicating plagiarism.
- There is a concern within higher education that the “teach to test” regime in schools is leading to an increase in students with problems of poor motivation and attitude to learning.

#### ADMISSIONS

1. As a result of the widening participation initiatives, many universities are admitting students with a range of different learning styles. Traditionally, universities tend to teach engineering as an academic subject. It is likely that the universities will be increasingly challenged to provide “practical” based study, particularly when faced with the expectations of fee paying students who have come through the “practical” diploma route.

#### THE BALANCE BETWEEN TEACHING AND RESEARCH

##### *Research and Teaching.*

2. The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) has had a major impact on the balance between teaching and research because of the importance attached to it by everyone employed in universities from Vice-Chancellors downwards. Quite apart from the impact that the outcome of the RAE will have on a university’s reputation, the fact that significant amounts of baseline funding are linked directly to performance in the RAE means that in general universities cannot afford to neglect optimising RAE scores across all departments. This means that any department which performs badly in the RAE runs the risk of closure, regardless of the quality of the teaching delivered by its staff. The inevitable consequence is that heads of department place a very high priority on maximising the research performance of their staff, particularly in universities that regard themselves as research-intensive. From the point of view of individual staff members, exclusion from the RAE spells disaster in terms of career progression and it is therefore not surprising that they should devote a disproportionately large amount of their time to the development of a strong research portfolio.

3. The requirement that academics should both teach and carry out research does allow one activity to fertilise the other. As professionals, academic staff do not generally neglect their teaching duties, although the pressures imposed by the RAE can mean that an academic who is intent on furthering his or her career through research is unlikely to devote a significant proportion of their time and energy to the development of innovative teaching and learning methods. Evidence to support this view comes from the extent to which staff engage in continuing professional development (CPD) activities related to teaching and learning. Most universities lay on a comprehensive programme of in-house CPD activities in the form of seminars and workshops on matters relating to teaching quality enhancement. However, many staff in the research-intensive universities do not see engagement with these activities as a priority for their career development and so will tend to avoid them as far as possible. The result is that teaching-related CPD activities are invariably populated by a minority of staff comprising the few who are not prepared to compromise teaching quality in order to further their research and those who have become disaffected by the dominant research ethos that has gripped universities.

##### *Funding Shortfall.*

4. There is evidence to show that the levels of funding allocated by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) fall significantly short of the cost of teaching provision in some disciplines. In the case of engineering, for example, a detailed study of the costs associated with engineering degrees was commissioned from J M Consulting by the Engineering Technology Board (ETB) and the Engineering Professors’ Council (EPC).<sup>119</sup> On the basis of four case studies using TRAC (Transparent Approach to Costing for Teaching) data it was found that engineering departments were operating with shortfalls in funding for teaching of between 15% and 41%.

#### DEGREE CLASSIFICATION

##### *Classification.*

5. For degrees to be truly valued, it is important that the needs of the “user” (eg an employer) are taken into account during any review of the classification system.

6. The conclusion reached by the Burgess Group<sup>120</sup> was that the present UK honours degree classification system is no longer fit for purpose. The arguments put forward in the Burgess Group report are highly persuasive and lead to the conclusion that a more comprehensive record of student achievement should be introduced in the shape of the Higher Education Academic Record (HEAR). To quote from the Executive Summary of the Burgess Group report:

<sup>119</sup> “The Costs of Engineering Degrees”, ETB/EPC Report commissioned from J M Consulting, November 2007 (available from <http://www.epc.ac.uk/uploads/presentations/EPC-ETBreportfinalversion.doc>).

<sup>120</sup> “Beyond the Honours Degree Classification: Burgess Group Final Report”, Universities UK, October 2007.

*“The HEAR will be a single document, based on, and developed from, the current academic transcript, and incorporating the European Diploma Supplement. It will contain a wider range of information than the current academic transcript and will capture more fully than now the strengths and weaknesses of the student’s performance.”*

7. This is very timely and a welcome step in the right direction, however steps will need to be taken to ensure that there is no bias in the achievements recorded.

#### *Standardisation.*

8. At present there is little or no standardisation across universities in the UK when it comes to the methodologies used for determining degree classifications. Most institutions use a weighted average of the marks achieved in assessments carried out at various stages in the programme of study with the final year normally being given the highest weight. Marks achieved in earlier years may be incorporated with lower weight or in some cases may be excluded from the degree classification calculation altogether.

9. In recent years a number of universities have modified their regulations relating to degree classification by discounting (ie excluding from consideration) a proportion of the assessed modules in which students have achieved the lowest marks. This can result in some students gaining a higher overall mark which may take them across a degree classification boundary. The net effect is that these students will graduate with a better class of degree than they would have gained had all of their module results been taken into consideration. The IUSS Committee may wish to investigate the academic justification for doing this.

10. The exclusion of certain modules from the methodology used for determining degree classification also calls into question whether students graduating from one of these programmes can reasonably claim to have demonstrated that they have met all of the intended learning outcomes. From an external viewpoint, manipulation of the degree classification system in this way is likely to be interpreted as a lowering of standards and can only serve to weaken the reputation of the UK higher education system. For this reason alone the abolition of the degree classification system and its replacement with a system based on academic transcripts is to be wholeheartedly welcomed.

#### *Plagiarism.*

11. Plagiarism is a growing problem and there is a suspicion that much of it is going undetected or is simply being ignored. That is not to say that the universities do not take a hard line if it is discovered. The ICT revolution has made the copying of text through cutting and pasting from one document to another an enticingly simple and straightforward process. This enables students to copy material from online resources (most notably Wikipedia) and also from one another with remarkably little effort. Fortunately the same technology that has facilitated the surge in plagiarism also provides the means for its detection. Some of the measures that have been introduced recently to combat plagiarism can be quite effective (for example, plagiarism detection software using web-based search engines such as Turnitin), although universities will only succeed in eradicating the problem if these measures are applied rigorously and consistently.

12. When students arrive at university, they are not always aware that simply copying information without attribution is wrong. It is therefore important that schools help in the fight against plagiarism by encouraging an ethos of original work.

13. Experience suggests that there are cultural differences in attitude to plagiarism which is something that needs to be handled sensitively when it comes to clamping down on poor practice. This is often dealt with on induction but it takes more than a chat to change deep rooted attitudes.

14. The current take up of tools like Turnitin can at best be described as patchy and in general universities are a long way short of being able to claim that student work is routinely and consistently being screened for plagiarism. If they are to make progress towards this goal, they will need to ensure that teaching staff are willing to accept the submission of student work in electronic form and are properly trained in the use of plagiarism detection tools. They must also create a culture in which all teaching staff routinely and consistently use anti-plagiarism software to scrutinise any work handed in by students for assessment. Currently a student who indulges in plagiarism may only stand a 10 or 20% chance of being found out (although this figure will vary widely depending on the teaching staff involved) and this may lead some students to think that the risks involved are worth taking. We need to move quickly to a position where the probability of detection increases to 80 or 90%, at which point one would hope that the vast majority of students will recognise that the risks involved are unacceptably high.

## STUDENT SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

### *Motivation and attitude.*

15. Students that are highly motivated to study their chosen subject are more likely to complete the course and graduate with a degree than those that are not. This sounds fairly obvious, but a sizeable proportion of today’s students appear to have problems of poor motivation and a less than ideal approach to learning. Whereas students with a deep-rooted desire to learn and understand the subtleties of a subject will probably succeed regardless of the environment they are studying in, those that are poorly motivated will tend to adopt a far more superficial approach to learning. Students in this latter category may view the learning process

as little more than the accumulation of disconnected items of factual information that are to be stored only for as long as necessary to regurgitated them in response to an examination question. In this situation there is a severe mismatch between the expectations of the lecturer (who is really trying to cater for the deep learners who are keen to develop their understanding of the subject) and the expectations of the student (who would really just like to be told the answers to the examination questions so that they can be remembered and reproduced in the exam room).

16. Students who adopt a superficial approach to learning are unlikely to become skilled practitioners in their chosen subject. They almost invariably perform badly in examinations, although this is not always the case—some examination questions almost encourage a superficial learning style. Turning a poorly-motivated superficial learner into a highly-motivated deep learner is by no means straightforward and is very demanding in terms of the time and effort required from tutors. In terms of motivation and overcoming learning difficulties students would undoubtedly benefit from more personal contact with their tutors (“personalised learning”) and this could be the single greatest factor that would help to improve student retention and lower non-completion rates. In a higher education system that has seen massive reductions in the unit of resource over the last twenty to thirty years and in which many staff are distracted from teaching by the RAE (see comments above) such intensive levels of student support are unlikely to be forthcoming.

17. Many lecturers in universities believe that the teaching experienced by students in secondary schools is at least partially responsible for the current attitude taken by students to the learning process. They point to evidence of schools “teaching-to-the-test”, where students are drilled to remember key facts that are likely to feature in assessments so that they will be able to regurgitate them when they sit the test. Schools have been accused of resorting to these tactics because they are faced with the need to optimise their pass rates and grade rankings in order to enhance their performance in national league tables.

#### *Further Action*

18. We believe that student fees for degree programmes in the UK can discourage students from pursuing the longer programmes that lead to professional qualification. In the UK, Chartered Engineers need to have an accredited Masters level (MEng or MSc) degree which entails four years of study; this is consistent with EU Directive 2005/36 on professional recognition within the EU, which specifies a minimum time of HE study of four years for Level E Professionals. Financial support for the extra year of study beyond the standard three years would mitigate the disincentive of the extra cost, and provide an opportunity to promote subject selection.

*December 2008*

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### **Memorandum 41**

#### **Submission from York St John University**

#### STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

##### *Summary*

1.1 Sustainable widened participation can only be enhanced through key agencies working in close partnership and developing local solutions to aspirations, achievement and access.

1.2 Excellent teaching needs to be informed by research and professional practice. Support for research must not just focus on “blue skies” but also properly recognise the contribution of action and near to market research in future sustainable economic growth and social development. Global excellence is important but there is also significant social and economic value from research of local and regional relevance and excellence.

1.3 Quality systems for the honours degree are robust. However, the degree can fail to represent the full range of student achievement and the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) is an important proposal. Higher education must not be purely instrumental but has a key role in personal and social transformation, embedding lifelong learning and in advanced education for global citizenship and democracy.

1.4 The quality of the student experience is of primary importance in both achievement and retention. We welcome the increasing recent emphasis on the “student voice” in policy and practice development as represented, for example, through the National Student Survey (NSS) and the National Student Forum.

1.5 Higher education needs to be supported to deliver more flexible and innovative provision to a more diverse and dispersed student population. Both the employer engagement agenda and increasing internationalisation requires funding models and quality processes that support this vision.

## ADMISSIONS

2.1 GuildHE Universities have a strong and sustained commitment to widening participation and a record of achievement.

2.2 York St John University hosts Aimhigher in Yorkshire and Humber along with the lifelong learning partnership, Higher York (York St John University, University of York, York College, Askham Bryan College and the City of York Council) and Learning City York, the education partnership of the City of York's Sustainable Community Strategy.

2.3 Bringing together the key agencies addressing widening participation and establishing transparent progression routes across all institutions, providing higher education in York and its immediate surroundings provides greatest benefit for students from primary schools through to post-graduate level.

2.4 Our experience shows that, especially for hard to reach students, it is important to integrate arrangements to provide for local circumstances and to create local (and regional) solutions, especially when confronted with extensive rural areas and issues of "access poverty."

2.5 York St John University is actively engaged with the Higher Education Academy's Special Interest Group on widening participation and fully supports its work in establishing and sharing best practice.

2.6 We also support the work of the Higher Education Academy in developing a better understanding of new students' expectations of higher education, embedding widening participation and student diversity and its work on personal tutoring. This work should contribute to enhancing the quality of the student experience.

2.7 We fully support the move to increasing transparency and fairness of the admissions process and the work of GuildHE in shaping the Delivery Partnership.

## THE BALANCE BETWEEN TEACHING AND RESEARCH

3.1 Excellent teaching needs to be informed by research and professional practice.

3.2 Students want to study in an environment where they can experience state of the art practice along with the most current developments in theory. Such research and practice informed teaching excites and inspires students.

3.3 There is no natural divide between teaching and research. However, this research must also include action research and near to market research and not just "blue skies" research. Research quality is not just about global rankings but also about regional excellence and its potential for social and economic impact working with private, public and voluntary organisations.

3.4 Higher education must provide all students with research skills and the confidence to think critically is regularly cited as highly desirable by employers.

3.5 York St John University supports the UK Professional Standards Framework developed by the Higher Education Academy. It requires academics to demonstrate the incorporation of scholarship, research and professional practice into their teaching with a programme of accredited continuing professional development.

3.6 There is a clear appetite for better recognition of teaching. This is also strongly indicated by the prevalence of accreditation and continuing professional development for staff in higher education and by the Higher Education Academy's system of Associates, Fellows, Senior Fellows and National Teaching Fellowships. This provides an aspirational structure and a valuable network for sharing good practice.

3.7 Formal training of HE teachers new-to-teaching is a priority at York St John. Our HEA Accredited programme has secured professional standards here in the UK. Importantly, it is now an "expert product" to the research-led University of Bahrain; and a contributor (via PMI II) to raising standards in the developing world through a contract with four universities in Kenya.

3.8 Individual universities need to provide support for professional development and to recognise high quality teaching. Teaching needs to be a clear and unambiguous route for academic promotion.

3.9 Post-graduate students need to be provided with teaching opportunities with the support and guidance of experienced and successful university teachers.

## DEGREE COMPLETION AND CLASSIFICATION

4.1 York St John University believes there is compelling evidence that the quality system is sound for universities operating within the framework overseen by the Quality Assurance Agency and the honours degree is an enduring and highly valued qualification.

4.2 A preoccupation with the honours degree, however, can fail to represent the full range of study opportunities in the modern university and student achievement. The UUK/GuildHE report "Beyond the Honours Degree Classification" sets out the opportunity to recognise the breadth and depth of student achievement through the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR). York St John University supports the work with JISC and other partners to develop student record systems and software required to ensure its success.

4.3 We strongly believe that higher education is not purely instrumental but has a key role in personal and social transformation, embedding lifelong learning and securing global citizenship for democracy.

4.4 York St John University supports a greater emphasis on diversity as a contributing factor to excellence and more vigorous critique of simplistic models of quality as evidenced by many league tables.

4.5 We would also support the call for a systematic debate, coordinated by DIUS, concerning what constitutes excellence in student performance *across* disciplines.

4.6 We share the view that the National Student Survey is now a vital tool for within the broader university toolkit for student evaluation, assessing students' perceptions of the quality of their experiences.

4.7 The quality of the student experience is of primary importance at York St John University.

#### STUDENT SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

5.1 The increasing need is for higher education to become a "joint venture" between students and institutions to produce the best outcomes for both students and the economy.

5.2 With a significant demographic downturn approaching, the student profile is changing. The employer engagement agenda is also shifting the locus of higher education to the workplace as much as the campus. The challenge for government is to put in place funding models and quality systems that support this vision.

5.3 Head of the National Audit Office, Tim Burr, has stated "HEIs could tailor provision more closely to people's circumstances, such as where they live and when they can study. ...more needs to be done to expand local and regional higher education in geographical areas with little or no local provision of higher education..." (*Report on Widening Participation in Higher Education* National Audit Office June 2008)

5.4 Higher education will need to be supported to deliver more flexible provision to a more diverse and dispersed student population. Both the employer engagement agenda and increasing internationalisation (of the curriculum and the student body) will require innovative models of student financial and other support.

*December 2008*

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### Memorandum 42

#### Submission from the University of Leicester

#### INQUIRY ON STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

##### *Summary*

##### ADMISSIONS

- Current practice does not always distinguish strategies to encourage wider participation and strategies to encourage fair access.
- There is insufficient emphasis on the evaluation of widening participation activity.
- Participation rates amongst lower socio-economic groups have increased, but it is unclear whether the change is a consequence of widening participation activity, school performance or expansion of higher education.

##### The Balance between Teaching and Research

- Current funding mechanisms ignore the reality that prospective students are attracted to the group of UK universities whose strategic mission is defined by the synergy between research and teaching.
- An unintended consequence of ignoring the link between research and teaching is the impact on the provision of teaching of successive Research Assessment Exercises.
- Changes in priorities for the funding of teaching over the last few years have not supported the research/teaching synergy.

#### STUDENT SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

- The possibility that the support packages for students might change gives rise to concern about the possibility of major perturbations in student populations, which would have financial consequences. This would have to be managed carefully.
- Progress towards a proper functioning market would take time, because of the change of culture that would be required both outside and inside universities.
- The extension of the student loan scheme to Masters' level programmes would be beneficial for both students and the economy.
- Policy developments appear to disadvantage part-time students in comparison with their full-time peers.

- Particular financial problems arise for students who need access to state benefits and are the very people who should be benefiting from widening access strategies.
- Individuals may be prevented from undertaking a higher education course because of benefit rules which disadvantage students and are compounded by a seemingly widespread lack of understanding of student eligibility on the part of benefit advisors.

DETAILED SUBMISSION

*The implementation and success of widening participation initiatives*

1. There needs to be clear thinking and delineation between strategies to encourage wider participation (ie encouraging individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds with ability to progress to HE) and strategies to encourage fair access (ie that the very brightest are given encouragement and equal opportunity to enter the country’s very best universities or the most challenging courses). This is not always the case in current practice.

2. The two require a distinct approach both at institutional and Government level. It is possible for a university to have excellent schemes for widening participation, encouraging young people to aim high, and yet have a very poor record itself in terms of fair access to its own programmes. Schemes designed to tackle fair access need to focus as much on admission and selection processes as on activity to raise aspiration.

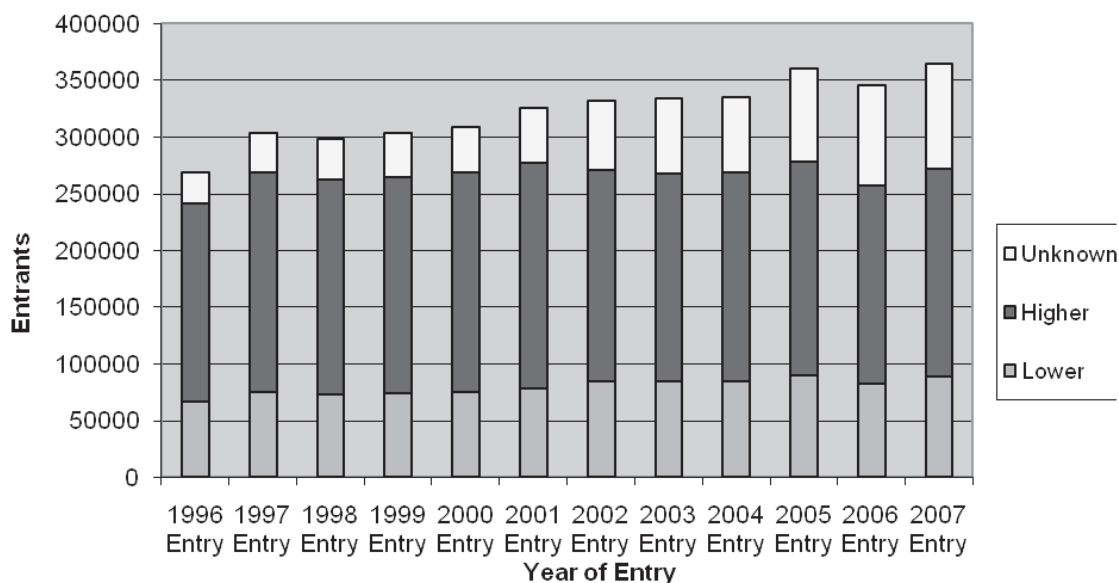
3. There is insufficient emphasis on the evaluation of widening participation activity. Much of current evaluation activity tends to focus on counting the volume of activity rather than the achievement of outcomes and student progression. Greater use of quantitative admissions data should be used to gauge success. For example, the evaluation of the £180 million Excellence Challenge scheme, an ambitious plan launched at the turn of the decade to secure wider participation and fair access focused heavily on how the money had enabled HEIs to develop additional activity. It did not look with any degree of details at the impact on patterns of admissions (<http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR644.pdf>)

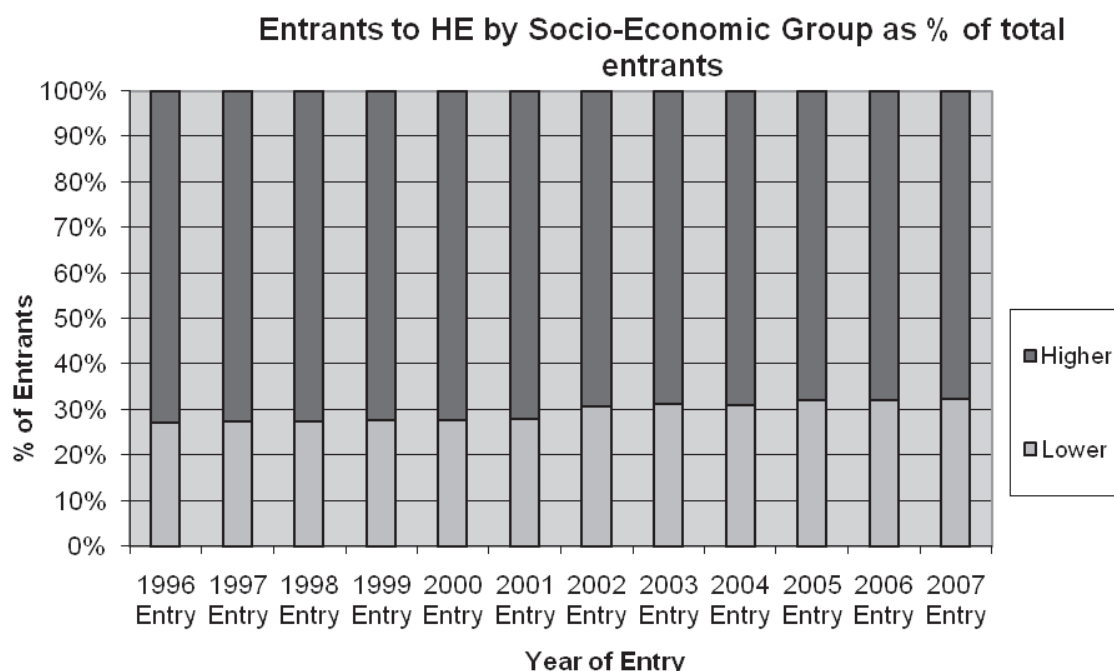
4. Consistency of funding streams is also important. The resources invested through the Excellence Challenge were swiftly reallocated towards the end of the scheme’s life.

5. A combination of inconsistent resourcing, evaluation that focuses on activity rather than outcome and a wooliness around whether the sector is seeking to tackle issues of fair access or wider participation means our understanding of what is really effective in this arena is not much more mature than at the start of the schemes a decade ago.

6. In his annual letter to the HEFCE in 2000 the Secretary of State called for “substantial progress” on the issue of widening participation. As the data below shows there is evidence that participation rates amongst lower socio-economic groups have increased both absolutely and in relative terms. What is unclear is whether the change is a consequence of widening participation activity, changes in school performance (ie more students from lower socio-economic groups achieving five grades A-C at GCSE enabling them to progress into level 3 study and hence through to HE) or expansion of higher education. The impact of the move to variable fees is not discernible on participation data (except on the behaviour of deferred entrants in 2005) as the graphs, using UCAS data, below demonstrate (note UCAS’s methodology for classification of socio-economic groups changed in 2002).

**Entrants to HE by socio-economic group**





*The role of the Government in promoting fair access*

7. Admissions policies are the responsibility of individual HEIs. All will focus on selecting and admitting the very best students. It is legitimate for the Government to engage with the sector in exploring the extent to which this stated aim is being met—in particular the ability of HEIs to determine talent that may be hidden because of disadvantage.

8. Although there are some shortcomings with the system of performance indicators for widening participation in higher education, the University believes that providing information on institutional success in relation to this issue is right and proper. The Government may wish to consider a carefully targeted pilot scheme which would look at the impact of widening participation and fair access activities on quantitative admissions statistics in a selection of HEIs.

*The balance between teaching and research*

9. There are a group of UK universities, of which Leicester is one, whose strategic mission is fundamentally defined by the synergy between research and teaching. These are institutions which offer high-quality courses in traditional disciplines at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and engage in high-quality research in the same disciplines. They also have a strong widening participation ethos and meet WP benchmarks. They place equal weight on the importance of research and teaching, they recruit staff in the expectation that they will be both research and teaching active, and they provide their courses on the basis that students will be taught in a research environment.

10. This research environment has a direct impact on the curriculum through opportunities provided for the continual updating and refreshing of core content and through the provision of special options. It also determines forms of assessment, which include the ubiquitous requirement for an extensive piece of independent study, and on the delivery of skills, including the ability to seek and assimilate information, prepare reports, think independently and critically and communicate findings. The strength of student recruitment to these institutions demonstrates that prospective students are attracted by these features of a university education, partly because employer interest in graduates with these skills remains as strong as ever. Current funding mechanisms appear to us to ignore these realities.

11. Universities which offer teaching in a research environment provide educational opportunities on the continuum from Bachelor's level to Ph.D. We believe that there is a lack of appreciation of the extent to which research informs every aspect of what we do in the discussions which have taken place in relation to the Bologna Agreement; there is a particular failure in mainland Europe to understand the strong focus on independent research which characterises integrated Master's programmes (M.Chem. etc).



12. We sense from recent research and public statements about student contact hours that there is some disquiet about the amount of independent learning built in to the undergraduate curriculum and the impact of this on contact hours, particularly in the arts and humanities disciplines. We would argue strongly that it is the space allowed for independent learning which characterises the UK HE system. Provided that such independent learning and development is properly guided and supported by institutions, including access to substantial library and on-line resources, the outcome is a level of intellectual independence which cannot be delivered through the mere transmission of the syllabus through face-to-face direct teaching.

13. One example of what we assume is an unintended consequence of ignoring the link between research and teaching is the impact on the provision of teaching of successive Research Assessment Exercises, which has led to the concentration of around 70 per cent of quality-related research funds to 25 per cent of institutions. This has put the delivery to undergraduates of courses in core subjects in some institutions at risk, and in the most extreme cases has led to their closure. We recall that during a time when Chemistry departments were closing after the last RAE, the Royal Society for Chemistry expressed the concern that the position would soon be reached where there were insufficient university places to generate the number of chemists required to support the country's needs. Action has since been taken by HEFCE to protect such vulnerable subjects, but we see no sign of any recognition that research selectivity is in itself one cause of the problem. We do not object to selectivity per se, but we do believe that funding methodologies for research and teaching should work together, not undermine each other. Research selectivity has gone far enough.

14. We also believe that changes in priorities for the funding of teaching over the last few years have not supported the research/teaching synergy. The increasing emphasis on part-time study, employer engagement and/or regional development (for example foundation degrees) have provided undoubted opportunities for institutions (including ours), but have denied flourishing traditional disciplines the capacity to expand. It is now virtually impossible to obtain additional funding for teaching except through "employment-related" routes, so there is a dislocation between the continuing popularity of traditional disciplines with students and employers, in particular the employers of young graduates, and the willingness of the government to support these courses.

15. In relation to research funding, and as a university which undertakes a considerable amount of medically-related, charity-funded research, where full economic costing does not apply, we very strongly support the continuation of the dual support system. Many of the major breakthroughs in medical treatment arise from the application of the dual support regime, and would not have happened without it.

16. Finally, and in relation to the assessment of excellence, we strongly support the continuation of some use of some elements of peer review as a means of assuring quality in both teaching and research. We acknowledge that the expansion of higher education has brought challenges, but we believe that these can continue to be met through systems which acknowledge institutional autonomy and the considerable benefits of self-regulation.

#### *Perturbation consequent on possible change in the student support package*

17. The possibility that the support packages for students might change radically gives rise to concern about the possibility of major perturbations in student populations, which would have financial consequences for institutions. This would have to be managed carefully.

18. The introduction of capped fees did not introduce a market based on fee prices, since institutions generally charged the full fee. Market differentiation continued to be based on perceptions of quality, with the market "price" being the admission standard. If the fee cap were removed a far more complex market would emerge combining perceptions of quality and fee price, which could lead to major perturbation and instability in the sector. Progress towards a proper functioning market would take time, because of the change of culture that would be required both outside and inside universities. The relationship between the university and its students would change, as a willingness to pay more would come with a demand to receive more. Other consequences might follow such as a decline in postgraduate applications because of accumulated debt during undergraduate studies. All of this would have to be managed.

#### *Support for Masters' Programmes*

19. It is acknowledged that higher level skills acquired through masters programmes are a key driver of innovation and creativity within the economy. Competition for financial support for Masters' level programmes through the Research Councils, University schemes or charities is fierce. The extension of the student loan scheme to Masters' level programmes would be beneficial for both students and the economy.

#### *Supporting Part-time Study*

20. For many universities part-time students are an increasing group and require a different approach and different types of support from full-time campus based students. The University of Leicester, for example, has around 21,000 students, around a third of whom are non campus based distance learning students, requiring different learning and teaching approaches and support mechanisms.

21. Policy development would also appear to increasingly disadvantage part-time students, in comparison with their full-time peers. In light of the “Leitch” agenda and the changing demographics, HEIs are likely to find themselves targeting part-time students in work, and there are real difficulties in engaging and supporting these learners, given some of the financial support issues:

- When the loan support system for HE students was introduced it was restricted to full-time students only and while there has been welcome provision of some support for those part-timers studying 50% of a full load, this has not affected the majority of part-time students in HE.
- With the introduction of top up fees, fee levels for part-time students, though unregulated, have inevitably risen towards pro rata against full time fees, resulting in large fee increases for part-time students, but without access to the degree of support offered to full time students.
- HEFCE funding did not previously discriminate against part-time or lifelong learning students, but the introduction of the ELQs policy removes funding for students in this group, the majority of whom are likely to be part time.

#### *Students and state benefits*

22. Particular financial problems arise for those students who need access to state benefits. Most full-time students are ineligible for benefits. Those that are eligible include lone parents, students with disabilities, carers and part-time students studying less than 16 hours per week. These are the very members of society who should be benefiting from widening access strategies and yet they may experience considerable financial hardship whilst a student, or may be prevented from undertaking a higher education course altogether because of benefit rules which disadvantage students and which are compounded by a seemingly widespread lack of understanding of student eligibility on the part of benefit advisors.

23. Student eligibility is a complex area, requiring specialist knowledge which frontline benefit staff often do not possess. As a result, many students who are eligible for benefit, are incorrectly advised not to apply. These students are not easily identifiable and generally only come to light if they approach their institution’s welfare service in relation to other matters.

24. During the benefit assessment stage many students receive incorrectly calculated benefit awards because of administrative errors. Student income is often inaccurately assessed by benefits staff because they do not apply correct student income disregards and calculate awards over the wrong periods. This is especially evident in housing benefit applications.

25. Eligible students often face a period of hardship between the end of the academic year and receiving benefit payment. This is because certain students are entitled to benefit in vacations only and cannot apply until the vacation starts, even though their situation is clear well before this date.

26. Regulations governing student eligibility to benefit can also be applied inconsistently. For example, Postgraduate Social Work lone parent students meet the qualifying conditions for income support in the summer vacation. However, government regulations do not specifically refer to this particular category of students, leaving their eligibility for benefit open to interpretation. Consequently, whether they receive benefit or not has become a postcode lottery. This is also true for PhD students who should be eligible for Job Seekers Allowance during their writing up stage, providing they make themselves available for work. Unfortunately many Jobcentre staff still treat these students as attending full-time study and students are often refused benefit as a result.

27. Benefit regulations also penalise potentially vulnerable students such as those in ill health. Under the former Incapacity Benefit/Income Support rules, some students who could prove sickness for a period of 28 weeks or more became eligible for benefit. The new Employment Support Allowance seems to exclude students entirely from claiming benefits whilst sick.

28. It is common for carers to struggle financially in order to maintain themselves whilst a student. Students are ineligible for Carers Allowance if they study over 21 hours per week, including course work undertaken at home. All full-time Higher Education programmes offered by this institution expect students, on average, to study over this permitted limit and therefore carers automatically lose their entitlement. However, their caring responsibilities are unchanged.

*December 2008*

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### Memorandum 43

#### Submission from the Heads of Educational Development Group

##### STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

We have concentrated our responses on the section:

*“The balance between teaching and research”* and particularly the subsection

*“The availability and adequacy of training in teaching methods for UK academics and the importance of Teaching Excellence for the academic career path, including the consideration of the role of teaching fellows”:*

In summary we note that:

1. Widespread introduction and recognition of pedagogical development programmes for staff new to HE teaching is valued and successful. This will need continuation with sensitive regards to mixtures of experience and research evidence led inputs, provision for part-time staff and programme credit ratings.
2. Opportunities for continuing professional development and appropriate staff recognition need renewed attention.
3. The end of the TQEF and introduction of TESS with funding rolling into the block grant should not be allowed to lead to an unintentional undermining of sound processes and practices which HEIs have developed to enable the enhancement of learning, teaching and the student experience.
4. While HEIs vary the balance between teaching and research in relation to their place in the sector, the RAE has been seen as taking attention and funding away from learning, teaching and educational development, thus influencing the quality of the student experience. A robust future focus is sought on more research informed teaching, pedagogical research, scholarship, ways of linking research and teaching and developing students as researchers. This should now be given more serious consideration and application across the sector.

##### OUR CONTRIBUTION IN FULL

The widespread introduction of pedagogical development programmes for staff new to teaching in Higher Education has been successful as proven, for instance, in improving student satisfaction scores across the sector. The common presence of such programmes will need continued and sensitive steering, to retain the current mix of research evidence and experience informed inputs and opportunities.

In particular, we must ensure that programmes equipping staff for teaching responsibilities, show parity in standards and quality across the sector, to the benefit of equitable student learning experiences for all HE students. In common with programmes preparing for other professions, this is done through an accreditation process administered by the profession itself—in our case, the HE sector through the HE Academy. We welcome differences in institutional missions and identities being reflected in development programmes for new academics and note that themes covered in such programmes now include more than learning and teaching ( eg leadership development, research development). However, we also note that the current accreditation process is increasingly allowing disparities between institutions that relate to agreed standards for learning and teaching (Professional Standards Framework standards 1 or 2), the level of engagement with “learning to teach” (credit size of programmes) and a shift from academic engagement with learning and teaching to training for teaching. Some of these disparities have caused substantial discussion and in light of the intention to achieve a high standard of learning experiences for all HE students, this needs consideration.

Some further consideration also needs to be given to development for part-time staff and visiting lecturers and Graduate students who teach. If the golden rule is the ensuring of appropriate learning and teaching professional development for all who are teaching/facilitating the learning of students, then they and other colleagues clearly are entitled to appropriate development provision , support and recognition, including mentoring schemes, and time allowances.

Moreover, further informed and focused commitment to the development and recognition of appropriate continuing professional development schemes for established staff continues to be needed.

It is crucial that the healthy and imaginative developments to support established staff, and enhance the quality of learning and teaching and the student experience should not be eroded by the cessation of the TQEF and the rolling of the TESS into a block grant. This could in some instances lead to erosion of recognition and reward of effective schemes for teaching, learning, assessment, curriculum development and enhancing the student experience which have been established and nurtured during the TQEF funding period..

With reference to teaching fellowships, on the one hand, National Teaching fellows are variously appreciated and their expertise made use of within their institutions. On the other hand, there are residual questions about the contributions and benefits to the institution that has supported them. Some colleagues

report that their NTFS are providing models for teaching excellence awards, internal fellowship projects and other innovation, enhancement and recognition processes. Some leadership in relation to ways for engaging NTFS more fully in institutions and the sector would be welcomed.

HEDG members represent the full range of HEIs, some more research intensive, some more teaching oriented. There is widespread indication that the RAE exercise has been seen as taking precedence over L&T. We consider that post RAE, more energy and focus should be dedicated towards:

- Research informed teaching
- The development of pedagogical research
- Scholarly approaches to learning and teaching
- Relating teaching and research
- Developing students as researchers

and that prioritisation and funding should underpin their further developments.

Good practice in terms of the focused and imaginative breadth of continuing professional development activity that is being nurtured and carried out across the sector is being shown by many HEIs to lead directly to enhancement of the student learning experience. This good practice needs to be maintained, developed, mapped further against the professional standards framework, and shared as a norm of provision, across the sector. This will only be possible with appropriate strategic direction and funding support.

*December 2008*

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#### **Memorandum 44**

#### **Submission from the University of Hertfordshire**

STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

##### *Summary*

- The University of Hertfordshire (UH) has elected to respond to the section of the Inquiry on the balance between teaching and research.
- Two key issues here are the identification and recognition of excellence in teaching, as a distinct, professional skill, and innovation in professional practice. There is much that can be done internally to recognise excellence and promote innovation; this should be encouraged and balanced with work at national level. Until performance and innovation can be captured and measured, it will be difficult to challenge the dominance of research as the determiner of academic and institutional success; this situation does not serve the student experience well.
- Responses to this Inquiry will reveal the differentiation of the HE sector above all else. Institutional mission does, and indeed should, drive questions of the balance of teaching and research, including investment in facilities, staffing strategies and reward structures, pedagogy and assessment. University mission now needs to be matched with funding and reporting structures to enable different types of university to deliver to their markets to their full potential; this is being constrained by a “one size fits all” approach that is no longer fit-for-purpose.

*The levels of funding for, and the balance between, teaching and research in UK HEIs, and the adequacy of financial support for the development of innovative teaching methods and teaching/research integration*

1. The weighting, and therefore funding and esteem, of teaching in higher education relative to research activity has been a challenge for some time, due in part to issues around the measurement of performance in teaching, as HEFCE’s recent report to John Denham on measures of esteem indicated. There are two key issues to be addresses in this respect: the identification and recognition of excellence and innovation in the practice of teaching.

2. In terms of the identification and recognition of excellence, the individual National Teaching Fellow (NTF) scheme of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) has been a welcome and successful initiative. The highly competitive process keeps standards, and therefore esteem, high, both within the field and within institutions. Nine UH teachers have won NTFs since the scheme’s inception and we will continue to encourage our staff to aspire to this level of recognition of their professional status.

3. We would call for the continuation of funding for the scheme but would also restate our proposal that the proportion of teaching staff holding such a Fellowship should be considered as a measure of university performance, in the context of a dependence on student survey data (usually the National Student Survey, NSS) as a proxy for teaching quality, compared to relatively robust measures for research quality. Student feedback will and should remain a key tool for universities to enhance the student experience, but cannot act as the proxy for teaching quality (see comments in paragraph 16 below).

4. Professional development for all teaching staff is also important in terms of meeting institutions' commitment both to students and staff. Hertfordshire requires that all new, inexperienced staff undertake its post-graduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in HE as a condition of probation (staff on fractionally staff are required to partly complete the programme). Successful completion of the Certificate brings fellowship of the HEA and 299 Hertfordshire staff have achieved this status. Engagement is actively encouraged through the appraisal process and we have a university level target of 50% of our academic staff achieving this status within the next three years. This use of targets to encourage engagement is a model that other institutions might wish to consider.

5. The recognition of excellence through career progression and other awards needs to follow if the esteem of teaching relative to research within institutions is to be raised. At Hertfordshire, we recently aligned readership and professorship criteria to provide a logical route for staff. We also make (through TQEF funding) small-scale innovation awards available for staff to develop and evaluate their academic practice. Vice-Chancellor's awards are made annually (the scheme recently received a PRCA national award), which includes an award for tutor of the year on the recommendation of students. We would suggest that all institutions should ensure there are a range of incentives and awards at different levels to motivate and reward staff for high/excellent standards of learning and teaching practice. As with the individual NTF scheme, the criteria for awards, particularly at higher levels, should include the dissemination of excellence and the impact upon other practitioners (and ultimately students).

6. In terms of innovation in professional teaching practice, the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF) and initiatives such as the Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) have provided a significant stimulus. At UH, the CETL funding has enabled significant innovation opportunities for staff across the university. The nature of the CETL means that its activities have been fully aligned with the university's strategic direction, as has the TQEF funding. HEFCE have recently published the results of their formative evaluation of the CETL programme in England, which highlights its key strengths; our experience at UH reflects that report. The subject centres are very useful sources of disciplinary support and include small-scale funding opportunities that facilitate innovation. There is a concern, however, that the (expected) end of TQEF and CETL funding will mean that support for innovation and evaluation will be more difficult to obtain in context where teaching funding is vulnerable to reallocations.

7. Flexibility is a key concept when thinking about innovation in teaching, particularly with the national ambitions for widening access to high-level skills and the need for up-skilling of the current and future workforce. E-learning, understood in its broadest sense, should be high priority in this context. Professor Sir Ron Cooke's recent paper to John Denham *On-line innovation in Higher Education* notes the potential role of some CETLs (specifically mentioning the University of Hertfordshire's Blended Learning Unit) in addressing national skills gaps.

8. Students learning in the work place are on core group of students needing flexible approaches, in terms of both delivery and assessment that fit the needs and priorities of that environment. Working with less traditional assessments needs open minded and creative teachers who are also able to ensure assessment is rigorous and meets the relevant level of HE learning.

9. Universities offering CPD/training provision to employees with face-to-face learning components, which are often run out of hours, need to put in place contractual arrangements (and reward mechanisms) that ensure evening and weekend teaching commitments can be resourced by staff with the necessary expertise. This could include employment through subsidiary companies to ensure flexibility and responsiveness to resource provision. Appropriate mechanisms to ensure academic standards and quality of delivery would also be necessary.

10. The question of the balance between teaching and research is also one about the academic portfolio, which is traditionally balanced between research, teaching and administrative functions. Although the balance itself has varied by institution, the principle of the balance portfolio has proved resilient despite a context of great change and increased complexity in terms of what universities deliver. We would argue that the balanced portfolio approach is not the way forward in this context, particularly for universities responding to newer markets such as workforce skills and business innovation.

11. Instead, we see the future as more specialised, with some academic staff focused on teaching, others on commercial activities, for example. An element of *scholarship* should always be maintained as a defining characteristic of the HE environment, but is not to be equated with research per se. Individual academic portfolios should be defined by people's strengths and interests, which will tend towards specialisation but also optimisation.

12. There is also a strong role for practitioners and professionals coming into the HE classroom and providing the latest specialist expertise as Visiting Lecturers. At Hertfordshire, their contribution is already considerable in business, the health professions, the creative and cultural areas and in education and we are extending this model to other parts of the institution. Staffing strategies need to be more innovative, for example blending industry/professional expertise with academic inputs as well as considering the contribution of alumni.

13. We would note that this is not simply about the balance between teaching and research, both of these activities being highly diverse. The debate should also be about the place of applied and collaborative research and innovation—which often crosses the boundaries of teaching and research—how that is recognised and rewarded in a sector that privileges pure research (despite general acknowledgement of the need to bring universities and business closer together).

*The quality of teaching provision and learning facilities in UK and the extent to which they vary between HEIs, the suitability of methods of assessing excellence in teaching and research and the impact of research assessment on these activities*

14. Universities with a mission that focuses on teaching will—and do—invest in teaching provision and learning facilities, however, this investment is not recognised fully in the measures of esteem that influence student, business and institutional behaviour to a greater or lesser extent. Quality will therefore vary greatly between institutions and is a function of mission and institutional strategy and direction. Funding by mission will allow those universities that focus on the student experience to continue to invest but also to have their performance assessed against appropriate criteria: one size does not fit all.

15. From an institutional perspective there are “across the board” Teaching Quality Information (TQI) measures such as the NSS, progression and achievement data and employment statistics. All have their limitations. There are also indicators that are used less universally, such as the number of staff achieving NTFs, winning CETLs, hosting national conferences and subject centres and winning competitive grants for learning and teaching research and development. Other indicators at institutional level include a commitment to ensuring staff have a teaching qualification such as the PG Certificate in Learning and Teaching in HE, encouraging staff to achieve fellowship status of the HEA, operating peer review of teaching schemes, providing funding opportunities for innovative and scholarly practice and ensuring that reward and recognition structures encourage excellent teaching.

16. There is a significant tension with the NSS being a tool for improvement and also used in league tables. There are documented instances of abuse (and probably an additional unknown amount of this activity that is undetected) because moving higher in the league tables might be deemed more important than getting students to reflect fairly on their experience of an institution as part of an enhancement exercise. Although attempting to improve the situation, this year’s enhanced guidance on administering the NSS simply reinforces the fact that this instrument is not suitable for meeting conflicting agendas. Furthermore, Paula Surridge conducted an analysis that suggests that NSS results may be significantly affected by the profile of the students in an Institution. Simple comparisons of data scores are potentially misleading ([http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/research/NSS\\_interpreting\\_data\\_nontechnical\\_guide.pdf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/research/NSS_interpreting_data_nontechnical_guide.pdf)). If it is to be promoted and used as a tool for enhancement, the NSS should be removed from all league table calculations.

17. Recent discussions about introducing value-added measures for more accurately judged measures of the impact of an institution upon its students are fine in theory but acknowledged as problematic in practice. This is explored in paragraphs 239–241 of HEFCE’s report to John Denham on understanding institutional performance.

18. The assessment of individual excellence also has its challenges. Student feedback questionnaires are framed according to local institutional need and subject to disciplinary and other effects (as with the NSS, direct comparisons of scores can be misleading—the person with the highest score is not necessarily the best teacher). This makes comparison between individuals difficult and between institutions impossible. Provided such evidence is viewed with an insight into its limitations, however, it can be useful as an internal development and enhancement mechanism. Sharing practice amongst universities could improve local practices and even yield indices that allow greater comparability across the sector.

*The responsibilities of the Government and HEFCE in assuring (a) the quality of teaching provision and learning opportunities in UK HEIs; and (b) the balance between teaching and research in HEIs*

19. HEFCE’s work in developing “spidergrams” to describe institutional mission should be pursued and the implications fully debated. The logical conclusion is differentiation of funding, with institutions funded to deliver on the mission they have declared. In this context, robust measures of esteem and performance are critical; if we persist in a situation where only research performance can be measured with any degree of satisfaction all we will achieve is a slow process of differentiation by attrition, which will fail a large proportion of students. We have an opportunity now to achieve differentiation by design and produce a high-quality spectrum of HE provision, within which all students can find the right mix and balance to help them reach their potential.

20. A move towards a differentiated sector will need to be matched in reporting structures and processes. Currently, these represent a barrier to universities pursuing an agenda of innovation, engagement and flexibility to meet the needs of a more diverse student body. There needs to be an open and frank discussion between Higher Education Institutions, HEFCE and the Higher Education Statistics Agency on developing reporting that is fit-for-purpose.

21. Two judgments, one on standards and one on quality, are now given by the Quality Assurance Agency. In terms of standards, light touch should be the aim for those institutions with a good track record in this area. In terms of quality, the direction of travel assurance has been towards placing greater trust in internal processes and we would want to see this trend continue. The emphasis should be on innovation and on the sharing and *implementation* of good practice in teaching through peer engagement. Internal Student Feedback Questionnaires should be used as a tool for improvement and enhancement and this is where the NSS will be most useful for institutions. The focus must be on the student experience rather than on the processes involved.

December 2008

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### Memorandum 45

#### Submission from the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals

##### STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

###### Summary

- A. Library and Information services, physical and virtual, are the symbolic heart of learning in a university
- B. To address the increasing Diversity of the student population, libraries have developed new ways of delivering effective services
- C. Libraries contribute to widening participation in a number of ways—through support of informal learners, collocation with other libraries and participation in the AimHigher programme
- D. Tensions exist between meeting the needs of teaching and research—library budgets are rarely sufficient to cater for both
- E. Learning resources top the satisfaction ratings of most undergraduate student surveys and many libraries have gained external quality accreditation (eg Chartermark—now Customer Service Excellence)
- F. Through Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs). Libraries support developments in e-learning and other approaches to learning—eg inquiry or problem-based learning
- G. There is a range of funding provision available for the support of teaching by libraries. CILIP has particular concerns about the learning resource provision for HE students in Further Education Colleges and students on overseas campuses.
- H. Libraries are effectively combating plagiarism through programmes of Information Literacy that explain the problem to students and promote positive behaviours
  - I. Libraries engage with students in a variety of ways to ensure services are tailored to their needs
  - J. Since the introduction of top-up fees student expectations of libraries have risen whilst funding in real terms has diminished
- K. The substantial library and information resource budgets of some overseas universities are reducing the competitive appeal of UK universities to international students.
- L. In particular we recommend:
  - (i) The Government/HEFCE should take steps to ensure greater parity of library experience between HE students in Further Education and those studying in Higher Education Institutions
  - (ii) The Government/HEFCE should encourage equity of treatment between academic and other learning support staff, for instance in eligibility for National Teaching Fellowships
  - (iii) The Government/HEFCE should provide tools for developing and enhancing a student-centred service including self-evaluation tools for Higher Education Institutions.

##### INTRODUCTION

1. The Chartered Institute of Library & Information Professionals (CILIP) welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence to the Inquiry on Students and Universities. CILIP is established by Royal Charter and is the professional body for library and information professionals in the UK. It has over 20,000 members working in all parts of the UK economy including higher education. The University, College and Research Group and the Colleges of Further & Higher Education Group are specialist groups within CILIP consisting of practitioners and experts working within higher education libraries.

2. The student experience of higher education is an important subject that not only relates to the sustainability and success of higher education in the UK but also the continued development and success of the UK knowledge economy.

3. Library and information services are the symbolic heart of learning in a university, either in physical or virtual form. They provide access to study and learning environments, broker access to academic and other information resources and provide significant amounts of direct support to learners and researchers. Much of the debate on the student experience is framed by discussions on teaching, there is often limited scrutiny of the roles of libraries in enhancing learning. As this submission shows, libraries are an integral part of the student experience of HE and make an important contribution to the quality of their experience. This contribution is often unacknowledged—services, especially virtual services, are provided within a general university framework—but it is important that the managers of universities and others who shape and influence the direction of HE in this country are aware of that contribution and provide sufficient funding for its provision.

4. Our submission follows the structure of the Inquiry although we comment only on those areas of direct relevance to the role library and information services in HE and the skilled staff who deliver them.

#### ADMISSIONS

5. It is important to recognise the increasing diversity of the student body and the wide range of learning modes now catered for. Of the 2.5 million UK HE students<sup>121</sup> many no longer study full-time at a UK higher education institution. An increasing number undertake HE accredited courses in Further Education Colleges; others study part-time or are distance learners. In the light of forthcoming demographic changes (with significant reduction in the numbers of 18 years-olds entering higher education) and policy drivers to extend level 4 and 5 skills within the working population the Inquiry needs to give as much attention to the needs and experiences of these students as to the more traditional student resident on or close to the HE campus.

#### *The Implementation and success of widening participation initiatives such as Compact agreements, and the impact of the current funding regime on these objectives*

6. Diversity in the student body is a success story for universities in reaching new audiences although continuing widening participation remains an important driver for change. Libraries contribute to widening participation in a number of ways:

- a. Providing access to informal learners and breaking down barriers and perceptions of university life. This may be achieved through local “learning city” schemes (eg Sunderland) or via the Inspire programme providing a framework of access agreements to library services in all sectors. However the restrictive nature of many licenses for online information services may prevent those not registered with the university from accessing these sources. It is an area where any comment by the Select Committee setting out the short-sighted nature of these restrictions would be welcome. These could be fed into the Carter report on “Digital Britain”.<sup>122</sup>
- b. Co-location of HE libraries with public or other types of libraries—the new University of Worcester library will combine public and HE libraries
- c. Active collaboration with AimHigher initiatives<sup>123</sup> evidenced by induction sessions within HE libraries for school students from Year 6 and later. There are examples of considerable innovation in widening participation within the sector, exemplified by the library sleepovers for pupils by the University of Wolverhampton.

7. Libraries have a sound track record of innovation and service development in student support through offering converged services, developing services for distance learners, and in extending reciprocal access to university libraries across the UK through the SCONUL (Society of College, National & University Libraries) Access scheme. Provision for disabled students is often extensive and sensitive, providing proactive support beyond the requirements of legislation (eg Northampton and De Montfort University, Leicester).

#### THE BALANCE BETWEEN TEACHING AND RESEARCH

##### *Balance between teaching & research provision in UK Universities*

8. Since the Follett report<sup>124</sup> most physical redevelopment of libraries has focused on creating effective learning spaces for students, evidenced by the development of blended learning spaces (eg the Adsetts Centre at the Sheffield Hallam University, the Information Commons at the University of Sheffield and the

<sup>121</sup> See Higher Education Statistical Authority press release, “Higher Education Statistics for the UK 2006/7” at: <http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php/content/view/1325/161/>

<sup>122</sup> Lord Carter, Minister for Communications, Technology and Broadcasting, is putting together a “Digital Britain” report setting out an action plan to help maximise the UK’s competitive advantage in this area including the benefits to society. See: [http://www.culture.gov.uk/reference\\_library/media\\_releases/5548.aspx](http://www.culture.gov.uk/reference_library/media_releases/5548.aspx)

<sup>123</sup> For details of AimHigher programme see: [http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/EducationAndLearning/UniversityAndHigherEducation/DG\\_073697](http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/EducationAndLearning/UniversityAndHigherEducation/DG_073697)

<sup>124</sup> Joint Funding Councils’ Libraries Review Group: Report. HEFCE, SHEFC, HEFW, DENI. 1993 (The Follett Report)



Learning Grid at the University of Warwick). More recent physical developments have rebalanced this provision with researcher spaces (both student and staff) spaces (eg the Wolfson Research Exchange at the University of Warwick, David Wilson Library at the University of Leicester).

9. In terms of information resource provision, libraries often manifest the tension between teaching and research, with typically, researchers pressing for ever more extensive journal and specialist monograph provision and students requesting access to reading list material in print and electronic formats. Library stock budgets are rarely able to accommodate the interests of both groups and at times library staff have limited control over purchasing decisions.

#### *The Quality of teaching provision and learning facilities in the UK*

10. Students make assessments of the quality of learning resource provision through the National Student Survey (NSS)<sup>125</sup> and the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES).<sup>126</sup> It should be noted that student satisfaction with learning resources is the highest performing area in universities, although significant disparities exist between institutions with scores in the top quartile and those in the bottom. Aside from Oxford and Cambridge with their undoubtedly world class provision, there is not necessarily any direct correlation between the level of resources and student satisfaction levels. The NSS therefore seems to indicate that there are more complex factors, linked to discipline, expectations and most fundamentally the extent of the integration between the library and information service and the learning, teaching and research mission of the HEI.

11. Academic library services have developed more sophisticated responses to enhancing customer service by applying external service quality standards and tools (Chartermark and Customer Service Excellence eg University of Huddersfield) and developing area-specific customer satisfaction measures and tools, which can be benchmarked to learn from best practice and set enhancement objectives (eg LibQual, SCONUL Satisfaction survey<sup>127</sup>). Absolute measures of library value and impact are difficult to determine. There is evidence that libraries are efficient and effective services, offering high levels of user satisfaction economically but this could be argued to be more of a measure of customer service effectiveness rather than an absolute measure of quality. The development of DIUS/HEFCE accredited development and evaluation tools on providing a student-centred service would be a useful resource for improvement.

12. Library and information services, particularly in the form of converged library, information and learning services provide central support and development for e-learning and as change agents in innovative learning and teaching, particularly in domains like inquiry or problem-based learning (eg the CILASS CETL—Centre of Excellence in Teaching & Learning—at the University of Sheffield and the Blended Learning CETL at the University of Hertfordshire). As the focus for independent study and learning libraries also provide real opportunities for students to develop as researchers, completing the support provided for research, teaching and research-informed teaching

13. The contribution of library and information professionals to the student learning experience has been recognised by their eligibility to become Registered Practitioners of the Higher Education Academy and success in the competitive National Teaching Fellowship (NTF) scheme and in internal university excellence schemes. Sadly, this recognition is not extended consistently across institutions and in some cases library and information professions are excluded from any excellence schemes or learning and teaching development programmes.

#### *Funding issues*

14. This lack of equity between institutions is also noted in respect of information resource budgets and learner entitlements both within the HE and most particularly when studying HE within FE or while based outside the UK.<sup>128</sup> CILIP has especial concerns about learning resource provision in FE colleges and its adequacy to support the learning requirements of HE students based in such institutions. There are no agreed national standards for the minimum level of resources or services to provide an appropriate learning experience for university students, and although there is evidence from NSS, PRES and scrutiny in institutional audit and IQER, it is the view of CILIP that there are insufficient safeguards for the quality of library and learning resources.

15. As noted in Paul Ramsden's report on "Teaching and the Student Experience"<sup>129</sup> international students perceive that UK libraries are less well-resourced than those at competitor institutions abroad. Similarly increased costs for digital curation need to be recognised in HEFCE funding if UK universities are to remain competitive internationally.

<sup>125</sup> For National Student Survey see: <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/nss/>

<sup>126</sup> For Postgraduate Research Experience Survey see: <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/research/surveys/pres>

<sup>127</sup> SCONUL facilitate the use of both survey schemes: see <http://vamp.diglib.shrivenham.cranfield.ac.uk/quality/sconul-satisfaction-survey> and [http://www.sconul.ac.uk/groups/performance\\_improvement/libqual2009.html](http://www.sconul.ac.uk/groups/performance_improvement/libqual2009.html)

<sup>128</sup> The wide disparity in information resource budgets supporting teaching and learning is set out in Support of Teaching by libraries in higher education, SCONUL, 2008. See [http://www.sconul.ac.uk/publications/pubs/support\\_of\\_teaching.pdf](http://www.sconul.ac.uk/publications/pubs/support_of_teaching.pdf)

<sup>129</sup> Teaching and the student experience. Paul Ramsden. DIUS, 2008. See [http://www.dius.gov.uk/policy/documents/teaching\\_and\\_student\\_experience\\_131008.pdf](http://www.dius.gov.uk/policy/documents/teaching_and_student_experience_131008.pdf)

## DEGREE CLASSIFICATION

*The extent to which student plagiarism is a problem in HE, and the availability and effectiveness of strategies to identify, penalise and combat plagiarism*

16. Plagiarism is an area of current concern to many higher education institutions. In addition to strategies to identify, penalise and combat plagiarism some effort needs to be given to informing students of academic integrity and good study and research practice.

17. Libraries have an important role to play in developing effective strategies, particularly in educating students on issues of academic integrity and awareness of plagiarism as part of an integrated information literacy programme. However information literacy training cannot be a substitute for adequate educational achievement at schools, nor for poor educational practice, and there are concerns that the lack of investment in information resources in the schools sector and a lack of attention given to this particular issue means that higher education institutions are making students “unlearn” what they have been allowed to do earlier in their educational experience. Some acknowledgement must also be given to the needs of some international students who have come from different educational traditions.

## STUDENT SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

18. Student engagement with Higher Education begins before the student arrives on campus. This “student journey” then continues until the graduate becomes a member of the University alumni. The library is able to engage with students throughout their journey. For example, as part of the recruitment process potential students will engage with the University website, and be able to view the contents of the University library and get an understanding of the resources held which could support their chosen course. This is continued with the potential student’s attendance at an Open Day, when the library will offer tours and other interactive events for visitors. Throughout the student’s academic life, the library will form a crucial part of their studies, whether as a user of physical resources or through the extensive collections in the virtual world.

19. Academic libraries in both the Higher and Further Education sectors place great emphasis on receiving student feedback. This feedback comes in many forms. As mentioned elsewhere within this response, the National Student Survey, the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey and the LibQUAL+ surveys all encourage responses by students with regard to library services. Also, students at many institutions are often present on Library Policy Forums, or form regular library focus groups. Library staff are often members of University Academic Boards, or Senates, at which students usually have representation. Feedback can also be more informal in nature, with students using email, telephone, instant messaging, SMS and social networking sites (such as Facebook) to pass on information to library staff.

20. Libraries have to ensure they are compliant with Equality and Diversity Legislation, and have carried out Impact Assessments where appropriate and as directed through general University policy (Equality Challenge Unit, 2007)<sup>130</sup>

*Examples of reasons for, and potential strategies to reduce, the non-completion of higher education programmes by students*

21. Libraries are often well placed to support students and help them complete their course of study. Many Universities have services which help students with study skills, for example writing essays or offering help with the avoidance of plagiarism (Learner Development Unit, Birmingham City University; Effective Learning Service, Queen Margaret University<sup>131</sup>). These Centres are often based within libraries as these spaces are seen as neutral and non-threatening. The Centres are seen as being linked to enhancement, not failure “giving the edge to your work” (Staffordshire University, 2008).<sup>132</sup>

22. Libraries often provide support in less traditional ways. Many now successfully offer help through “roving” staff, who proactively approach students and offer relevant information at the point of need (Antonesa and Murphy, 2008).<sup>133</sup> Students have a wide variety of hardware and software available to them, and roving staff are able to provide support, for example in using an interactive Smartboard, displaying a DVD through an overhead projector or finding the latest selection of e-books for their subject area.

<sup>130</sup> Equality Challenge Unit (2007) Conducting equality impact assessments in higher education [online] Available from: <http://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/equality-impact-assessment-in-HE>

<sup>131</sup> See: Queen Margaret University (2008) Effective Learning Service [online] Available from: <http://www.qmu.ac.uk/ELS/default.htm>

<sup>132</sup> Staffordshire University (2008) Study Skills Centre [online] Available from: <http://www.staffs.ac.uk/uniservices/infoservices/studyskills/centres/index.php>

<sup>133</sup> Antonesa, M. and Murphy, E. (2008) Front-line service delivery: responding to changing user needs and patterns of library usage at NUI Maynooth [online] Available from: <http://www.sconul.ac.uk/publications/newsletter/43/16.rtf>

*The adequacy of UK higher education (HE) funding and student support packages, and implications for current and future levels of student debt*

23. Feedback from English Higher Education suggests that student expectations are rising, with the introduction two years ago of student top-up fees. Students expect that libraries will be open for 24 hours a day, seven days a week. They expect that their text books will be available both in print format and electronically. They do not expect to pay fines, and they think that printing should be free. These expectations are being addressed in library strategic plans (eg Loughborough University Library, 2008; University of Warwick, 2004)<sup>134</sup>

*Any further action required by the Government and/or HEFCE to ensure that UK HEIs offer students a world class educational experience*

24. Government and HEFCE should be aware that UK HEIs are facing greater competition for international students who would previously have chosen the UK as their place of study, particularly from the US. Competition for students is exacerbated by the large budgets enjoyed by some US libraries in comparison to libraries in the UK, which research has shown to be a factor when students are choosing their University (Sconul, 2008).<sup>135</sup>

December 2008

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**Memorandum 46**

**Submission from the Learning and Skills Council**

INTRODUCTION

1. This document is the submission of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) to the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee inquiry into students and universities.

2. The purpose of this document is to inform the Committee of the contribution made by colleges and independent providers in the further education sector to the provision of higher education in England. Whilst supporting learners progressing into higher education, the sector makes a significant contribution to the development of higher level skills for those entering work and for those already in work.

PROGRESSION FROM FURTHER EDUCATION TO HIGHER EDUCATION

3. Around 30% of 16 year olds who remain in learning do so in general further education colleges, with a further 10% progressing to sixth form colleges. Those figures are broadly replicated in subsequent progression into higher education, where over 40% of entrants are from the further education and sixth form college sectors.

4. Fundamental to the work of the LSC has been the promotion and support of achievement of a full Level 2 qualification, as the minimum set of qualifications needed to get on in life. The data above make it clear, however, how important it will be to continue to support and encourage Level 3 provision in the further education sector, in order to maintain progress to the Government's aspirations for higher education participation.

PROVISION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN FURTHER EDUCATION

5. Further education (FE) colleges in England teach around 11% of the students studying on courses leading to higher education and higher level qualifications (HE) in England. The total number of HE students in FE is in the order of 200,000.

6. Over 300 further education sector colleges (out of a total of 370) deliver some higher education, either "prescribed" (as defined by the Education Reform Act 1988, and not eligible for funding by the LSC) or "non-prescribed).

7. Whilst for most further education colleges HE is a relatively small part of their overall provision, it is still significant, with as many as 5,000 full-time and part-time HE students in some colleges. Indeed, since the incorporation of further education colleges in 1992, a number of specialist arts and agricultural colleges have transferred from the FE sector to the HE sector as more appropriately reflecting the balance of their provision.

8. Compared to the HE sector, HE students in FE are more likely to be over 25, to study part-time, to study locally to their home, and to come from areas with low rates of HE participation. As such, HE in FE makes an important contribution to widening participation in HE.

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<sup>134</sup> See: Loughborough University Library (2008) Service Level Agreement [online] Available from: <http://www.lboro.ac.uk/library/about/PDFs/sla2008-2009.pdf> and University of Warwick (2004) University library strategic plan [online] Available from: <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/library/main/basics/about/aims/stratplan.pdf>

<sup>135</sup> Sconul (2008) Library services for international students [online] Available from: [http://www.sconul.ac.uk/groups/access/papers/international\\_students.pdf](http://www.sconul.ac.uk/groups/access/papers/international_students.pdf)

9. Higher Education is delivered by further education colleges in a variety of ways:

- prescribed higher education directly funded by HEFCE
- prescribed higher education delivered under franchise or consortia arrangements with higher education institutions and funded indirectly by HEFCE
- non-prescribed higher education funded by the LSC
- prescribed and non-prescribed higher education funded by other bodies.

10. Between 2002 and 2005, some 90% of this provision reviewed by the Quality Assurance Agency received “confidence” judgement in respect of academic standards, and 99% received “commendable” or “approved” judgements in respect of the quality of learning opportunities.

*Prescribed higher education directly funded by HEFCE*

11. For the academic year 2008–09, HEFCE has allocated a total of £176 million for directly funded higher education at 124 further education colleges, ranging from £14,000 at Totton College to over £10.6 million at Newcastle College. Around 70,000 students are covered by this provision.

*Prescribed higher education delivered under franchise or consortia arrangements with higher education institutions*

12. HE students being taught in FE under franchise or consortia arrangements will be recorded as registered students of the appropriate HE institutions, and may attend the FE college for all, or part, of their programme. The number of such students is not, therefore, easily identified from administrative data, but a study by HEFCE in 2006 identified over 51,000 students registered at HEIs but taught in further education colleges in England.

*Non-prescribed higher education funded by the LSC*

13. The LSC will fund over 1,200 qualifications at Level 4, and almost 150 at Level 5. This provision includes qualifications such as the Diploma in Accounting awarded by the Association of Accounting Technicians (AAT). Around 75,000 learners pursue these programmes.

*Prescribed and non-prescribed higher education funded by other bodies.*

14. In addition to the groups identified above, there are known to be small numbers of HE learners in FE who are not funded directly by HEFCE or LSC. Examples of such learners would include those fully-funded by their employers, which might be private or public sector organisations.

*Capital allocations for HE provision*

15. The LSC has been working with the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to help ensure that there are no barriers to the development of new HE facilities in FE colleges or the development of new FE facilities in HE institutions. Depending on the circumstances of each provider, funding will be available from different sources.

16. In particular where HE activity in FE colleges is below 20% percent of the total provision, the LSC, as now will provide capital funding for the totality of FE and HE activity. Where FE activity in HEIs is below a certain percentage the HEFCE has responsibility to provide capital funding for the totality of FE and HE activity. In these cases the HEFCE would provide capital funding to HEIs. Where an allocation/formula basis was applied the formula would include both FE and HE activity;

*Level 4 Apprenticeships*

17. Progression for learners into, within and beyond Apprenticeships is a key aspect of the World Class Apprenticeships requirement for a new Blueprint for Apprenticeships. Trials of Higher Apprenticeships at Level 4 have been developed in some sectors, most of which include the NVQ at Level 4 and a Foundation Degree. Consultation on the new Blueprint will include a proposal to include Level 4 Apprenticeships across all sectors as well as detailing clear progression routes within the sector itself through professional qualifications. The LSC has recently undertaken a project to align UCAS tariff points with a small selection of Advanced Apprenticeship framework, thereby providing a clear route for learners into higher education. Plans are currently being developed to align all Advanced Apprenticeship frameworks to this model.

**PROVISION OF FURTHER EDUCATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

18. Finally, and for completeness, it should be noted that around 30 higher education institutions enrol learners who are funded by the LSC, totalling some £80 million. In most cases these learners are on foundation year programmes leading to progression to a degree programme at the same institution, but in a small number of cases, mainly as a result of institutional mergers, the HEI delivers general FE. A particular example would be Thames Valley University, which merged in 2004 with Reading College and School of Arts and Design, and has over 20,000 young people and adults on roll who are funded by the LSC (resulting

in an allocation of over £19 million in 2007–08); the university, as the further education provider for the area, is also involved in the Young Apprenticeship programme for 14–16 year olds and in the delivery of the new Diplomas.

*December 2008*

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### Memorandum 47

#### Submission from Loughborough University

The following submission is from Loughborough University. We are conscious that the committee will receive submissions from groups such as UUK and the 1994 Group and have therefore limited our submission to additional points for the sake of brevity.

#### SUMMARY

- Concern is expressed at the potential for compacts and similar arrangements to become exclusive so limiting, rather than widening, participation;
- The importance of maintaining sufficient funding to enable teaching enhancement activities is stressed;
- The importance of the link of research and scholarship to teaching is emphasised, as is the benefit of close involvement with external “users”;
- Continuing to ensure that MEng and similar programmes are properly recognised within Bologna is highlighted;
- The role of schools in helping reduce plagiarism is noted;
- The priority of adequate funding for both higher education provision and individual student support is reiterated.

#### ADMISSIONS

1. An overriding concern for the University remains fairness and equality in the admissions system. In respect of initiatives such as compact agreements it needs to be demonstrated that the existence of such networks does not disadvantage students who may apply from schools that are not part of the compact or other network. In some cases such unintended “exclusion” may arise from schools feeling left out from an inner circle. Our experience at Loughborough has been to engage in a wide range of informal, practical and working arrangements with schools from many areas and backgrounds and that this approach ensures that students and schools are empowered to consider Loughborough at all times.

#### THE BALANCE BETWEEN TEACHING AND RESEARCH

2. Funding for teaching development and enhancement is changing at the moment with the move to TESS funding. It is too early to be precise about the inclusion of former TQEF funding into the baseline. We would however, confirm that there has been significant value derived from the provision of specific funding for TQEF and CETL initiatives in the past. Whilst it is not clear that ring fenced funding continues to be required, in line with the general move to a single funding stream, the level of funding needs to be sufficient to provide for teaching enhancement activities.

3. In respect of the “balance” between teaching and research our experience, which has led to some of the highest student satisfaction scores in the country, is that this is less an issue of balance and more about the benefits of closely integrating research and scholarship with high quality teaching. At Loughborough our experience is that:

- The research-informed teaching that we deliver offers a distinctive and outstanding student experience, because teaching is carried out by researchers at the forefront of their field;
- The close involvement of collaborators (in effect the users of our work in both teaching and research, drawn from industry, business, the public sector and the professions) is also very significant in delivering high quality teaching;
- Resources allowing Staff to Student Ratios to be kept at reasonable levels remains a crucial issue.

## DEGREE CLASSIFICATIONS

4. We note the issue of portability as mentioned in the enquiry. A key priority for Loughborough is to equip students with the knowledge and skills to flourish in a competitive global employment and educational environment. In this respect we are pleased that the integrated Master's four academic year degree has been recognised as meeting the requirements for second cycle qualifications identified by the Bologna process within the *Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area*. It is important that the UK government continues to give clear statements in support of this recognition.

5. In respect of plagiarism the increased use of electronic submission has substantially improved detection rates. However, in our view schools also have a critical part to play in order that we develop an education system that is free of plagiarism at all levels.

## STUDENT SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

6. The crucial issue for a world class educational experience is that the unit of resource is maintained and that there is stability in funding arrangements. Funding levels and stability are essential not just to our own research-informed teaching activities, but to all strands of HE provision. We note there has been discussion of a national bursary scheme; the priority remains that whatever the distribution scheme, sufficient funds need to be available for both student support and for the continued development of world-leading higher education in the UK.

December 2008

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**Memorandum 48**
**Submission from Liverpool Hope University**

## STUDENT TRANSITIONS: THE FLYING START PROJECT

*Issue: Student support and engagement*

## SUMMARY

- The division of UK post-16 education into separately organised and funded sectors has led to increasing differences in the types of student learning, writing and assessment that are expected at A level and in Higher Education.
- Those differences exacerbate the difficulties that many students experience in the transition to university study.
- Initiatives to support and prepare students, and to make teachers and tutors more aware of teaching and assessment practice in sectors other than their own, can go only some way towards easing student transitions.
- Policy changes to reduce sector differences in learning, writing and assessment will ultimately be needed to enable smoother educational transitions for students, especially those from less educationally privileged backgrounds.

## ABOUT THE FLYING START PROJECT

- The Flying Start project is a National Teaching Fellowship project (funded by HEFCE and managed by the Higher Education Academy) which is being conducted at Liverpool Hope University and the University of Derby, along with other partner institutions.
- The project focuses on easing the transition from A level to degree level study, especially for students entering Higher Education from a widening participation background.
- The project is multi-level, with elements focusing on practice (student transition mentoring programmes) and tutors (cross-sector communities of practice in student writing and assessment), as well as a policy strand to develop policy recommendations to reduce differences in learning, writing and assessment between UK educational sectors.
- More information about the project is available from [www.hope.ac.uk/flyingstart](http://www.hope.ac.uk/flyingstart)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

- James Elander is Professor of Psychology at the University of Derby. He is a Higher Education Academy National Teaching Fellow, and has published research on student writing, student assessment, and student authorship.
- Lin Norton is Professor of Pedagogical Research at Liverpool Hope University. She is a Higher Education Academy National Teaching Fellow, and has published research on pedagogical action research and many aspects of student learning, writing and assessment in Higher Education.

- Glynis McDonough is manager of the Centre for Widening Participation at Liverpool Hope University. She has many years of experience with post-16 education in schools, FE and HE, has developed published teaching resources for GCSE and A level teachers, and leads the Liverpool Hope STARS Compact, a major pilot with 14 schools and over 100 students committed to developing cross sector teaching and learning innovations.

#### EVIDENCE ON WHICH THE FLYING START PROJECT BUILDS

1. Post-16 education alone does not sufficiently prepare students for university study. One study showed that the majority of first year university undergraduates felt that A levels had not prepared them for university.<sup>136</sup> A comparative study of teaching methods found that A level students were not expected to study autonomously and development of critical analytic skills was mainly limited to preparation for specific exam questions, whereas HE students were expected to be more autonomous and were encouraged to develop more general analytical skills for assessment.<sup>137</sup> The consequence is that many universities find themselves having to offer classes in essay writing because students are unable to write critically.<sup>138</sup>

2. A major widening participation priority has been to provide preparatory support prior to university entry,<sup>139</sup> including outreach work at schools and FE colleges.<sup>140</sup> One transition programme focusing on the skills required for coping with teaching and assessment in HE, delivered just prior to entry to university, significantly increased HE retention and completion.<sup>141</sup> However, concern continues about transitions from schools to universities.<sup>142</sup> There is a demonstrable need for greater shared understandings of learning and assessment among practitioners across the school, FE and HE sectors,<sup>143</sup> and evidence that those understandings need to be discipline-related<sup>144</sup>

3. A developing feature of UK post-compulsory education is the emergence of dual-sector institutions providing FE and HE, and universities with close links to schools and FE colleges.<sup>145</sup> Those institutions have developed transition programmes focusing on generic study skills, peer mentoring, and residential experiences, which have been shown to improve university retention, progression and completion.<sup>146</sup>

4. Assessment criteria for university writing can be a useful focus for helping students understand what is expected in university essays and other written assignments. In Higher Education, research has shown that tutors and students have different understandings of criteria for written assignments such as “critical evaluation”, and “argument”.<sup>147</sup> Workshops focusing on those criteria have been effective in improving students’ understandings.<sup>148</sup>

5. A very recent study compared A level and university students’ understandings about what was required in university written assignments, and evaluated an intervention for A level students to help improve their understandings. The comparison between A level and university students’ showed that:

- A level students were more confident than university students about their understanding of the assessment criteria for writing at university.

<sup>136</sup> Smith, K. (2004). School to university: an investigation into the experience of first-year students of English at British Universities. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 3, 1, 81–93.

<sup>137</sup> Ballinger, G.J. (2003). Bridging the gap between A level and degree: some observations on managing the transitional stage in the study of English Literature. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 2, 1, 99–109.

<sup>138</sup> Frean, A., Yobbo, Y. & Duncan, I. (2007). *A level students unable to write essays*. The Times, August 15, 2007. [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life\\_and\\_style/education/article2260498.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/education/article2260498.ece) Accessed 10 December 2008.

<sup>139</sup> Robertson, D. & Hillman, J. (1997). *Widening Participation in Higher Education by Students from Lower Socio-economic groups and Students with Disabilities*. National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, Report number 6.

<sup>140</sup> Yorke, M. & Thomas, L. (2003). Improving the retention of students from lower socio-economic groups. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 25, 63–74.

<sup>141</sup> Knox, H. (2005). Making the transition from further to higher education: the impact of a preparatory module on retention, progression and performance. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 29, 103–110.

<sup>142</sup> Times Higher Education (2008). *Are schools failing universities?* Times Higher Education, 10 January 2008.

<sup>143</sup> Birnie, J. (1999). Physical geography at the transition to higher education: the effect of prior learning. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 23, 49–62.

<sup>144</sup> North, S. (2005). Different values, different skills? A comparison of essay writing by students from arts and science backgrounds. *Studies in Higher Education*, 30, 517–533.

<sup>145</sup> Burns, D. (2007). *Conceptualising and interpreting organizational boundaries between further and higher education in “dual sector” institutions: where are they and what do they do?* Paper presented at the International Conference on Researching Transitions in Lifelong Learning. University of Stirling, 22–24 June, 2007. <http://www.tlrp.org/dspace/retrieve/2116/DBurnsPaperCRLConference+June07%5B1%5D.doc> Accessed 10 Dec 2008.

<sup>146</sup> Bathmaker, A. M. & Thomas, W. (2006). Positioning Themselves—Higher Education Transitions and “Dual Sector” Institutions: Exploring the Nature and Meaning of Transitions in FE/HE Institutions in England. Paper presented at SRHE conference, Brighton. <http://crl.gcal.ac.uk/conf07/parallelabstracts/abstracts/paper8.doc> Accessed 10 December 2008.

<sup>147</sup> Harrington, K., Elander, J., Norton, L., Reddy, P., Aiyegbayo, O. & Pitt, E. (2006). A qualitative analysis of staff-student differences in understandings of assessment criteria. In C. Rust (Ed.), *Improving Student Learning Through Assessment: Proceedings of the 2005 13th International Symposium* (pp. 235–247). Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development.

<sup>148</sup> Harrington, K., Norton, L., Elander, J., Lusher, J., Aiyegbayo, O., Pitt, E., Robinson, H., & Reddy, P. (2006). Using core assessment criteria to improve essay writing. In C. Bryan & K. Clegg (Eds.), *Innovative Assessment in Higher Education* (pp. 110–119). London: Routledge.

- A level students' understandings in fact revealed more superficial approaches to learning (remembering facts rather than understanding concepts) and more naïve epistemological beliefs (believing that knowledge is fixed and comes from authority rather than being constructed through the learner's active engagement).

The intervention consisted of workshops to improve A level students' understandings of what is required in written assignments at university. The evaluation was a longitudinal, comparative trial in which participating students were tracked over time to assess changes and compared with students who received standard tuition. This showed that:

- The workshops reduced A level students' previously overstated confidence in their understandings, thereby increasing their awareness that producing written assignments at university would present a new challenge.
- The workshops promoted more sophisticated beliefs about essay writing, for example increasing the proportions of A level students who believed that structuring relevant material to the essay question is more important than including all the "right" information.

This research, which is presently being evaluated for publication, concluded that interventions to develop more realistic understandings of what is required in academic writing could be used to prepare students more effectively for the transition to Higher Education.<sup>149</sup>

6. The student experience is one half of the picture and there is growing evidence to suggest that how university lecturers' conceptualise assessment and its purpose will determine the types of assessment they set and the way they mark them.<sup>150</sup> Recent in depth interviews with 29 lecturers from 18 disciplines at four universities showed that lecturers' assessment philosophy did not always match their assessment practice because of a number of external constraints, including:

- students' expectations
- institutional requirements
- range of students
- quality assurance procedures<sup>151</sup>

Limited professional autonomy may also affect teachers and tutors in the school and FE context, with consequences for how students are supported in their academic writing.

#### EMERGING EVIDENCE FROM THE FLYING START PROJECT

7. At both Liverpool Hope University and the University of Derby there are well established Widening Participation Compact programmes that guarantee agreed numbers of university places for students achieving "lower" grades. The Liverpool Hope Widening Participation Centre has several years' experience of providing and evaluating Widening Participation initiatives, including a 4-year cross-sector collaborative project (the Syndicate Project) funded by Merseyside Aim Higher ([http://www.ahgtm.ac.uk/projects/?page\\_id=120](http://www.ahgtm.ac.uk/projects/?page_id=120)).

8. The Liverpool Hope University STARS project is a Compact Scheme where 120 year-12 students from 22 local schools work with Hope undergraduate student mentors in a programme of monthly contact, special events and a four-day project focused on writing for assessment at A level. The programme focuses on the synoptic A level paper and reflective writing, as well as transferable competencies related to university assessment criteria.

9. At the University of Derby, the first UK integrated dual-sector institution, there is an FE college offering A levels on over 16 subjects, and a Compact Scheme with over 50 partner schools, whose students made over 11,000 individual applications to study at HE at the University in 2006–07. Over 90% achieve the grades they need and over 70% go on to enrol. The Compact Scheme employs undergraduate students as mentors and Compact Assistants in schools and colleges ([www.derby.ac.uk/fpl/partnerships](http://www.derby.ac.uk/fpl/partnerships)), as well as operating an award-winning web site providing information about choosing courses, applying to university, study skills and being an effective student.

10. Moderate numbers of A level school teachers have expressed interest in working with university tutors on collaborative pedagogic action research projects. The main obstacles are the limited time that school and FE teachers have for activities away from the classroom, and their limited experience and confidence with undertaking action research projects. For this reason, providing collaborative support and Research Assistants is more effective than funding their release from classroom teaching and other duties.

<sup>149</sup> Jessen, A. & Elander, J. (under review). Development and evaluation of an intervention to improve Further Education students' understanding of Higher Education assessment criteria: three studies. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*.

<sup>150</sup> Norton, L. (2007). Using assessment to promote quality learning in higher education. In A. Campbell, & L. Norton (Eds.), *Learning, Teaching and Assessing in Higher Education: Developing Reflective Practice* (pp. 92–101). Exeter: Learning Matters Ltd.

<sup>151</sup> Shannon, L., Norton, B., Norton, L. & Phillips, F. (2008). *Contextualising Assessment: The Lecturers' Perspective*. Paper presented at the 4th biennial EARLI/Northumbria Assessment Conference, Potsdam, Germany, 27–29 August 2008.



11. Excellent resources exist to provide guidance and instruction in pedagogical action research, including Professor Lin Norton's newly published book.<sup>152</sup>

12. The existing pool of Compact Scheme student mentors can be given additional training to work as Transition Mentors with students in schools and FE colleges, and training materials can be developed that can be shared between schemes and institutions.

13. Web-based systems (eg Moodle and Wikis) facilitate information sharing and management between students and practitioners across sectors.

14. The A2 "synoptic paper" provides a useful initial focus for promoting analysis, evaluation and argument in pre-university student writing.

#### LIKELY FLYING START POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. A level assessment should include more items of extended written composition.
2. Assessment criteria for A level examinations should include greater emphasis on analysis, evaluation and argument in addition to knowledge of facts and information.
3. A level examination boards and universities should liaise and consult more closely with one another over their assessment criteria.
4. Preparatory courses in writing and assessment in Higher Education for prospective university students should be organised and funded jointly by the schools, FE and HE sectors.
5. Teaching staff in schools, FE and HE should be given greater incentives to collaborate in sharing and developing good assessment practice.
6. Training for university academic staff should include increasing their awareness of students' pre-university experiences of learning, teaching and assessment.

December 2008

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### Memorandum 49

#### Submission from the Higher Education Academy

##### STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

1.1 The Higher Education Academy is an independent organisation owned by Universities UK and GuildHE. Our mission is to support the higher education sector in providing the best possible learning experience for all students. We have strong links into the higher education sector including through our programme of institutional contacts with each university and college in the country, our network of 24 subject centres working with academics in different discipline areas, and our growing community of Associates and Fellows of the Academy.

##### 1.2 The Academy:

- provides national leadership in developing and disseminating evidence-informed practice about enhancing the student learning experience
- operates as an independent broker, enabling expertise to be shared across institutions and subject areas
- works at multiple levels, with individual academics, subject communities, departments, faculties and institutions.
- works across all parts of the UK, recognising the distinctive policy contexts and priorities of the devolved administrations but also providing opportunities to share expertise among them.

1.3 The Academy is an important resource to the UK higher education sector in accelerating and facilitating improvement and change. In the four and a half years we have been working we have found institutions keen to work with us to enhance the quality of students' experiences. The evidence of our work is that UK higher education institutions take quality seriously and look to make best use of available support. The Academy does not believe that there is a need for increased levels of external monitoring and regulation of the sector.

1.4 Our Chief Executive, Professor Paul Ramsden, was asked earlier this year by the Secretary of State to provide thoughts on the future of teaching and the student experience. While Professor Ramsden reported in a personal capacity he consulted very widely with the sector. The Higher Education Academy endorses many of the recommendations in his report, which is referred to in this submission [1]

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<sup>152</sup> Norton, L.S. (2008). *Action Research in Teaching and Learning: A Practical Guide to Conducting Pedagogical Research in Universities*. Abingdon: Routledge.

1.5 We have drawn on our research and our work with academics and institutional leaders across the sector to present this evidence to the Committee. We have restricted our comments to those areas where we have a specific perspective related to our remit of improving the student experience.

1.6 The main recommendations in our evidence are:

- there is no need for greater external monitoring of the sector (1.2)
- students need to be properly prepared for higher education (2.2, 2.3.)
- the benefits of higher education should be made widely available (2.4)
- the sector needs to work to adapt provision to meet a wider range of student expectations (2.4)
- teaching and research are both important components of the student experience and cannot be separated (3.3)
- university teaching should be excellent, based on national criteria, and be properly rewarded and recognised (3.1, 3.3, 3.8)
- the extent to which the Professional Standards Framework is used to share good practice should be reviewed (3.6)
- that the recommendations of the Burgess group on degree classification be taken forward (4.2)
- that incremental changes to quality assurance recommended in the report from our Chief Executive to the Secretary of State take effect (4.5)
- that contact hours are not taken as a proxy for quality in the student experience (4.6)
- that the idea of students as “customers” be discouraged (5.1) and student engagement be promoted.

#### ADMISSIONS

2.1 The Higher Education Academy is a strategic partner in the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions programme. We work in a number of related areas detailed in the paragraphs below.

2.2 Preparing students for higher education.

The Higher Education Academy supports the notion that preparation for higher education is important. Many of the Academy’s subject centres work with staff in different subject areas to help them help students make the transition from school to higher education. Details of a number of these initiatives can be found on our website. [2]

2.3 The Academy endorses the recommendations made by its Chief Executive in his recent report to the Secretary of State, including creating a programme of support to help universities and colleges gain better understanding of the expectations that new students will have of higher education.

#### *Widening participation*

2.4 The Academy has not taken a view on whether the government’s specific widening participation targets are appropriate. However we believe that the benefits of higher education should be made available to as many people as possible, and that opportunities should continue throughout life. We are also clear that the targets and the associated agenda place new requirements on the sector to design and deliver high quality higher education that meets a wider range of student backgrounds and expectations.

2.5 The Academy has a specific remit to support the government’s widening participation agenda. At the heart of the Academy’s approach has been to make information more widely available about how the sector can best adapt to suit a wider and more diverse student body.

#### THE BALANCE BETWEEN TEACHING AND RESEARCH

3.1 The Higher Education Academy believes that:

- There is no natural divide between teaching and research.
- The distinctive characteristic of the student experience in higher education is the opportunity it gives students to benefit from teaching that is informed by research and professional practice.
- Students have a right to teaching that is provided by professionals, who have acquired expertise in teaching according to the nationally defined criteria set out in the Professional Standards Framework [3]
- Excellence in teaching should be recognised and rewarded equally with research.
- Universities and colleges should show institutional commitment to excellent teaching
- All academics should teach. This applies at all levels, from postgraduate students to professors.

- There is a particular need in the more applied or professional areas (health and social care, engineering, law etc) for a curriculum and learning experience that develops graduates who can refine relationships between practice, its evidence base, and the research questions emerging from the relationship between them.

3.2 The Academy supports HEIs to promote the professionalisation of and excellence in teaching through a number of means outlined in the following paragraphs.

3.3 The UK Professional Standards Framework, developed by the Academy on behalf of the sector, requires academics to demonstrate the incorporation of scholarship, research and professional practice into their teaching activity. Research-informed teaching is a requirement of the Professional Standards Framework

3.4 The Professional Standards Framework was launched in 2006. There is strong anecdotal evidence of its impact across the sector, and the majority of HEIs have programmes for initial and continuing professional development accredited by the Academy against the framework.

3.5 The Academy accredits provision by universities and colleges of programme aligned to the Professional Standards Framework. This:

- supports institutions in the professional development and recognition of their staff;
- provides a means of promoting and sharing good practice in professional development;
- supports and encourages individuals to enhance their professional practice in learning and teaching;
- provides recognised qualifications for individuals and recognition by the Academy as an Associate or Fellow.

3.6. Despite the apparent success of Professional Standards Framework there has been no systematic review of the extent to which HEIs are using it to support the development of teaching. The Academy would recommend a review of the framework and its role in encouraging the sharing of practice within and between institutions.

3.7 The prevalence of accreditation of initial and continuous professional development for staff in HE, the Academy's system of Associates, Fellows and Senior Fellows, and the National Teaching Fellowship scheme in England and Northern Ireland all suggest that there is an appetite for clearer recognition of the importance of teaching. The Academy's own recognition scheme, linked to the Professional Standards Framework, has seen numbers increase to around 22,000 since the Academy was formed.

3.8 The Academy will be publishing in the new year the results of a survey of institutional practices for promoting staff based on teaching. The Academy supports the recommendations made by its Chief Executive in his paper for the Secretary of State on making an allocation of funding to higher education institutions to develop more robust criteria for appointments and promotions based on teaching.

3.9 The role of National Teaching Fellows is important on two levels. By supporting networks of fellows, such as the Association of National Teaching Fellows, it is possible to speed the sharing of effective practice across the sector. The fellowships also provide a level of accomplishment to which academics can aspire. They are complementary to the specific fellowship schemes run by individual institutions.

3.10 An important constituency is postgraduates who teach. The next generation of university teachers is likely to come predominantly from the postgraduate community. Therefore, another consideration in the training of teachers is the opportunities for postgraduate research students to gain experience of teaching (and training in that regard). A number of the Academy's subject centres run specific projects in this area. In addition, the Higher Education Academy's *Postgraduate Research Experience Survey 2008 [4]* looked at the experiences of postgraduate research students in 30 HEIs. There were over 16,500 postgraduate student responses, from which:

- Just under half (48%) of the research students agreed that they had been given adequate opportunity to gain experience of teaching.
- A similar proportion (43%) agreed that they had been given an adequate support and guidance for their teaching.
- Nearly two-thirds (62%) agreed that the experience that they had gained through teaching had been worthwhile

3.11 A further significant constituency is the community of work or practice based mentors and teachers. Students regard these teachers as role models and look to them for the vital integration of academic theory with practice. As increasing numbers of "non-traditional" students are attracted to HE and as career pathways (and curricula) become more flexible it is to be expected that these teachers will have more responsibility for students' learning. There are instances of good practice in their support in some areas, for example education for health and social care, but these may need to be shared more widely

## DEGREE CLASSIFICATION

4.1 Degree classification is a matter for HEIs, operating within national frameworks for quality and standards overseen by the Quality Assurance Agency. Our Chief Executive's report to the Secretary of State lists compelling evidence that the undergraduate honours degree is a highly-valued qualification. The Higher Education Academy believes that the UK has sufficient mechanisms in place to maintain the integrity and reputation of the degree system.

4.2 Nevertheless the current system of degree classification is a blunt instrument for providing specific information on student achievement for students and for employers. The Academy was represented on the steering group convened by Universities UK and GuildHE on the degree classification system in UK higher education chaired by Professor Bob Burgess, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Leicester and Chair of the Higher Education Academy. The final report, *Beyond the Honours degree classification*, [5] reflects extensive consultation with universities and employers and is an important staging post in the development of the higher education system. The Academy supports its recommendations and has been working with a group of 18 institutions on designing and piloting the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR), which was proposed to provide an opportunity to recognise the breadth of student achievement, over and above traditional degree classifications. We are also working with CRA and JISC to explore the development of student record systems and the software required to ensure the HEAR's success.

4.3 The strong international reputation of UK higher education is built on confidence in the quality of teaching, research and assessment. The specific role of the Academy in relation to quality is to work with HEIs on quality enhancement, working in close cooperation with others, notably the Quality Assurance Agency. The importance of this role was increased in 2005 when the review by the Quality Assurance Framework Group concluded that "a stronger enhancement aspect to institutional audit will deliver increased benefits to students and to institutions". A recent report, *Quality Enhancement and Assurance, A changing picture*, published jointly by QAA and the Academy updates recent developments. [6]

4.4 The Academy's work has addressed issues in a number of related areas. Of particular interest are:  
4.4 (1) *National Student Survey*. The National Student Survey, which is run by HEFCE, is a vital tool for assessing students' perceptions of the quality of their experiences. The Academy's main role is to help HEIs use the NSS and its outcomes most effectively to improve the student learning experience. Our view is that this scope to influence institutional practice is the most valuable purpose of the NSS. The Academy's main activities have included intensive work with a small number of HEIs, leading to a collection of case studies and articulation of many key issues for HEIs, and publication of reports to support and inform the use of NSS data, available on the Academy website, [7] including:

- exploring assessment and feedback issues identified by the NSS
- an assessment of the 2007 NSS optional items
- a guide on how to use multi-level modelling to interpret NSS data
- case studies of activities undertaken by institutions informed by NSS data
- a comparative review of national surveys of undergraduate students
- an exploratory evaluation of how institutions are using NSS data.

4.4 (2) *postgraduate programmes*. The Higher Education Academy's 2007 and 2008 surveys of the experiences of students on both postgraduate research and postgraduate taught programmes involved a total of 73 HEIs wishing to build a better understanding of this area. We believe that a similar survey to the NSS covering postgraduate students would provide a catalyst for further improvement in this area.

4.5 The Higher Education Academy endorses the report from our Chief Executive to the Secretary of State, which makes a number of recommendations for incremental change. In particular he suggests:

- Accelerating the current movement towards enhancement-led quality assurance
- Strengthening "causes for complaint" procedures
- Reviewing quality assurance arrangements for postgraduate taught programmes, including information for prospective students about quality which parallels that provided for undergraduates and monitoring of international students' experiences (including data from a new NSS for postgraduate taught programmes)
- Ensuring that public perceptions of quality are not compromised by greater emphasis on an employer engagement/work-based learning agenda
- Developing published measures of institutional commitment to teaching and the student experience.
- Reviewing institutional policies and procedures for the recruitment and assessment of international students
- Ensuring that learning hours and contact hours are decided upon as part of a rational system linked to an explicit evidence base
- Proactive emphasis on diversity as a contributing factor to excellence and more vigorous critique of one-dimensional models of quality (as evidenced in most league tables)

- A systematic review of institutional systems for collecting and using student feedback and peer observation of teaching
- Considering the need for new systems to ensure comparability of standards, not only within subjects but also across them and coordination by DIUS of a systematic debate about what constitutes excellence in student performance *across* the disciplines.
- Review of the external examiner system

4.6 There has been much media discussion, not all of it very well-informed, on contact hours. The Academy's view is that the commentary misses the key issue, which is that it is primarily the quality not quantity of input—from both academics and students—that affects the student experience. The number of contact hours is a crude proxy for a high quality student experience, which depends on a number of factors.

4.7 Plagiarism has attracted much media attention. Although not a new issue in higher education, student plagiarism is seen to be an increasing problem in the UK and beyond. All 24 subject centres of the Higher Education Academy Network provide information to their constituents on the topic of plagiarism.

4.8 The Higher Education Academy and the Joint Information Systems Committee are partners in the Academic Integrity Service which seeks to tackle plagiarism. This service is running the Academic Misconduct Benchmarking Research Project (AMBeR) . This aims to identify the range and nature of penalties applicable to cases of student plagiarism in UK Higher Education Institutions (HEI). The project involves a three-stage study of the regulatory and practical aspects of dealing with student plagiarism. [8]

4.9 In developing work on assessment it is important to take account of the specific needs of students and academics engaged in work-based learning.

#### STUDENT SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

5.1 While universities and colleges are taking increasing notice of the “student voice”, and the government has programmes such as the National Student Forum, the experience of the Higher Education Academy is that there is some way to go. We are concerned to ensure that the idea of students as “customers” does not take hold as this misses opportunities to develop the student experience as an active partnership between students and those who teach and support student learning.

5.2 Our Chief Executive's report to the Secretary of State sets out a vision of higher education as a “joint venture” between students and providers of higher education. We believe that the concept of student engagement must be further developed at all levels in universities and colleges.

5.3 The Academy's own work includes supporting student networks including in England the CETL student network. We involve students in our governance structures and work in partnership with the NUS and others.

5.4 The Academy's research into the experiences of first year students, [9] found that the likelihood of withdrawal was considerably affected by two key factors: students' prior knowledge of their institution and their course, and how stimulating they felt their teaching to be. We have commented elsewhere in this submission on the importance of preparing students properly for higher education, and on the importance of excellent teaching.

5.5 There appears to be a growing consensus that the model of higher education as a “joint venture” between students and institutions will produce the best outcomes for students and for the economy. The challenge for governments and for agencies is to make available funding models and quality systems that support this vision.

*December 2008*

#### REFERENCES

- [1] The Future of Higher Education: Teaching and the Student Experience. Professor Paul Ramsden. Paper submitted to the Secretary of State Higher Education debate.  
[http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/policy/paulramsden\\_teaching\\_and\\_student\\_experience](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ourwork/policy/paulramsden_teaching_and_student_experience)
- [2] Higher Education Academy news story, Subject Centres help ease students' transition into higher education. Web resource.  
[http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/news/detail/Subject\\_Centres\\_Help\\_Ease\\_Student\\_Transition](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/news/detail/Subject_Centres_Help_Ease_Student_Transition)
- [3] The UK Professional Standards Framework <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/policy/framework>
- [4] *Postgraduate Research Experience Survey 2008*. Malgorzata Kulej and Chris Park  
<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/research/surveys/pres>
- [5] *Beyond the Honours degree classification: the Burgess Group final report*, available from Universities UK  
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- [6] *Quality enhancement and assurance: a changing picture*. Higher Education Academy, Quality Assurance Agency and Hefce. <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/publications/papersandmonographs>

[7] Higher Education Academy National Student Survey web pages. <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/research/surveys/nss>

[8] Academic Misconduct Benchmarking Research Project web site  
<http://www.jiscpas.ac.uk/AMBeR/index.php>

[9] *The first year experience of higher education in the UK*. Professor Mantz Yorke and Professor Bernard Longden. <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/research/surveys/fye>

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## **Memorandum 50**

### **Submission from Million +**

#### INTRODUCTION

##### *Million +*

1. Million+ is a university think-tank with 28 subscribing universities. Million+ welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to this inquiry. These universities have their own diversity and specialisms and provide a network of institutions that promote aspiration, excellence and innovation, teaching the majority of the UK's higher education students, with centres of excellent research of international significance and strong profiles in excellent research of national significance and knowledge transfer.

#### SUMMARY

- Universities which recruit the majority of the UK's higher education students have recruitment and admissions strategies which are not restricted to the September semester and which recognise more than 1000 pre-entry qualifications and Accredited Prior Experiential Learning.
- Proposals to allow Sector Skills Councils to approve qualifications alongside a light touch qualifications framework remain a significant concern.
- Increasing participation and widening participation in HE are key goals and should not be counterposed against each other.
- Policy drivers and funding regimes (teaching, research and student support) are not geared to enhance the reputation and resources of the all of universities.
- Hefce proposals to transfer £30 million from retention to school-college-university partnerships redefine widening participation and are opposed by Universities which have successfully delivered WP.
- The prospects of increasing and widening participation have been limited by the decision of DIUS to restrict Additional Student Numbers.
- The omission of part-time students from the 2004 HE Act means that income streams incentivise full-time provision with a differential impact in terms of income and funding that favours institutions with full-time student profiles.
- Fundamental differentials between public funding streams for teaching and research have arisen as a result of the skewed distribution of Quality-Related research funding since 2002.
- In the same period teaching funding has had to accommodate continued growth in student numbers, and other strategic developments and there has not been the same stable investment in teaching funding and infrastructure.
- Assessing excellence in teaching is complex and requires collection and triangulation of data from a number of sources.
- The Academic Infrastructure and Quality Assurance system in the UK is unique and adds to the reputation of UK Universities internationally.
- The development of the Higher Education Academic Record (HEAR) should be supported.
- The student support package is complex, has been subject of piecemeal amendment and undermines widening participation. There remains an unanswerable case for a national bursary scheme.
- Universities are not funded for students who do not complete and retention strategies are integral to the university's activities.

#### ADMISSIONS

2. Admissions for full-time undergraduate students are administered by a central body, the Universities & Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). This is a structured system that dictates submission of material to a strict timetable and is not mirrored globally. In Australia and the USA, many universities operate common university application processes, though others manage their own admissions. The UK is one of the few countries which has no system of post-qualification admission (PQA).

3. Part-time students and international students apply directly to UK institutions – a fact that is not always taken into account when UCAS figures for applications are announced.

4. Universities decide whether to make an offer to the applicant, usually conditional on achieving specified grades/UCAS points. If the offers made by universities are conditional, an applicant may accept two offers, of which one is their firm (or first) choice. The other, is their insurance choice. Applicants who receive no offers or who choose to decline all the offers they receive can elect to enter the UCAS EXTRA system from late February. Applicants who apply after 30 June, or who hold no offers after that date can enter the clearing system.

5. All Universities have highly selective courses for which there is great competition. However, Universities which have a tradition of widening participation have targeted and focused strategies and are involved in a complex and lengthy recruitment and admissions processes. Clearing is a crucial part of the admissions process because it provides an opportunity for students who may still be thinking about university to finalise their interest. It is not just a process to redistribute students to institutions which have capacity.

6. The common view that the admission process commences a year prior to admission and is largely complete by the end of June/by the end of clearing, leads to many misconceptions about the “standard” student, the process and its relationship with the business model in mixed economy universities. These universities recruit standard and widening participation students following different modes of study with funding from sources other than Hefce eg NHS, TTA.

#### ADMISSIONS AND QUALIFICATIONS

7. Universities which recruit the majority of the UK’s higher education students:

- Recognise more than 1000 pre-entry qualifications and Accredited Prior Experiential Learning (APEL).
- Take into account professional body requirements over an extensive range of courses eg for teachers, social workers, nurses, midwives and professions allied to medicine, the law.
- Encourage and support potential students who have expressed an interest in attending university to apply well before and well beyond the June “deadline”.
- Take into account the results of vocational qualifications which are published much later than the August A-level results.
- Recruit students who are not in pre-education eg students who are registered as unemployed, mature students (post 25) who are in employment but wish to commence HE study on either a full time or a part-time basis and students on more than one semester in the year for some courses.

8. Universities which run flexible admission and qualifications strategies will have little difficulty in recognising Advanced Diplomas. While the Government has a stated commitment to progression to HE from apprenticeships, pathways of progression must be secured and advanced apprenticeships supported where required eg the newer creative industries.

9. Proposals to allow the Sector Skills Councils to approve qualifications alongside a light touch qualifications framework remain a concern. A proliferation of SSC qualifications with weak progression routes to HE is unlikely to be of advantage to learners. This approach stands in sharp contrast to the involvement of universities in the development of 14–19 Diplomas.

#### UNIVERSITY ENTRANCE TESTS

10. It is undoubtedly the case that university entrance tests can act as a further barrier in what is already a complex process, can be costly and are the subject of coaching. These tests differ in purpose from the other pre-entry conditions eg pre-interview, auditions/portfolios which would continue to apply in the event that Post Qualifications Admissions (PQA) was introduced.

#### PRE-ENTRY QUALIFICATIONS

11. Pre-entry qualifications are also bedeviled by a hierarchy of value that often goes unchallenged. It is difficult to see why universities should effectively call the shots on subject choice (years 8 and 10) and vocational qualifications on the basis that they are allegedly not as academically challenging as others. This rules out applicants and becomes part of a covert screening process which is not subject to any robust external analysis, leading to differential institutional values being ascribed to Universities. There is a risk that improved Information, Advice and Guidance simply endorses this hierarchy and fails to challenge the presumptions that lie behind the differential recognition pre-entry qualifications.

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## HE PARTICIPATION TARGETS

12. Government targets have ensured a welcome focus on HE participation of 18–30 year olds in the UK which remains 8–10% below that of some other OECD competitors and the OECD average. The targets have also provided a focus on differentials in participation by different groups of students.

13. Increasing participation in HE has been confused with widening participation. Criticism of the former because it has not delivered the latter is misplaced: increasing participation and widening participation in HE are both key goals and should not be counter-posed against each other.

14. Social class differentials in HE participation rates are key to understanding under-representation. When analysed by institution, the most significant contribution to widening participation has been made by mixed economy institutions with a strategic focus to deliver both increased and widening participation and with the flexible admissions and targeted recruitment policies previously outlined.

15. Policy drivers and funding regimes (teaching, research and student support) have not been re-gearred to enhance the reputation and resources of many universities. Funding policies continued to focus on “standard” students, full-time provision and research concentration, which are mirrored in the creation of league tables. There has been no attempt by DIUS or the Funding Councils to moderate the effects of league tables. Hefce’s own research report<sup>153</sup> confirmed that league tables were at best opaque and triggered perverse institutional behaviour. Widening participation continues to pose institutional risks which are not ameliorated either by values or funding regimes.

## FAIR ACCESS AND ADMISSIONS POLICIES: POST QUALIFICATION ADJUSTMENT PERIOD

16. DIUS has promoted amendments to the admission procedure to allow a Post Qualification Adjustment period (PQAP) with effect from 2009–10. This would allow students who achieve better A-level grades than predicted grades to hold their firm offer but explore opportunities for admission to other universities. This will delay and disadvantage the great majority of students and universities for whom clearing is an integral part of the admissions and recruitment process, add to complexity because the current system works on UCAS points (rather than better grades) and fail to take into account vocational qualifications where candidates are frequently awarded a pass or fail rather than a grade. PQAP is opposed by many universities.

17. DIUS interest in university admission policies continues to focus on a widening access to Oxbridge and a small number of universities to a relatively small number of students. There is a danger of distracting attention from the changes needed to pursue successful widening participation strategies on a wider scale. This underestimates the far greater scale of social mobility achieved by other universities. When comparisons are made between socio-economic occupational backgrounds of students at the point of entry compared to three years after graduation, mixed economy universities achieve a far greater scale of social mobility.

## COMPACT AND PASSPORT SCHEMES

18. DIUS/DCFS policy has recently sought to emphasise the value of school-university partnerships. There is nothing new about these partnerships or the Compact and Passport schemes which mixed economy Universities have integrated into their admissions and recruitment strategies eg the passport scheme at the University of Teesside has been running since 1999.

## PROPOSED TRANSFER OF FUNDING FROM HE STUDENTS

19. Hefce proposals for a new formula for the allocation of funds for widening participation<sup>154</sup> severely disadvantages universities in London (eg Greenwich, Kingston) which have been at the forefront of opening up opportunities to students from non-traditional backgrounds. Some are set to lose over £500,000 pa. Hefce has also proposed a £30 million shift from retention (ie the teaching of HE students) to school-college-university partnerships. This has been opposed by Universities which have successfully delivered WP.

## HE PARTICIPATION TARGETS AND RESTRICTION OF ADDITIONAL STUDENT NUMBERS (ASNs)

20. The prospects of increasing and widening participation have been further limited by the decision of DIUS to restrict ASNs in 2009/10. As a result that there has been no transparent decision-making strategy to allocate ASNs: universities which over-recruited in 08/09 are being allowed to recruit to the same numbers in 09/10; others which had not yet submitted a bid for ASNs for 09/10 (often those with longer admissions and recruitment cycles) are potentially not allowed any growth; HEI forward strategic plans have been stymied; investment in university/higher education centres has been committed although no ASNs may now be available. Universities that lost ELQ numbers and funding which planned to expand ASNs have not been prioritised.

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<sup>153</sup> *Counting what is measured or measuring what counts?* Hefce (CHERI,OU and Hobsons) Hefce April 2008

<sup>154</sup> *Future support for teaching enhancement and widening participation* Hefce November 2008



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## BALANCE BETWEEN TEACHING AND RESEARCH

### *Differential funding*

21. The UK Government has undoubtedly sought to address historic under-funding of universities which had arisen in the previous decade. However, the 1.07% of GDP spent on HE in the UK's still compares unfavourably with Canada (1.88%), the USA (1.41%) and Australia (1.19%).

22. The omission of part-time students from the 2004 HE Act means income streams incentivise full-time provision with differential impact in terms of income and funding streams that favour institutions with full-time student profiles.<sup>155</sup>

23. Fundamental differences between public funding streams for teaching and research have arisen as a result of the distribution of Quality-Related research funding since 2002. This has been compounded by the decision of the then Secretary of State<sup>156</sup> to ask Hefce to prioritise excellent research of international significance in the 5 year QR funding period (04/05–08/09).

24. In the same period teaching funding has had to accommodate continued growth in student numbers, and other strategic developments. This differential funding has been reflected in subsequent grant letters eg in 2006–07<sup>157</sup> Hefce recurrent grant for teaching rose by 5.3% but was required to fund 23,000 additional students and other initiatives whereas both research funding and capital investment increased by 8%. Similarly in 2007–08<sup>158</sup> recurrent grant for teaching rose by 4.4% and was required to fund an additional 25,000 students while research funding rose by 6.9%.

## ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES

25. Financial support for the development of teaching has been initiative driven and infrastructure has not benefitted from the same stability and investment as research. £2.5 million, £7.5 and £15 million were allocated to support research-informed teaching from 04/05 – 07/08,<sup>156</sup> sums which were unlikely to make any significant difference. Their allocation reflects a misunderstanding of the role of universities as outlined in the Magna Carta Universitatum which underpins the Bologna Declaration, that teaching and research in universities must be inseparable if their tuition is not to lag behind changing needs, the demands of society and advances in scientific knowledge.

26. The continued failure of current funding regimes to support research infrastructure and capability in all universities including those which have strong profiles in excellent research of national significance remains a critical issue. This failure limits the student experience since students attending universities in which QR funding has been concentrated inevitably benefit from improved facilities and infrastructure.

## ASSESSING EXCELLENCE

27. Negative consequences of the RAE include; poaching of staff, department closure and separation between teaching and research as activities and a hierarchy of value. The application of the RAE as a tool to judge excellence and determine research funding remains in doubt. In spite of the pre-eminence of the USA in research, no similar exercise is deployed to research funding regimes.

28. Assessing excellence in teaching is complex and requires collection and triangulation of data from a number of sources eg student achievement, progression, NSS, appraisal systems and staff PDPs and poses a number of challenges.

29. The extent to which teaching and learning is or should be exemplified in academic career paths has to be a matter for Universities. Academic roles vary between disciplines and within institutions. The work of the Higher Education Academy<sup>159</sup> is helpful. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) publishes themes designed to enhance strategies and promote best practice.

## DEGREE CLASSIFICATION

### *Relationship with Quality Assurance*

30. The UK Academic Infrastructure consists of 4 inter-related elements; the Code of Practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards, Frameworks for HE in the nations of the UK, subject Benchmark statements and programme specifications backed by QAA review (institutional audit). All universities subscribe to the Academic Infrastructure and QAA judges the extent to which institutions apply it in managing standards and course quality. The Academic Infrastructure in the UK is unique, envied in other countries and adds to the reputation of UK Universities internationally and should undoubtedly be retained.

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<sup>155</sup> *Part-time Study in Higher Education* Prof Christine King, Staffordshire University, September 2008

<sup>156</sup> Grant letter to Hefce Rt Hon Charles Clarke 22 January 2003

<sup>157</sup> Grant letter to Hefce Rt Hon Ruth Kelly MP 31 January 2006

<sup>158</sup> Grant letter to Hefce Rt Hon Alan Johnson MP 11 January 2007

<sup>159</sup> Established in 2004 as an independent company owned by UUK and GuildHE

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#### ADVANTAGES TO DEVELOPING THE HIGHER EDUCATION ACADEMIC RECORD (HEAR)

31. The Burgess report (2007) rightly recognised that there were “highly compelling” factors to support a review of the UK’s degree classification system. Employers use the current degree classification system and university attended as a shorthand way of screening applicants; this is unlikely to do justice to the full range of student experience and achievement or all UK universities.

32. Burgess concluded that, HEAR based on the current academic transcript, and incorporating the European Diploma Supplement, should be developed to record all university-level undergraduate student achievement in all UK universities. HEAR could include information about academic credit and link to a national credit framework. The development of HEAR is helpful and is being trialled by 20 universities.

#### STUDENT SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

##### *Student Support Packages*

33. 43% of all HE students are part-time but under the 2004 HE Act these students in England are not entitled to access income-contingent loans for tuition fees unlike full-time students. The whole support package is complex, has been subject of piecemeal amendment and undermines widening participation<sup>160</sup> and retention because full-time students who want or need to switch into part-time study face a more hostile funding regime.

#### NATIONAL BURSARY SCHEME

34. Universities with the majority of widening participation students inevitably have more students who are eligible for bursaries (statutory and institutional). Students from exactly the same financial background currently receive different bursaries according to where they choose (or are able) to study and according to which course they choose to study. This student and institutional inequity cannot be justified. There is an unanswerable case for a national bursary scheme.

#### DEBT AND STUDENT NUMBERS

35. Whatever the costs to students and graduates of servicing individual debt, the cost to the DIUS and the Exchequer of servicing the loan and repayment system upon which the current support package for full-time students relies, is the primary reason why growth in student numbers is now stymied.

#### RETENTION

36. Retention rates in UK universities compare favourably with those in other OECD countries and media reporting of so-called “drop-out” is at best unhelpful. Students from under-represented groups are more likely to face financial problems, have less experience in study skills, balance study and part-time/full-time work have more caring responsibilities than other students, may need to study on a flexible basis and are more at risk of non-completion.

37. HESA statistics which report non-continuation do not capture the fact that many students drop-out for a combination of life-style reasons. Universities are not funded for students who do not complete and retention strategies are integral to the university’s activities.

#### RETHINKING WORKING CLASS “DROP-OUT” FROM HE.

38. There is also a need to redefine “failure”. Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation<sup>161</sup> confirmed that most working class students who left early had gained skills, confidence and life experience from their time at university – and that the majority re-entered university later. Working class students who withdraw early to refocus and re-enter education are the real lifelong learners. The current system does not facilitate flexible lifelong learning. Funding regimes need to catch up with the institutional needs and costs of widening participation students whether they study on a full or flexible basis and whether they are younger or mature entrants.

*December 2008*

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<sup>160</sup> *Reality Check: student finance regimes* Million +/London Economics November 2007

<sup>161</sup> *From life crisis to lifelong learning: rethinking working class “drop-out” from higher education*, Joseph Rowntree, November 2005.

## Memorandum 51

### Submission from the University of Portsmouth

#### STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

Our response focuses on two areas:

A: degree classification, portability, and student plagiarism, and

B: student support and engagement.

Key points (A):

- There is in our judgement considerable potential to propose a standard methodology for degree classification.
- However, if a standard methodology were established it would be almost meaningless unless agreement about marking scales and the criteria they represent was also reached.
- The current system of peer group review through the QAA and by use of external examiners provides a good means of maintaining confidence in the standard of degrees.
- The evidence is that plagiarism is not as widespread as commonly inferred.
- Universities are increasingly taking on the role of educating plagiarism out of students through addressing deficiencies in basic study skills and particular competences.

Key points (B):

- Research is needed to understand the extent, causes and effect of disengagement of students.
- The reported lower achievement of males and students from BME groups needs to be understood and addressed (as far as possible) through institutional initiatives linked to learning, teaching and assessment strategies.
- Strategies to ease transition and promote social and academic acculturation, whilst resource intensive do have a positive impact on retention.
- HEIs are being challenged to support the increasing number of students with severe and complex physical disabilities and mental health problems which require resources beyond that available.
- More flexible funding regimes that promote a proper credit accumulation and transfer system would permit more students to continue in HE and eventually achieve an award.

#### A. *Degree classification, confidence in the value of degrees, portability and student plagiarism.*

*“whether the methodologies used by UK HEIs to determine degree classifications and the distribution of degree classes awarded are appropriate, the potential methodologies for the standardisation of degree classifications within, and between, HEIs, and the effectiveness of the Quality Assurance Agency in monitoring degree standards”*

A.1. The methodologies used commonly relate to assessment results arising from studies in Year 2 and Year 3 of a three year undergraduate honours programme, levels 5 and 6 respectively of the QAA Framework for Higher Education Qualifications. They are normally based on the use of a formula to determine mean averages of marks from different units or modules. The formulae and the weightings they attribute to different levels and modules vary from institution to institution but they are all trying to calculate a mean average performance. Less commonly there is use of various formulae to try and identify the modal performance.

A.2. The QAA was until recently recommending that institutions should adopt a common methodology when determining degree classifications. As a result many more institutions than was the case 10 years ago now have something like an institutional standard methodology for classifying degrees. It is not uncommon however for particular disciplinary traditions to hold sway either within an institution or between institutions in the sector.

A.3. There is in our judgement considerable potential to propose a standard methodology. However, there is unlikely to be a consensus view within the sector about what the detail of that methodology should be. Academics hold very deep attachments to the particular features of a methodology with which they have become familiar, and come to equate this with both academic standards and their own academic judgement.

A.4. In any case, if a standard methodology were established it would be almost meaningless unless agreement about marking scales and the criteria they represent was also reached. This too would be difficult to accomplish because many, both within and outside the HE sector, have chosen to reject the idea of criteria referenced marking as opposed to the use of normative values.

A.5. The HE sector has however made progress in agreeing and operating benchmark statements to define the characteristics of particular subjects, and it has accepted (through the QAA Academic Infrastructure) common descriptors to characterise the different levels of learning. It might now, perhaps through the agency of the QAA, agree and operate common criteria to determine the qualities to be

associated with first class performance, upper second class performance, lower second class performance, third class performance. It is likely however that these criteria, as with the benchmark statements, would have to be subject-specific.

A.6. The use of external examiners in a slightly more systematic and commonly defined way, with perhaps some “independent” scrutiny of the process, could be a more effective means of monitoring degree standards. This could also be done under the aegis of the QAA.

*“The advantages and disadvantages of the UK’s system of degree classification and the introduction of the Higher Education Academic Record”*

A.7. The advantage is that the terms used to describe classification have some meaning and some currency both within and without the world of academia. The disadvantage is that many do not like either the meaning or the language, and have come to regard the terms as archaic and divisive.

A.8. Some means of quickly ranking overall performance however is important both to potential employers and to other educational establishments. In other countries this is often done by a Grade Point Average. However there is no globally-acceptable methodology for that approach either, and similar issues about what the grades mean would have to be resolved.

A.9. A transcript of marks is an important supplement to this ranking process which allows a more detailed and informed judgement to be made. To build on the idea of a basic transcript however in the voluminous but loosely prescribed ways required both by the Higher Education Academic Record, and by the Diploma Supplement upon which it is closely modelled, seems to be self defeating, if the purpose is to convey clear information to employers and other educational establishments. We very much doubt whether these documents will ever enjoy any widespread support or demand from employers and other stakeholders.

*“The actions that Universities, Government, and others have taken, or should take, to maintain confidence in the value of degrees awarded by Universities in the UK”*

A.10. The current system of peer group review through the QAA and by use of external examiners is a good means of maintaining confidence in the standard of degrees. Fitness for purpose is well maintained through the processes introduced in the wake of the Dearing Report. External scrutiny of and involvement in curriculum approval runs the risk of undermining the autonomy of UK Universities. This autonomy has in many ways been the most significant factor in establishing the prestige enjoyed by UK Universities.

*“The relationships between degree classification and portability”*

A.11. This consideration depends very much on what portability is envisaged. If the portability is an EU issue, as was the argument behind the creation of the Diploma Supplement, then there are many other factors (eg linguistic competence) perhaps more pressing and critical in improving portability of qualifications than the use of a commonly understood ranking of degree outcome. If the portability relates to movement between HEIs in the UK then the establishment of credit frameworks has done much to improve this portability. Degree classification however does not play much part in this because of the issues discussed above about common methodologies and criteria referenced marking.

*“The extent to which student plagiarism is a problem in Higher Education, and the availability and effectiveness of strategies to identify, penalise and combat plagiarism”*

A.12. The evidence is that plagiarism is not as widespread as commonly inferred. In our experience it is more a problem of poor, lazy scholarship than it is of any systematic attempt to cheat the system, although there are spectacular examples of the latter and these will always attract adverse comment.

A.13. Many students come to University lacking the necessary levels of scholarship to tackle the expectations and rigours of University assessment. There is strong evidence of lazy and unquestioning use of primary sources for example or of insufficiently well grounded scientific and mathematical skills. This lack of necessary skills encourages consideration of plagiarism by some students when confronted by the kind of assessment tasks expected of them in an HEI.

A.14. Universities increasingly therefore are taking on the role of educating plagiarism out of students through addressing deficiencies in basic study skills and particular competences. This is a role in which HEIs are becoming innovative and increasingly competent, through use of dedicated software or complementary learning activities such as the Maths café at the University of Portsmouth.

A.15. Educating plagiarism out of students is proving an effective strategy but it incurs a high overhead and eats into the curriculum space which ought to be available for other purposes.

A.16. HEIs also have to become more adept at using assessment strategies which in themselves are less vulnerable to the plagiarist. For example HEIs must mix assessment types and not rely too heavily on traditional assessment approaches such as the essay. The questions asked in assessment have to be carefully worded to require evidence of independent thought and individual contribution. Marks can be awarded for activities that require the individual unambiguously to make their own contribution, eg through question

and answer at presentations, through use of log books to chart the “construction” of an assessment response, through controlled “in-class” testing, or even through viva voce examinations. This in turn requires a greater focus on the development of academic staff in the use of a variety of assessment approaches.

### B. Student support and engagement

*“the effectiveness of initiatives to support student engagement in the formulation of HE policy, and how the success or otherwise of these initiatives is being assessed”*

#### STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND STRATEGIES TO REDUCE NON-COMPLETION

B.1. The lack of engagement of students with their studies is reported to be an increasing problem in HE. Although a link between attendance (for full time campus based) of students and attainment is often speculated there is little research to confirm or refute this. Similarly it is suggested that the increased use of e-learning may lead to nonattendance and disengagement of some students :- but again there is little research on this topic. Research is needed to identify the true extent of, and contributing factors to, the problem of disengagement and the impact it has on achievement.

B.2. Data from our own institution supports national data regarding the experience of males and BME students. Both appear more likely to be excluded and proceed from level to level with “trailing failures” and less likely to achieve a good (1st/2.1) degree and graduate employment (6 months post graduating). Whilst the reasons for this differential achievement are complex with origins well before the students enter HE, institutions nevertheless need to consider their learning, teaching and assessment strategies in the light of the data.

B.3. Research shows the importance of social and academic acculturation for all students, and particularly those from non-traditional backgrounds. Although resource intensive, effective transition strategies, opportunities for small group teaching, opportunities for collaborative and social learning and the Personal Tutor system all contribute to integration and retention. Our own initiatives to support students through their transition has gained good student feedback and research is underway to determine the impact of this initiative on learning and retention.

B.4. A particular challenge facing HE is the number of students with severe and complex disabilities and mental health problems. This can have considerable resource and logistical implications for institutions. Mental health can affect completion in a number of ways:

B.5. The move from a supported school/home environment to the independent demands of University academic and social life can be sudden and much more demanding than the student or family or indeed other mental health professionals realise.

B.6. The same level of support often cannot be provided (eg one on one daily assistance in the classroom) and there is no-one to monitor the student’s capacity to look after themselves on a daily basis.

B.7. Mental ill health can by its nature make it difficult for students to be regular and focussed in their studies, and indeed to access the treatment that can be helpful to them.

B.8. Some mental health conditions have no known effective “treatment”, and in these cases students may struggle for a year or two but withdraw eventually as they are unable to cope and there is nothing further that can be done to support them.

B.9. Students suffering from anxiety are very likely to seek postponement or deferral of their formal assessments as they approach them as a direct consequence of their condition. This has clearly damaging progression implications as the number of delayed assessments accumulates and at some stage most such students simply fail to represent themselves and are ultimately recorded as having failed due to being “written off after time”.

B.10. The University has recognised the problems students may face and introduced a procedure whereby such students are rapidly identified and contacted before the accumulated deficit of work becomes overwhelming. Such students are offered the opportunity to suspend their studies without penalty for as long as they feel it necessary, subject only to the actual continuation of the course. This has two outcomes, either a return to study when able or a managed withdrawal over time without the taint of failure or personal guilt.

B.11. It would be even more helpful if the funding for students with mental health needs through the DSA could extend to include counselling for specific learning/mental health difficulties, where this required input beyond what was normally offered.

B.12. This year’s raising of the non-medical helpers allowance component of the DSA from £12,420 to £20,000 for the explicit purpose of increasing the accessibility of HE for the more severely disabled is welcome but has a corollary impact on the overall institutional financial burden that has not been recognised by additional Institutional funding. Course tuition on a one-to-one basis of very severely disabled candidates may now be necessary as is specific adaptation of Hall residential rooms to meet very specialised needs. Our own institution this year had to install a Parker bath at a cost of over £10,000 as spinal atrophy meant that the normal disabled provision of a wet room and shower chair would not meet the individual need.

B.13. More flexible funding regimes that promote a proper credit accumulation and transfer system would permit many students to continue in HE and eventually achieve an award.

December 2008

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## Memorandum 52

### Submission from the Executive Committee of the Quality Strategy Network

#### SUMMARY

1. In summary, this submission argues that:
  - The methodologies used by UK HEIs to determine degree classifications are consistent and appropriate, and that these are well monitored by QAA
  - The degree classification system remains the best available means of summarising student achievement
  - Degree classification is a good indication of portability, when supported by the Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR)
  - Plagiarism is well understood by HEIs, which have developed sophisticated means of combating this.

#### PREAMBLE

2. The Quality Strategy Network is the membership body for senior quality managers within UK HE. This submission has been prepared by the QSN Executive Committee on behalf of the Network.

3. Given the particular experience and expertise of network members, we have confined ourselves to commenting on the questions relating to academic standards, which come under the heading “degree classification”.

#### INTRODUCTION: THE HE SECTOR IN THE UK

4. The UK HE system is very diverse. It is essential that this diversity should be maintained if the sector is to meet the challenges of an unprecedented participation rate. Individual institutions within the UK sector have different missions, enabling the sector to offer a broad subject coverage and encourage participation from students from a wide range of backgrounds. A homogenous system would not be able to deliver this range of educational opportunities. Given this diversity, it is essential that there should be one agreed and coherent national QA<sup>162</sup> system, within the parameters of which all providers of HE operate; it is noteworthy that this is the situation which currently prevails.

5. Even within institutions there may be a wide variety of objectives and targets; and some of these may even be contradictory (see HEFCE’s submission to the Denham review of HE). There is no objective measure of the “best” institution; success cannot be measured in simplistic terms, such as measures of financial performance or student achievement, but can only be assessed in relation to the specific mission.

6. This diversity is essential if we are to deliver the wide range of graduates which the future of our country needs (see HEFCE Strategic Plan). Hence the most successful graduates from business-facing universities, Million + or the specialist sector may have a very different skillset from the “top” graduates from the Russell Group. This does not mean that all are not equally worthy of First Class Honours when judged against the criteria set out for their particular award.

#### THE BACKGROUND TO THE SETTING OF DEGREE STANDARDS IN UK HEIS

7. While it is essential that individual degree-awarding institutions should exercise their autonomy in determining the detailed criteria for the award of degrees, they do so within a well-established framework provided by elements of the Academic Infrastructure, the development of which has been one of the major achievements of the QAA. This infrastructure includes the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications and the Scottish Credit & Qualifications Framework, which set out general criteria for the award of qualifications from sub-degree to doctorate level; Subject Benchmarks, which recommend core subject content for awards in particular disciplines; and the Code of Practice, which details best practice in a range of aspects of institutional management, from the appointment of external examiners (who represent the longest established cornerstone of the system for externally assuring standards, see paragraphs 20ff below) to the admission of students. In addition, there has been a successful emphasis on the provision of accurate information to students, for example programme information and comparative information, such as the National Student Survey (NSS), and quantitative data provided through Unistats.

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<sup>162</sup> Throughout this document, we have used “quality assurance” or “QA” to refer to the systems and processes used by institutions, and the sector more broadly, to guarantee the standards of awards, to review the quality of the student learning experience, and to plan for enhancements to that experience.

8. An increasing range of awards are also subject to the scrutiny and requirements of a professional body. There are presently some 900 accrediting bodies on record in the UK, which exercise considerable influence on both curriculum content and standards. To give just one example: any institution which wishes to award professional degrees in Social Work must have those awards examined by the General Social Care Council. Such scrutiny not only provides objective external input into the development and review of degree courses, but also helps to ensure an element of consistency across the sector. Institutions have developed systems to deal successfully with the complexity of integrating these professional requirements with the common HE standards and their own missions. Any attempt to implement a centralised approach would have implementation costs out of proportion to its value, and would be likely to lead to major issues with professional accrediting bodies.

#### EFFECTIVENESS OF QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCY IN MONITORING DEGREE STANDARDS

9. We are not aware of any evidence that degree standards are inappropriate, or that standards are any less secure than at any time in the past.

10. We have a mature quality assurance system in the UK. It has been developed systematically over the last two decades, and is now well-understood and well-established. A rolling programme of Audits, Continuation Audits, Subject Reviews and now Institutional Audits, alongside Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR) in Scotland and Institutional Review in Wales, has consistently given the sector a clean bill of health, with only a fraction of disciplines or institutions found to be unsatisfactory. These processes have taken place alongside HEFCE Assurance Audits, and reviews conducted by bodies such as the Higher Education Regulation Review Group (HERRG), which sought to reduce the administrative burden on institutions. There may be further scope for improvement, but the principles are now well accepted. The individual decisions of autonomous institutions are not reviewed, but the full process of decision-making is considered, to ensure that it is fit for purpose.

11. This maturity supports the increasing focus on the enhancement of student learning opportunities, and the promotion of student engagement, which are the current priority for all institutions. This is not simply a matter of listening to student feedback and acting upon it, although that is standard practice in all institutions with which we are familiar. It is about how we engage students fully as participants in more aspects of institutional life and decision-making. At the same time, there is a focus on the student experience: how we ensure that time spent within HE is both rich, and valuable and relevant to subsequent employment and personal development. Discussions about “quality enhancement”, and how best it can be delivered, have been the central focus of the two most recent QSN annual conferences, each attended by around 100 senior quality managers from across the UK HE sector.

12. Peer review is an essential aspect of the national QA system; indeed given the complexity of the HE sector, the variety of institutions and the competing internal objectives, it is difficult to see who the expert reviewers might be, if not current (or very recent) professionals within the system. We have all seen the few alarmist reports—given undue weight perhaps by the THE letters page—which suggest that nameless, faceless bureaucrats require the completion of ever-increasing mountains of paperwork, usually involving the meaningless ticking of boxes. This is not a system we recognise, nor one in which we work. Indeed QSN perceives a trend towards internal processes which are more efficient and add value, and the Network is active in promoting these.

13. QAA recruits, and trains, established and experienced members of staff from within HEIs to perform the audit function, and they are well aware of the challenges faced by institutions, for example in identifying, implementing, and measuring the success of enhancement initiatives. Nevertheless, where an institution is found to be lacking, either in terms of academic standards, or in the delivery of high quality education; or in its processes to assure these, a judgement of less than full confidence is delivered. Our members have wide experience of this system in practice; based on that experience, we believe it to be a sound system which delivers reliable judgements. Indeed we are concerned that any other process—for example one which included more tick-boxes—would lead to universities from which creativity and risk-taking, as well as frank debate, were eliminated. The dynamism of the sector would thereby be compromised; and the sector, and above all its students, would be the poorer for this.

14. QAA has taken many years to reach its current position, which provides assurance of, and public information about, the standards and quality of provision across the HE sector. It does this without infringing upon the core concept of the autonomous institution. We fully accept the importance of making information about the outcomes of QA processes available within the public domain. We do retain some misgivings about the value of this information, as currently published, to non-expert users, who are not well placed to interpret the differences which may be perceived, and we welcome the initiatives which are currently underway, for example via the work of UCAS through the Unistats website, to provide information in a form more accessible to those outside the sector, such as students, prospective students, parents and employers.

15. We note that the UK’s approach to quality assurance has had a significant influence on developments elsewhere, including across Europe through the Bologna Process and in jurisdictions such as Malaysia and Saudi Arabia. We also note the recent confirmation by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) of QAA compliance with agreed European standards. This is an indication of the esteem in which the system is held.

## CURRENT METHODS OF STANDARDISATION

16. We are of course aware of the debates about academic standards, and the assertion that these have fallen over recent decades.

17. We acknowledge the proportions of students achieving higher classifications of degree (First and Upper Second Class Honours), and understand public surprise that this proportion has risen given the massification of HE. However, we note a number of points which may have impacted on this:

- (i) The onus on widening participation has enabled a previously untapped pool of talented students to enter HE who would not have done so hitherto.
- (ii) The range of subjects available has greatly increased. This has drawn in a range of professionals whose skills were not previously acknowledged to be at degree level, but whose competence was not in doubt. Hence the comparison over time does not compare like with like.
- (iii) This range of subjects has also increased the range of skills and competences which are expected. For example, students may be assessed on their achievement of practical outcomes (such as through work placement), rather than on scholarly essays or extended dissertations.
- (iv) Institutions are much more explicit about the learning outcomes which are to be demonstrated, and the assessment criteria to be applied. Even 20 years ago, this was almost unknown. Hence students are clearer about what they need to do in each piece of assessed work, and can target their efforts accordingly.
- (v) Institutions often use a range of assessment methods. Hence whilst previously an ability to succeed in written examinations, based on the academic essay, was of paramount importance, students may now achieve well by being strong in coursework, presentations, and so on. Many of the skills and abilities tested in this way are of equal relevance to a student's future contribution in employment than were the narrower range of skills tested by more traditional methods.

18. Hence we question the assertion that standards have fallen over time, as the respective systems are so different that they are not susceptible to such a simplistic comparison.

19. Institutions have internal mechanisms to ensure the standardisation of marks in relation to the national expectations of degree-level study. These may include some or all of double marking; moderation; the use of generic grading descriptors to articulate the expectations at each class of award; and comprehensive validation and periodic review processes, drawing on views from colleagues external to the institution, to ensure that each course has outcomes which are appropriate to a degree in this subject.

20. This internal decision-making about student performance is validated by the external examiner. External examiners bring professional experience and objectivity to bear, and have a key role in confirming that the marks and grades awarded are appropriate, consistent across institutions within the sector and over time, and in accordance with the regulations. No work will be outside the remit of at least one external, and we are not aware of any evidence that the system does not work well. We do not believe that there is a cadre of expert professionals available to do this work other than those currently serving as external examiners, and the commitment which senior academics demonstrate in acting as external examiners (for limited reward) shows the seriousness with which this role is taken.

21. QAA auditors do not interview external examiners. However, they have access to their reports; and can review the criteria for the appointment of externals; can check any institutional training or induction; can read any guidelines or procedural notes; and can check how an institution has responded to any or all annual reports. Failure to engage appropriately with external examiners would almost certainly lead to a judgement of limited confidence at Institutional Audit or equivalent.

22. We note that there was a QAA proposal in 1998, to develop a national Register of External Examiners (in response to the 1997 Dearing Report), and that this suggestion has recently been resurrected by Professor Roger Brown, now of Liverpool Hope University. We fail to see the benefits of this proposal. On a basic level, its administration would create a significant bureaucratic burden, and we do not believe that a single central body would be effective in keeping such a major database updated. More significantly, institutions take great care in selecting examiners with the specific knowledge necessary for their own programmes, which assures subject alignment. The use of an extended network of contacts to identify potential examiners ensures that the available "pool" of examiners is regularly extended through the appointment of those who have not previously examined, but who are recommended by colleagues and subsequently inducted into the process. It is hard to see how a central register would be able to match the efficacy of this process, especially in new or growth areas where the number of potential examiners may be restricted.

23. We are aware of no evidence that institutions select external examiners who are insufficiently critical or who are too close to the institution or course team; the need for objectivity is explicit in the QAA Code of Practice, and institutional criteria for appointment will make clear that this professional relationship should be supportive, but requires a degree of distance. It should also be noted that many examiners have indicated that they would not wish to join any centrally held Register. Their engagement as fellow academics, operating a critical standards safeguard, is based on their commitment to the educational and subject community, but they have reservations about inclusion as part of a national database.



## PORTABILITY

24. The portability of a degree will relate primarily to its holder, and his/her professional skills, rather than the subject itself. In a society which is heavily service-industry based, the ability to conduct research in a critical and analytical manner, to solve complex problems, and to present complex information in different ways to a range of audiences, are of critical importance. Degree classification is determined both by the dedicated subject knowledge which is demonstrated, but also by the application of professional or graduate skills (time management; marshalling of arguments; problem-solving; teamwork; communication and so forth) to this knowledge.

## ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF DEGREE CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM

25. The value of the classification system is that it gives a quick and easy reference point for students, employers and other stakeholders. The system is well established, and its outputs easily recognised. It is essential that this be supplemented through a detailed transcript and record of performance, but these will necessarily be as complicated as they are detailed.

26. We acknowledge the weaknesses of the current classification system, and the anomaly of using such a broad brush approach to summarising the achievement and attributes of students, and we await with interest the pilot of the proposed HEAR. However, as was evident in the sector's response to the Burgess Report, there is little support for any of the possible alternative systems which were discussed; and an acknowledgement that, if universities do not offer summary judgements of performance in some way, then employers and others will devise their own, which may be less reliable than those which the awarding institution can offer. It is unrealistic to suppose that an employer will have either the time, or the expertise, to interpret a complex document such as the HEAR for each applicant, although this will provide valuable additional information for those who are shortlisted, for example.

27. We note that students, at institutional level, also value the degree classification. This may in part be based on pre-existing expectations, but it would be counter-intuitive to change this system unless it is clear that the alternative offers significant advantages, such as qualitatively greater objectivity. We do not believe this to be the case with any alternative proposal at this time.

## METHODOLOGIES USED BY UK HEIS TO DETERMINE DEGREE CLASSIFICATIONS, AND THE POTENTIAL METHODOLOGIES FOR STANDARDISATION

28. We would accept that there are many diverse methodologies for the determination of degree classification, and note that this is in part a function of institutional autonomy. Many of these methodologies are of long standing, and have been developed in response to specific institutional priorities. There are significant similarities between the majority (including the accepted grade boundaries). However there may be value to reviewing existing practice, and developing guidelines and practical advice which would secure greater consistency of approach within and between HEIs, especially around borderline cases.

## PLAGIARISM

29. We are aware of regular reports of an increase in student plagiarism, but we believe that institutions are well aware both of the issue, and of approaches to respond to it. Sector-wide groups regularly discuss issues such as plagiarism, and we are convinced that this matter cannot be resolved through interventions from outside the sector.

*January 2009*

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### Memorandum 53

#### Submission from the 157 Group

## STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES INQUIRY

### Summary

- There is a public misconception of the role Further Education (FE) Colleges play in delivering A Level and Higher Level Qualifications which traditionally lead to University provision.
- FE Colleges are more socially inclusive than their Sixth Form Counterparts, although the funding methodology discriminates against learners choosing to study in FE.
- This funding differentiation impacts upon diversity and inclusion in Higher Education (HE).
- Access for adults should be reviewed, with a guarantee of HE provision following on from successful completion of an Access being established.
- An All Age Advice and Information Service would support routes to HE.
- An open discussion on the nature of vocational and academic programmes should be held to prevent provision being pulled in too many directions.

- Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) should be compelled to enter into formal relationships with the key local General Further Education Colleges (GFE's) in their locality.
- FE providers, as the key players in their local communities, should be at the leading edge of the establishment of new HE Centres.

### *Context*

1. The 157 Group represents twenty six of the largest and most successful Further Education Colleges in the Learning and Skills Sector. We seek to influence policy development in education and related policy areas. The strength and expertise of our providers gives us both the capacity to act as an internal critical friend to key decision makers and to support the development of the sector as a whole. We do not see ourselves as a traditional “lobbying body” but rather an advice and opinion service.

2. We are pleased to be able to offer evidence to the Select Committee on its Students and Universities Inquiry. 157 members deliver a significant amount of HE in FE provision which is well regarded both in terms of its quality and ability to reach out to individuals classed as non traditional HE participants. However for the purpose of this submission we have focussed upon the routes available to current and potential FE learners into traditional HEI's. This paper also seeks only to address the issues of admission included in the call for evidence as this is where The 157 Group have a significant contribution to make. It is also worth noting that, within 157 member colleges, we have a significant number of high profile individuals who have been involved in research on widening access. Many of these individuals have written extensively on the subject and would be happy to expand upon the key issues outlined briefly in this submission.

### *Key Issues*

3. Despite public perception Further Education Colleges deliver almost half of all A Level provision in the United Kingdom. This fact is not reflected in either government policy or current funding arrangements. The frustration felt by many in the sector on viewing A Levels as the “gold standard” of education is matched by frustration within FE Colleges that the School Sixth Form or Sixth Form College is viewed as the “gold provider” of A Level provision.

4. All evidence suggests that school Sixth Forms are less socially inclusive than FECs, and undoubtedly this impacts upon individual learner's ability to access Higher Education. General FE colleges have a higher proportion of entrants from lower socio-economic groups to HE (34%) compared to 25% in Sixth Form Colleges and 8% in private schools. The reality for many young people is that if they fail to reach five “good” GCSEs access to Sixth Form provision is denied, and with that the traditional route into HE. It is then often left to the college sector to deliver an appropriate curriculum offer for those young people that delivers on a wide range of aspirations from access to employment to further education. This can be an academic supported route, a vocational learning path or, in many cases, a combination of the two, Further Education Colleges are tremendously successful in delivering such provision. Nevertheless it is essential to take account of the fact that those young people who do not meet the traditional cut-off target, which we must not forget is almost 50% of all young people, are denied the traditional route into HE. It is worth noting for the record however that colleges are the provider of choice for many young people, including those who reach the “five good GCSE standard”. These individuals choose to study in FE for a variety of reasons including access to a more adult environment, a broader provision offer and a “half way house” to the University learning environment. This is an extremely positive choice, but is affected, often without the learner in question being aware, of the relative positions, in the view of Universities, of their chosen providers.

5. This sense of inequality is further exacerbated by current funding arrangements. The majority of young people who fail to gain five good GCSEs are strongly tied to individuals and communities from lower socio economic groups. This in itself is undeniably tied to issues of race. BME students form a significantly large proportion of the college student community, in comparison with their school counterparts. By maintaining a significant funding gap between Sixth Form and FE provision, the funding method is having an additionally negative effect that runs counter to published policy aims across Government Departments. In effect we are pushing more money towards the children of the leafy suburbs than the children of the most disadvantaged communities in our society. The 157 Group welcomes the ongoing progress on closing the funding gap but feel far more should be done in the name of social justice.

6. Equally the school Sixth Form presumption does not assist FE providers in their role as key strategic partners in delivering the local agenda. In those areas where excellent FE provision exists, we believe that significant government resources are often wasted delivering economically unviable provision, through newly created Sixth Forms. The Sixth Form presumption should be lifted; with local intervention only being made to create such additional provision where the curriculum offer does not reflect demand or quality is not met.

7. In addition Sixth Form colleges should be encouraged to open up their recruitment practice reaching beyond their current and limited focus. This would encourage and empower more young people to enter well-funded institutions that provide a direct access to universities; however conscience this decision is at the time of enrolment.

8. Access to HE for adult learners is an additional and complicated area. Adult learners wishing to access HE are extremely likely to come through the FE route. Colleges provide an important stepping point, not only in providing relevant qualifications but also in building confidence and making connections with forms of support, for example possible funding routes. For the majority of adults who wish to go on to HE, they will choose to study locally and generally part time, owing, in part, to their own pressures and personal or family commitments. Increasingly evidence suggests that adult learners are more likely to complete a Foundation Degree locally and potentially seek to “top up” with a local HEI provider. The 157 Group believes that providing such routes for adults in HE is essential to both meeting the 50% target and widening the demographic of the HE population. We believe access course provision has been tremendously successful in widening and diversifying the HE population but are concerned by increasing evidence that students on successful completion of such a programme are being denied access to the partner HEI. We would call upon the Government to ensure that all those who have successfully completed Access to HE course are guaranteed a HE place.

9. Information and guidance is critical for both young people and adults in making sense of the qualifications landscape and how their choices will directly affect their ability to access HE. We would argue, therefore, that every information and careers service should be provided on a universal all age basis. This could effectively break down the instinct by many careers tutors in schools to advise young people to remain within the schools sector whether or not it is the most appropriate curriculum offer. An all-age service would additionally allow adults to access services through relationships with alternative sources that they are more likely to connect or engage within their day to day life with for example their children’s schools, in a similar way that Sure Start Centres have had a positive effect on joining up the landscape of support for parents and signposting them to relevant provision.

10. Aim Higher is a valuable initiative, yet it lacks the drive, innovation and crucially the ability to connect with the very young people from disadvantaged communities that it seeks to target in the aim of reaching the 50% target. The 157 Group members are extremely successful in engaging with individuals from disadvantaged communities and strongly recommend that DIUS reviews its approach with guidance from practitioners delivering on the front line.

11. The 157 Group believe it is now time to have an honest discussion about how academic and vocational courses relate to each other, the “framework” of qualifications and access to Higher Education. The reality is that individuals studying vocational qualifications are significantly less likely to be accepted for a university place than those studying an A Level programme. Although things are clearly better in the Post 1992 institutions, this is perhaps unsurprising as programmes of vocational study may often follow on logically to courses traditionally run by Post 1992’s, for example computer logistics or nursing. High level vocational courses however such as medicine law or engineering are still, almost universally, run in the Red Brick institutions that in reality, offer no vocational pathway. The Government should address the question of access in this context but also examine the purpose and core of vocational provision.

12. It is crucial that vocational courses are not pulled in too many directions. The sheer complexity of matching vocational and academic provision has not assisted in challenging the question of parity of esteem. If vocational provision is a quality product in its own right we should be rightly concerned if we only determine its validity by the proportion of traditional academic content it contains. This is not to say that we should be “dumbing down” vocational curriculum, or removing core components such as English and Mathematics, but rather to say that vocational course should be allowed to be vocational, if they are to be highly valued by individuals, employers and universities alike.

13. We strongly believe that the solution for HEI’s in expanding their intake, and ensuring that their intake is more diverse is the College Sector. HE providers should be compelled to enter into formal partnership arrangements with the local key FE provider in their area, to build a cross sector curriculum offer and make access to university a mainstream option for FE learners.

14. In addition we welcome “University Challenge” and the proposed establishment of HE Centres within areas that do not have a tradition of Higher Level Learning. We believe that it is colleges who, as the key strategic partners within their community should lead on the development of HE provision in the proposed areas. FE Colleges are generally accepted as the most responsive elements of the education system. Strong relationships with employers and key agencies through Local Area Agreements and Multi Area Agreements mean we are extremely strongly placed to deliver an offer that is responsive to community needs. In partnership with a HE institution and others we believe that we could act as the key interface between Schools and FE and FE and HE to ensure that we reached out to non traditional groups in the likely localities and as a result met the 50% target.

15. To conclude, Further Education Colleges are the key to increased and diverse access into HE provision. Whilst we believe we have a valuable role in developing in partnership localised HE provision, we also believe we are critical to meeting Government HE admissions targets, both on intake and diversity measures. To make this a reality funding arrangements, admission processes and partnerships with HEI’s should work to assist Colleges in delivering this core societal aim rather than acting as significant barriers.

Finally it is essential to remember that it is large FE Colleges who have had the most amount of success in reaching out to non traditional students in developing HE provision, a point that those developing “University Challenge” would do well take into account.

December 2008

## Memorandum 54

### Submission from the Council for the Mathematical Sciences

#### STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

The Council for the Mathematical Sciences (comprising the Institute of Mathematics and its Applications, the London Mathematical Society, the Royal Statistical Society, the Edinburgh Mathematical Society and the Operational Research Society) is pleased to present its evidence for the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Select Committee’s Inquiry into *Students and Universities*.

Our response focuses on matters relating specifically to mathematical sciences. As a result not all aspects of the Committee’s inquiry are addressed in the text below.

#### GENERAL COMMENTS

1. The geographical remit of this inquiry is not clear. The terms of reference refer to UK HEIs but subsequently only to HEFCE; given that education is a devolved issue the remit should be clarified in the Committee’s report.

*The effectiveness of the process for admission to HEIs, including A-levels, Advanced Diplomas, apprenticeships and university entrance tests.*

2. Current A-level mathematics is doing a reasonable job; numbers taking A-level Mathematics are increasing<sup>163</sup> following a slump in the change to the AS-A2 system, with dramatic increases in Further Mathematics thanks to the Further Mathematics Network.<sup>164</sup>

3. However, A-level mathematics fails to distinguish between high-achieving students; an “A\*” grade may help to some extent, but only if it rewards mathematical thought rather than simply a higher degree of accuracy.

4. It is unclear that the proposed diplomas in science or engineering will have anything close to the content of the current mathematics A-level, which suggests that these would not be appropriate preparation for university-level mathematical sciences programmes. We endorse the February 2008 statement by the Advisory Committee on Mathematics Education (ACME) on mathematics in diplomas,<sup>165</sup> noting the importance of mathematics training to the further study of a range of other science and engineering subjects.

*The implementation and success of widening participation initiatives, and the impact of the current funding regime on these objectives*

5. Successful initiatives in mathematical sciences include the HEFCE-funded *More Maths Grads* project,<sup>166</sup> Masterclasses run by the Royal Institution<sup>167</sup> and the various “Challenges” organised by the UK Mathematics Trust.<sup>168</sup>

*Levels of funding for, and the balance between, teaching and research in UK HEIs, and the adequacy of financial support for the development of innovative teaching methods and teaching/research integration.*

6. Research funding from the EPSRC Mathematical Sciences Programme has been diminishing year by year—from £21 million in 2006–07 to £16 million in 2008–09<sup>169</sup> and £14 million in 2009–10—in favour of multidisciplinary research themes. The CMS is concerned that this is a move away from funding basic research in mathematical sciences, which will ultimately be to the long term detriment of the research base across science and engineering.

7. There is concern at the low level of the HEFCE unit of resource for mathematics given that contact hours are high and that labour-intensive student support is required.

<sup>163</sup> See, for instance, the 14 August 2008 DCSF press release at <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/localauthorities/index.cfm?action=content&contentID=15518>

<sup>164</sup> Increases credited to the FMN in *State of the Nation Report: Science and Maths Education* (Royal Society, September 2008), numbered page 60, available from <http://royalsociety.org/downloaddoc.asp?id=5698>

<sup>165</sup> Available from <http://www.acme-uk.org/news.asp?id=91>

<sup>166</sup> More Maths Grads—[www.moremathsgrads.org.uk](http://www.moremathsgrads.org.uk)

<sup>167</sup> RI Masterclasses <http://www.rigb.org/contentControl?action=displayContent&id=0000000844>

<sup>168</sup> UKMT Challenges—<http://www.mathcomp.leeds.ac.uk/Maths%20Challenges.htm>

<sup>169</sup> The EPSRC Mathematical Sciences Programme budget for the current year is given at <http://www.epsrc.ac.uk/ResearchFunding/Programmes/Maths/Intro.htm>

8. We are also concerned about the effect of Full Economic Costing on a subject with relatively low grant volume. This is a recent policy change whose effects need to be monitored carefully for unintended consequences.

9. Good teaching and research go hand-in-hand in the mathematical sciences and should not be pitted against each other. The design of undergraduate mathematical sciences degree courses can be guided by recent research and advanced courses within them often are.

10. Teaching standards in mathematics are generally very good but often involve large classes, with many in excess of 200 students. At these levels the lecturer is not easily able to interact with the audience; similar considerations apply to tutorial sizes.

11. MSc courses are often the vehicle by which recent research is disseminated and for the training and recruitment of PhD students—it is a considerable blow that EPSRC’s move to narrowly-defined “Knowledge Transfer Accounts” will effectively withdraw funding from the more “general” mathematical sciences MSc courses. Responsibility for funding for the second cycle is unclear.

*The suitability of methods of assessing excellence in teaching and research and the impact of research assessment on these activities*

12. There is general confidence in peer review as a means for research assessment but rather less so in any formulae based on mechanically collected data.<sup>170</sup>

13. The Research Assessment Exercise has been a mixed blessing for teaching and research. On the positive side, it has encouraged staff to maintain their interest in research throughout their career which also has a positive effect on their teaching. On the negative side, it has encouraged short-termism; many of the most substantial results in mathematical sciences have taken many years to come to fruition, and this can be at odds with the need to produce publications on a regular basis.

14. The RAE’s emphasis on research groups can lead to patchy coverage of some areas of mathematical sciences in some departments—thus having a negative effect on the undergraduate curriculum.

15. The RAE has been a driver of concentration of research into an increasingly small number of “centres of excellence”. This may be advantageous where investment in large scale equipment is needed, but is not necessary or suitable in mathematical sciences; departmental closures following RAE-based funding decisions have a number of effects, including the creation of mathematics “deserts” in parts of the country.<sup>171</sup>

*The availability and adequacy of training in teaching methods for UK academics*

16. The current training provision offered in many HEIs to UK academics in mathematics is very poor, and makes poor use of valuable time. It is often generic and pays no attention to the special way that mathematics and statistics must be taught; this is widely recognised by the community. It is vital that it is replaced by proper subject specific training such as that offered by the Higher Education Academy’s MSOR Subject Centre<sup>172</sup> and currently being piloted at the University of Birmingham.<sup>173</sup> This needs proper funding.

*The responsibilities of the Government and HEFCE in assuring (a) the quality of teaching provision and learning opportunities in UK HEIs; and (b) the balance between teaching and research in HEIs*

17. Some aspects of funding and support in these areas fall between the two stools of HEFCE and research councils (EPSRC in the case of mathematical sciences). Much more “joined-up” action is required here. The lack of clarity in responsibility for second cycle funding (eg for one year Masters courses) is one result here.

18. Mathematics support groups, drop-in sessions and small tutorials are all essential to back up teaching in lectures and Government support for these is vital. A difficulty with mathematics is that one tends to get “stuck”. Giving help to students who are stuck is an essential but very labour-intensive, and hence expensive, business.

*Potential methodologies for the standardisation of degree classifications within, and between, HEIs*

19. Degree classifications cannot easily be standardised across different subjects; there are inherent differences between disciplines that would hinder attempts to do so. Mathematics tends to have a much wider (often bi-modal) distribution of marks compared with other subjects and this needs to be carefully considered. For individual mathematical sciences students the profile of module marks may show more

<sup>170</sup> See, for instance, *Citation Statistics* (International Mathematical Union, et al, June 2008) for a mathematics-focused critique of bibliometric approaches (see <http://www.mathunion.org/fileadmin/IMU/Report/CitationStatistics.pdf>)

<sup>171</sup> For a more detailed treatment of the negative effects of concentration of research see *Keeping HE Maths Where it Counts: the decline in provision of mathematical sciences courses with more moderate entry requirements—drivers and implications* (Council for the Mathematical Sciences, 2007) available from [http://www.cms.ac.uk/reports/2007/steele\\_report.pdf](http://www.cms.ac.uk/reports/2007/steele_report.pdf)

<sup>172</sup> See <http://www.mathstore.ac.uk>; The HEA MOSR Network distance learning courses on “Teaching of statistics in HE” are run in association with the Royal Statistical Society’s Centre for Statistical Education (<http://www.rsscse.org.uk/activities/tsihe.asp>)

<sup>173</sup> See [http://www.hr.bham.ac.uk/development/courses/landt/MSS013\\_Associate\\_module\\_in\\_Learning\\_and\\_Teaching\\_in\\_Higher\\_Education\\_mathematics.shtml](http://www.hr.bham.ac.uk/development/courses/landt/MSS013_Associate_module_in_Learning_and_Teaching_in_Higher_Education_mathematics.shtml)

variation than in some other disciplines. Some university regulations require that all modules are passed, and this can fetter the professional judgement of boards of examiners in mathematical sciences when determining degree classification.

*Any further action required by the Government and/or HEFCE to ensure that UK HEIs offer students a world class educational experience*

20. The Government should ensure that the UK can recruit, motivate and train the best possible university lecturers, excellent in both teaching and research. To do this we need to make it clear that there is a great career available for them. An apparent reduction in support for basic research in mathematical sciences in the UK works against this.

December 2008

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## Memorandum 55

### Submission from the University of the Creative Arts

#### INQUIRY ON STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

##### *Summary*

The University of the Creative Arts (UCA) is a specialist art and design institution. In the following report to the Select Committee on Students and Universities, the UCA has identified a number of threats and opportunities for the sector:

##### *Threats*

- the impact of the cessation of route B entry on recruitment to art and design courses;
- the affect of restrictions on funding for student growth (particularly ASNs and ELQs) and the consequent implications for widening participation and learning and teaching initiatives;
- the number of different agencies presenting Compact Agreements and consequent confusion in the market;
- the need for more parity in recognition of the value of learning and teaching alongside research;
- the affect of bibliometrics as a measure of success for research funding;

##### *Opportunities*

- working with the community to increase participation in HE;
- further development of activities to increase participation and enhance on-course support for students from non-traditional backgrounds;
- anticipation of the benefits of peer review in RAE and audit;
- HEAR providing greater transparency for stakeholders.

#### ADMISSIONS

1. *The effectiveness of the process for admission to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), including A-levels, Advanced Diplomas, apprenticeships and university entrance tests*

1.1 UCA takes account of academic qualifications and portfolio submission in admissions. The UCAS tariff contributes to effective decision making. The welcomes further developments in the tariff.

1.2 The use of predicted grades continues to be helpful, although somewhat unpredictable. Portfolio submission aids in the selection process as quality of work can support predicted grades. A post qualification application process (PQA) would support realistic offers based on actual, rather than expected, achievement.

1.3 The introduction of the 14–19 Diplomas will benefit vocational routes into HEI's. As take up of these qualifications is still low, it is difficult to perceive their effectiveness within admissions. UCA continues to monitor the development of the Creative & Media Diploma and its potential to enhance progression routes onto undergraduate provision.

1.4 The cessation of Route B has implications for the smooth operation of the 2009 admissions cycle within art and design. This is a significant change in admission practice and has implications for student choice. HEI's with art and design provision have yet to indicate whether their course closing dates will be in January or March. There is concern that the change could potentially lead to a fall in application rates

as students studying on UCA's Foundation Diploma in Art & Design will be required to make decisions before March regarding future undergraduate choice, when they may not be fully prepared or know in which area they wish to specialise.

1.5 The facility to provide feedback to applications via UCAS will provide a more effective process for the applicants themselves, along with the ability for HEI's to monitor and revise where necessary internal processes.

1.6 Apprenticeships and entrance tests are not offered at UCA.

## 2. *The UK's ability to meet government targets for Higher Education participation and the relevance of these targets*

2.1 Participation rates have remained around the low 40% mark for some years. Many have questioned whether the 50% target is achievable using existing policy drivers.

2.2 Government strategy for raising skills and employer related links may help to increase participation at some level but may run counter to its strategy to increase 10,000 apprenticeship places through the National Apprenticeship Service. A debate is required to set a realistic target, to focus strategy to equip the workforce with the necessary skills for the economy and to decide where those skills are best achieved.

2.3 The recent Government announcement to restrict student number growth in 2009–10 by 5,000 ASNs and curtail growth in 2010–11 compounded by the recent announcement to withhold offers of grants for students from households earning up to £60,000 will hit widening participation (WP).

2.4 The introduction of the Equivalent and Level Qualifications (ELQ) policy will also hit WP, particularly in the mature market and upskilling agenda.

2.5 A 50% WP target remains a long term aspiration and will necessitate greater structural changes, embedded across communities, schools, FE and HE. New partnerships and initiatives will be needed at primary and junior level to raise the aspirations of children to enter HE. Institutions will need work closely with communities to develop strategies to encourage participation amongst young people (eg AimHigher).

2.6 UCA is currently considering barriers to entry to HE, re-examining support for part-time students, encouraging mature learners to up skill and reviewing the impact of fees on participation rates.

2.7 HEIs be flexible to the study patterns of under-represented groups and both the financial and study support needs.

## 3. *The implementation and success of widening participation initiatives such as Compact agreements, and the impact of the current funding regime on these objectives*

3.1 The UCA has for some years provided an "internal ring-fence" to a significant proportion of its widening participation funds to support activities for students from non-traditional backgrounds, particularly to increase the numbers of applicants and provide additional on course academic support. This good practice has enabled stable relationships to be developed between the University and local schools and colleges to support student progression into HE.

3.2 Funding for widening participation is currently based on student FTE numbers. For UCA, as a specialist arts institution, such a funding regime means that the University is not able to respond to a significant number of requests for WP activities from schools and colleges, as the current funding arrangements are geared to favour larger and general institutions of higher education and do not recognise the specific expertise brought to the HE sector by smaller, specialist institutions.

3.3 Retention of students from non-traditional backgrounds is key to evaluating the success of activities to support widening access to HE. Institutional and national initiatives for student engagement and support should be successfully aligned to measures to widen access to HE.

3.4 Individual institutional compacting arrangements with FE Colleges and schools have worked well, where such arrangements have been underpinned by activities to support progression through higher education. Other initiatives to support the development of Compacts have had mixed results, not least owing to the number and variety of Compacting arrangements developed by other agencies such as LLNS. For example, pupils in one school in one local authority may be able to access up to five separate Compacts with UCA. This diversity in administering Compacts is burdensome and confusing for both the sending and receiving institution.

3.5 The UCA's Progression Agreement aligns the aims and objectives of LLN Progression Agreements with the commitment of the University to support students from non-traditional backgrounds progressing into and through HE. This Agreement is currently being tested by UCA and aims to offer pupils, schools and FE colleges clarity about the offer from the University, as well as identifying activities the University can offer to schools and FE colleges to support successful progression to UCA.

3.6 Funding arrangements for delivering progression activities to support the diverse Compact arrangements are also complex—some progression activities are part-funded by Aimhigher, local authorities, LLNs, individual HEIs or a combination of partners. Compacts themselves are unlikely to support successful transition into higher education for young people from non-traditional backgrounds if they are not underpinned by activities which aim to support subsequent retention on course (subject-based, acquisition of relevant study skills, understanding the requirements of studying in HE).

3.7 Direct funding to universities to deliver on progression activities and Compacting arrangements, accompanied by national guidance to universities on developing and extending Compacting arrangements, would offer better value for money than funding directed through third parties, such as LLNs. Direct funding would negate the need for a management fee “top slice” taken by lead institutions in LLNs, the need to employ significant numbers of additional staff via LLNs and would offer individual institutions “ownership” of and a commitment to the development and sustainability of Compacting arrangements.

3.8 The University’s experience of working with Aimhigher Kent & Medway has been an unqualified success. This has been partly due to the excellent model for partnership working and business plan, which was developed in the early years of the partnership and the continued commitment from all partners involved. There have been demonstrable and significant results from this initiative to increase attainment rates and increase the numbers of Aimhigher Kent & Medway students progressing into HE. The University is also a partner in Aimhigher Surrey, which has significantly less funding than some other Aimhigher partnerships. UCA would suggest continuation of the Aimhigher initiative, which is embedded in Access Agreements and outreach activities, beyond current funding to 2011.

#### *4. The role of the Government in developing and promoting fair access and admissions policies for the UK Higher Education sector*

4.1 The University and many of its partners in the HE sector are already demonstrably committed to promoting fair access to HE and have, over a number of years, put in place policies and practices to ensure students are not disadvantaged by admissions processes.

4.2 However, there is still some way to go to ensure the sector as a whole is able to meet the challenges of ensuring fair access to higher education. UCA would welcome guidance from Government on developing and promoting fair access and admissions policies for HE, particularly in furthering compacting arrangements. A national review of policy and practice and subsequent national dissemination and recommendations for best practice on admissions policies and practice, including interview, would also be welcomed.

4.3 The preparation and submission of a student portfolio of work offers specialist art institutions an additional method for the selection of students, over and above consideration of qualifications, application form and performance at interview. This allows institutions to consider a range of factors in their selection of students, such as “potential” and “talent” in students from non-traditional backgrounds, who may lack confidence and are not able to demonstrate the acquisition of “cultural capital” at interview, when compared to those students applying to HE arts courses via the traditional A’ level/Foundation routes.

#### THE BALANCE BETWEEN TEACHING AND RESEARCH

##### *5. Levels of funding for, and the balance between, teaching and research in UK HEIs, and the adequacy of financial support for the development of innovative teaching methods and teaching/research integration*

5.1 UCA has a continuing strategic commitment to research in the creative arts for a variety of purposes that include underpinning the quality of student learning. The concentration of the major portion of UK research funding in a reduced number of HEIs, and the moves in the funding of teaching away from enhancement towards targeted allocations for widening participation, are having the combined effect of reducing the capacity of a significant number of HEIs to support the development of innovative teaching methods that also integrate teaching and research.

##### *6. The quality of teaching provision and learning facilities in UK and the extent to which they vary between HEIs*

6.1 The UK quality assurance framework consistently confirms the overall high quality of teaching in the UK. Following the removal of specialist premium funding, mechanisms must be found to ensure that specialist institutions receive sufficient funding to maintain and develop their teaching facilities. HEIs need a level of ring-fenced investment in their learning and teaching infrastructure that will enable them to equip graduates with the knowledge and skills needed to sustain the UK economy, and in UCA’s case prepare the future leaders of the UK’s Creative Industries. The highest quality learning facilities are vital to enable specialist HEIs to compete in the international HE market, to maintain quality and secure the reputation of UK HE.



*7. The suitability of methods of assessing excellence in teaching and research and the impact of research assessment on these activities*

7.1 We have absolute confidence in QAA's Institutional Audit process and since the RAE was introduced, research quality has risen significantly. A key ingredient in this success has been the strength of the peer review process which has provided confidence in the evaluation of research and teaching excellence.

7.2 In respect of research assessment, the peer review process for art and design has significantly increased our understanding of the subject, its contribution to the knowledge base, and our ability to articulate our research strengths to the wider community.

7.3 As a specialist HEI we believe that research is fundamental to academic excellence in order to remain at the leading edge of our subjects. A vibrant and active research community is also important in respect of our cultural and creative contribution to the region. For example 35,000 visitors attended exhibitions across our five campuses in 2007–8 and nearly 1,000 creative professionals attended one of our knowledge transfer initiative events.

7.4 We are concerned that the use of bibliometrics to assess research quality has significant issues for a specialist creative arts university and will reduce the opportunity for emerging subjects to engage in research and contribute to the economy.

*8. The availability and adequacy of training in teaching methods for UK academics and the importance of teaching excellence for the academic career path, including consideration of the role of teaching fellows*

8.1 The UCA suggests that teaching experience and excellence should be recognised in criteria for promotion, on an equivalent basis with research and leadership skills. In particular, the role of teaching fellows should contribute to career progression opportunities.

*9. The responsibilities of the Government and HEFCE in assuring (a) the quality of teaching provision and learning opportunities in UK HEIs; and (b) the balance between teaching and research in HEIs*

9.1 The Government and HEFCE are clearly responsible for assuring the threshold standard of learning opportunities in Higher Education at the highest level through QAA audit of institutions' own internal mechanisms for quality assurance.

9.2 The UCA would encourage a more positive focus in HE on ensuring a balance between teaching and research in terms of parity in funding and academic recognition.

#### DEGREE CLASSIFICATION

*10. Whether the methodologies used by UK HEIs to determine degree classifications and the distribution of degree classes awarded are appropriate, the potential methodologies for the standardisation of degree classifications within, and between, HEIs, and the effectiveness of the Quality Assurance Agency in monitoring degree standards*

10.1 UK HEI's, on the whole, have appropriate and robust academic regulations which quantitatively and qualitatively define the requirements for awards and degree classification within their respective institutions.

10.2 Differences between institutions exist in the requirements for awards and the application of regulations; however institutions operate, on the whole, to the same qualitative external benchmarks. The differences are such that it is arguable that a greater level of standardisation between institutions is not required.

10.3 Peer review of the curriculum and student achievement through institutional quality systems, including external examination, provides a wealth of evidence of the appropriate maintenance of institutional academic standards across the sector. In addition the use of externally published benchmark data allows UCA to monitor subject and institutional performance in student achievement.

*11. The advantages and disadvantages of the UK's system of degree classification and the introduction of the Higher Education Academic Record*

11.1 There is advantage in the current UK system of undergraduate degree classification, in that the inherent qualities and requirements of individual subjects are well established and understood by the sector and graduate training schemes provided by employers.

11.2 The disadvantage of the current classification system is that there is some variability in regulations for the determination of degree classifications between institutions.

11.3 With the increased availability of data in student achievement available to institutions, prospective students and stakeholders, the variability between institutions in degree classification distribution is transparent and open to a greater level of scrutiny. This issue would benefit from greater inspection through audit, particularly if a marked trend of wide discrepancy with national norms exists.

11.4 Information published by the QAA, in the form of institutional audit reports, provides evidence that the determination of academic standards of degrees and award classification is, on the whole, satisfactory across the sector.

11.5 The introduction of the HEAR is welcomed, in that it provides a sector “standard” and is a holistic and portable record of individual student achievement. This also assists to provide a greater level of transparency and information for stakeholders, including employers.

12. *The actions that universities, Government and others have taken, or should take, to maintain confidence in the value of degrees awarded by universities in the UK*

12.1 Universities should publish information about institutional regulations and quality processes and their outcomes on an annual basis for stakeholders. Publication should include all policies in relation to the peer review of curricula and standards and institutional “whistle blowing” policy and procedures. For many HE institutions this would be a continuation of current practice.

12.2 The QAA system of audit is well established and periodically reviewed. Outcomes are published for stakeholders. Published recommendations indicate where action is required, at a national level, to further develop institutional quality systems and academic standards in the sector and this should continue.

12.3 Careful application and review of the criteria for taught degree awarding powers and University Title should continue to promote confidence in degree awarding institutions. A greater level of public information in this area may promote a greater level of transparency and understanding for stakeholders.

13. *The relationship between degree classification and portability*

13.1 There is a level of portability in the current UK system of degree classification around the understanding of the attainment of “good degrees” for entry to taught postgraduate and research programmes and many company graduate training schemes.

13.2 The introduction of the HEAR will assist the portability of the record of achievement for students and graduates for transfer between institutions, courses, FE, training and employment both inside and outside the UK.

14. *The extent to which student plagiarism is a problem in HE, and the availability and effectiveness of strategies to identify, penalise and combat plagiarism*

14.1 The University has published effective regulations to define and penalise academic misconduct. In conjunction with these, the University is further developing its support for first year students, to enhance the development and understanding of “good” academic conduct and practice.

14.2 In common with other HEIs, the University has seen a recent increase in the numbers of cases of plagiarism. Although the sector now has considerable experience of addressing text-based plagiarism, less research has been undertaken into visual plagiarism in a creative arts context. In 2008, the University’s Academic Board approved an Academic Integrity Policy that aims to adopt a proactive approach to issues of plagiarism. The Policy places emphases on valuing and fostering academic integrity via a 3-fold approach: informing, integrating and deterring. Turnitin is now used with students both as a formative tool to advise how to avoid plagiarism and as a detection tool. The action plan associated with the Policy involves staff development to ensure that policies are applied fairly and consistently, for example a staff workshop to address Visual Plagiarism.

*Student Support and Engagement*

15. *The effectiveness of initiatives to support student engagement in the formulation of HE policy, and how the success or otherwise of these initiatives is being assessed*

15.1 The University College values formal and informal feedback from students and has published a Student Representation and Feedback Policy.

15.2 Students are involved in planning and decision-making. Officials of the Students Union and student representatives are members of the Board of Governors and chief academic committees. Union officials meet regularly with the Deputy Vice Chancellor. At campus level, students are members of Boards of Study. Campus Student Forums meet regularly and provide an extra channel of communication with senior academic managers, addressing issues normally outside the scope of individual courses. Students are offered training and briefings to support them in their roles and campus staff provide mechanisms to enable representatives to communicate more easily with fellow students. The University's recent institutional audit report commended briefings for student representatives by committee chairs that encourage and inform student participation.

#### 16. *How the student experience differs in public and private universities*

16.1 The private university sector recognises that student satisfaction is critical to business success and therefore the student experience is prioritised as a key performance indicator and appropriately resourced.

16.2 Business processes are aligned to the student experience and there is a strong commitment to high quality customer service. Services are easy to access and are often organised as a one-stop-shop approach with extended opening times, trained staff, and follow up support. On-line services are supported through customer relationship portals and service manager portfolio responsibilities. Personal relationship building and sense of community is integral to student services and enhances the student experience.

16.3 The private sector approach distinguishes the academic faculty and has high level expectations and contractual agreements in terms of research outputs and teaching delivery. This is balanced with income revenue targets, student recruitment and retention targets, student satisfaction threshold targets, and professional practice. Professional performance is managed and held to account.

16.4 These factors impact upon the student perception of value for money.

16.5 In the public sector the revenue streams and funding are limited and therefore resources are stretched. Institutions do not have the capacity to respond to rapidly changing student expectations and therefore services may not be readily available and accessible.

16.6 The public sector tends to be more bureaucratic resulting in barriers which impact upon student experience. On the positive, academic staff have more freedom to manage their time which can result in students receiving personal tuition and guidance over and above scheduled class contact time.

16.7 The public sector student community has a wider socio-economic representation and equal access to facilities. The challenge for the public sector is meeting the student experience expectations which might be unrealistic for a publically funded institution to deliver.

#### 17. *Examples of reasons for, and potential strategies to reduce, the non-completion of higher education programmes by students*

17.1 The University experiences relatively low levels of non-completion in its programmes and this may be attributable to a number of factors associated with the structure of creative arts education generally and the size and ethos of the University in particular. However, the success of the University's widening access strategies has resulted in an on-going need to review the support mechanisms for students who may have limited awareness of the demands of HE at the outset of their studies. UCA has put in place various schemes, some funded from WP funding streams to address these issues (Study Advisory Services, Buddying and Mentoring Schemes). Nevertheless, our Counselling services are under evermore pressure from students anxious about their ability to cope with the demands of university study. Financial concerns are also recognised as key barriers to success in HE. UCA was one of the 17 "early adopter" institutions for the FSA funded Money Doctors programme which has been rolled out through the UCA Student Advice Centres.

#### 18. *The adequacy of UK higher education (HE) funding and student support packages, and implications for current and future levels of student debt*

18.1 Funding and student support packages are complex as may be evidenced by the plethora of student money advice websites. Whilst student debt is of considerable concern to students and their guardians it does not appear to have had an impact on recruitment. This will be tested in the more constrained financial environment we have now entered. The financial packages currently available to students may not be sufficiently flexible to accommodate the increasing diversity of course delivery patterns that are anticipated in the next 5–10 years. The financial support packages that are currently available for part-time study, for example, may not facilitate life-long learning and continuing professional development.

#### 19. *Any further action required by the Government and/or HEFCE to ensure that UK HEIs offer students a world class educational experience*

19.1 The following actions are suggested:

- monitoring the effect of the removal of Route B entry on students progressing from a Diploma in Foundation Studies (Art & Design);
- more alignment between widening participation activity and on-course support;

- streamlining of funding for Compact Agreements more directly to Universities;
- more detailed guidance on promoting fair access in admissions procedures.

*December 2008*

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## Memorandum 56

### Submission from the Institute of Directors

Policy relating to higher education is of great interest to the Institute of Directors (IoD) and its members, and we are pleased to be given the opportunity of contributing to the current inquiry by the House of Commons Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee into students and universities. The inquiry is broad based, but we focus our contribution on the issue of the degree classification system. Observations on this, and on standards in higher education, are set out below following some introductory remarks about the IoD.

#### *About the IoD*

1. The IoD was founded in 1903 and obtained a Royal Charter in 1906. It is an independent, non-party political organisation of approximately 50,000 individual members.<sup>174</sup> Its aim is to serve, support, represent and set standards for directors to enable them to fulfil their leadership responsibilities in creating wealth for the benefit of business and society as a whole. The membership is drawn from right across the business spectrum. 83% of FTSE 100 companies and 64% of FTSE 350 companies have IoD members on their boards, but the majority of members, some 71%, comprise directors of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), ranging from long-established businesses to start-up companies.

2. IoD members' organisations are entrepreneurial and growth orientated. More than two-fifths export. They are at the forefront of flexible working practices and are fully committed to the skills agenda: over 90% of members' organisations provide training for their employees and 70% provide training leading to qualifications. Skills development also constitutes a key part of directors' approach to maintaining and sharpening their organisations' competitive edge during the downturn: 47% plan to keep investment in training at the same level in 2009, and 41% plan to increase training spend. Members' organisations typically require a highly qualified workforce: the average proportion of jobs in members' firms requiring employees to be qualified to Level 4 is over 50%. 52% of members' organisations employ recent graduates.

#### *Summary*

3. Key points in the IoD's memorandum include:

- The IoD supports the current honours degree classification system. Whilst imperfect, it is well understood by employers and remains an important recruiting aid. The system provides a simple but valuable metric early in the recruitment process and an insight into the calibre of potential graduate employees.
- Many employers will welcome aspects of the new Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR), including the promise of more information on students' academic achievements. The HEAR should add useful detail to the overall picture.
- The HEAR will initially be introduced alongside the current classification system. This is sensible. Importantly, it means that the reports will continue to detail the overall classification—or “summative judgement”—of a student's degree. The summative judgement must remain an integral feature of the HEAR. The additional detail of the latter should be a complement to, not a substitute for, the former.
- However, it was clear from the series of reports published by the Burgess Group that its long term intention was that the HEAR would eventually come to replace the classification system, which it viewed as “no longer fit for purpose”. The IoD disagrees with this analysis and believes such a move would be costly and disruptive for employers. The demise of the summative judgement would make the classification system more opaque, not less.
- Research conducted by the IoD over the course of the last year suggests that directors are generally upbeat about both the quality of their graduate employees and the standard of education provided by universities.

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<sup>174</sup> As at 15 August 2008, the IoD had 50,583 members.

## IoD MEMORANDUM

*The honours degree classification system*

4. The IoD opposed moves to jettison the current honours degree classification system in its response to the 2003 White Paper on higher education, in submissions to two subsequent consultations on the topic in 2005 and 2006, and in commenting on the release of the final Burgess report in 2007. The principal reason for this is that, in the form of the “summative judgement” (usually expressed in the form of First; Upper Second; Lower Second; Third; Pass or Fail), the system offers employers a quick and valuable insight into the overall intellectual calibre of an applicant. It is a useful recruitment aid and is well understood by employers.

5. In arguing that the current classification system was no longer “fit for purpose”, the Burgess Group—the body convened to examine the measurement of student achievement—argued that “the summative judgement thresholds distract and detract from information that conveys a fuller understanding of the skills and knowledge that the student has acquired.”<sup>175</sup> It is important to recognise, however, that employers do not approach the summative scale with an expectation that it will distil into a single grade, with absolute accuracy, the entire range of a candidate’s abilities. On the contrary, businesses typically adopt a holistic approach to recruitment, for example through the use of interviewing, to investigate skills, abilities and interests beyond academic achievement.

6. A degree classification is one factor among many in a recruitment process. It is also a starting point, not the finishing line. It is an indicator of calibre, not the final word. It is also a factor that loses potency with the passage of time: as individuals enter the labour market following graduation, the significance of degree classification is diluted; work experience, skills and knowledge will assume greater significance for subsequent employers. And, although we are not aware of specific research in this area, it is also probable that size of organisation will impact on how employers approach the use of degree classifications. For example, formal “sifting” processes, with organisations only considering applications from candidates with a First or Upper Second, is likely to be more commonplace in large businesses running extensive graduate recruitment schemes than in small businesses with fewer vacancies.

7. IoD research from 2006 suggests that members’ organisations adopt a relatively sophisticated approach to recruitment and selection. The vast majority produce detailed job descriptions and person specifications when recruiting.<sup>176</sup> In the selection process itself, 76% use structured interviews (eg deploying questions derived from a person specification form); 66% use unstructured interviews (eg biographical questions derived from a candidate’s c.v.); 38% use psychometric tests (eg tests of ability and personality); 22% use psychological tests (eg tests of motivation); and 21% make use of assessment centres.<sup>177</sup> Although this data covers members’ recruitment practices in general, not merely the recruitment of graduates, it indicates the importance employers place on a thorough assessment of potential employees’ abilities and attributes.

8. To underline this point, and with reference to graduates in particular, employers are placing great emphasis on their wider “employability” skills—the more generic and transferable skills, attributes and abilities (other than technical competence) that make an employee an asset to their employer. In an IoD survey conducted in October 2007, 64% of graduate recruiters said that graduates’ employability skills were more important to them when recruiting than the specific occupational, technical or academic knowledge and skills associated with the individuals’ degree. 23% thought that the two sets of skills were equivalent in importance, with only 12% believing that employability skills were less important.<sup>178</sup> Nor are the degrees themselves necessarily the only focus of attention when it comes to qualifications. When questioned in June 2008, 64% of directors agreed that employers took A level results into account when recruiting young people because they were a good guide to ability. 44% said the same for GCSEs.<sup>179</sup> For these reasons, the IoD disagrees with the Burgess Group assertion that there is “conclusive evidence” that while the summative judgement “endures”, “it will actively inhibit the use of wider information.”<sup>180</sup> The IoD believes that current practice suggests otherwise.

9. In response to representations from unconvinced stakeholders, the Burgess Group tempered its original proposals and recommended that, in the short to medium term, the HEAR should continue to contain an overall summative judgement. Nevertheless, as the HEAR became established, it intended that “the existing degree classification system will decline in importance until it should no longer be considered necessary”, though it did not “assume this will be easily achieved”.<sup>181</sup> The IoD disagrees with this intent.

<sup>175</sup> *Beyond the honours degree classification. The Burgess Group final report* (Universities UK, October 2007), p. 32.

<sup>176</sup> Person specifications describe the essential attributes and qualities that are required of someone to perform well in a given position.

<sup>177</sup> Source: Q2 2006 IoD Business Opinion Survey. Fieldwork was conducted between 12 and 23 June 2006.

<sup>178</sup> Source: *Graduates’ employability skills* (IoD skills briefing, December 2007). A representative sample of 500 directors was surveyed on the IoD’s behalf by GfK NOP in October 2007. The paper is available on the IoD website at: [http://www.iod.com/intershoproot/eCS/Store/en/pdfs/policy\\_paper\\_graduates\\_employability\\_skills.pdf](http://www.iod.com/intershoproot/eCS/Store/en/pdfs/policy_paper_graduates_employability_skills.pdf).

<sup>179</sup> Source: *IoD Education Briefing Book 2008* (IoD, August 2008). A representative sample of 500 directors was surveyed on the IoD’s behalf by GfK NOP in June 2008. For the purposes of the survey, “young people” were taken to be those under the age of 25. The Briefing Book is available on the IoD website at: [http://www.iod.com/intershoproot/eCS/Store/en/pdfs/policy\\_paper\\_Edu\\_Briefing\\_Book\\_website.pdf](http://www.iod.com/intershoproot/eCS/Store/en/pdfs/policy_paper_Edu_Briefing_Book_website.pdf).

<sup>180</sup> *Beyond the honours degree classification. The Burgess Group final report* (Universities UK, October 2007), p. 5.

<sup>181</sup> *Beyond the honours degree classification. The Burgess Group final report* (Universities UK, October 2007), p. 43.

Were the summative judgement to be excised from the HEAR after such a period of “transition”, there would undoubtedly be a significant administrative cost for employers. Rather than having a single indicator supported by additional data, employers would be faced with a wealth of module marks and other performance data which would be much more challenging to interpret. This would not only be burdensome for those businesses recruiting for positions attracting multiple graduate applicants. It would also impact sharply on small businesses, which typically are not able to draw upon dedicated human resource support.<sup>182</sup> The move might also result in the unintended consequence of employers, faced with copious information which they struggle to decipher, placing increasing emphasis on the awarding institution as a differentiating factor.

10. The question is one of balance. There is no perfect system. It was clear from the Burgess Group’s analysis of international practice that a new system is not waiting to be parachuted in. Whilst the IoD remains convinced of the need to retain a summative judgement, therefore, it also supports the move to spread employer awareness of, and access to, greater information relating to students’ studies and achievements through the HEAR. This combination of approach enables the overall grade to be complemented and contextualised by a more detailed record of students’ accomplishments. As long as the HEAR itself is user-friendly—being concise, clear, and as standardised as possible—its contents will be of interest to employers.

11. In voicing support for the current classification system, the IoD simultaneously recognises that it is imperfect. It is valid and legitimate to flag areas of concern. Two particular issues seen from an employer’s perspective are the comparability of degrees and the increasing proportion of students awarded First class or Upper Second class degrees.

12. To take comparability first, the final report of the Burgess Group observed that as the UK higher education sector comprised a large number of autonomous institutions, themselves consisting of a wide range of different departments, variation in assessment and marking practices were “inevitable, and in many cases, both necessary and warranted.”<sup>183</sup> Amongst other points, the Group noted that:

- the distribution of degree classes varies between subject areas;
- the choice of assessment method (eg coursework versus examination) influences classification; and
- the method used to determine the classification influences the outcome, as do the particular regulations adopted by an institution in respect of assessments and awards.

13. Evidently, there are obvious questions about the genuine equivalence of degrees between institutions, departments and subjects. To add to the mix, a report by the Higher Education Policy Institute in 2006 also suggested significant differences in the workload of students at different institutions.<sup>184</sup> Of course, absolute equivalence is an unrealistic aim. That said, the IoD backs the recommendation of the Burgess report that the UK higher education sector should collectively consider how greater clarity and consistency could be brought to assessment practice. Efforts by universities to secure greater commonality of approach in the way that degrees are assessed—both between institutions and between subjects—would be welcomed by employers. Universities are independent, autonomous organisations and their right to set their own procedures must be respected. Nevertheless, there is an obvious gain in clarity that would benefit businesses and students alike. Finally, it should also be recognised that issues of consistency and comparability would not all be magically resolved by the phasing out of the current classification system.

14. The debate about the classification system also takes place against a backdrop of an increasing proportion of students attaining top degrees. According to the UK Data Archive, the proportion obtaining first class or upper second class degrees was 31.3% in 1972, 32.2% in 1977 and 34.2% in 1982.<sup>185</sup> Since then, the proportion of degrees being classified first or upper second class has risen steadily to reach 57% in 2006-07.<sup>186</sup> This can make it correspondingly more challenging for employers to distinguish between the best candidates, not dissimilar from the way in which an increasing proportion of students with good A level grades can make it more difficult for universities to select their own intake. But the appropriate response to this trend, in the IoD’s view, is not to remove the overall grade such as “A” at A level or “Upper Second” at degree level, but to offer greater insight into the achievements that make up this award as a complement to the summative judgement.<sup>187</sup>

<sup>182</sup> 74% of IoD members’ organisations with fewer than 50 employees have neither an HR department nor HR manager.

<sup>183</sup> *Beyond the honours degree classification. The Burgess Group final report* (Universities UK, October 2007), p. 25.

<sup>184</sup> B. Bekhradnia, C. Whitnall & T. Sastry, *The academic experience of students in English universities* (Higher Education Policy Institute, Report Summary 27, October 2006).

<sup>185</sup> Source: UK Data Archive. These are “ball park” figures as there may be continuity issues between pre-1995 figures (held by the Data Archive) and post-1995 figures (held by the Higher Education Statistics Agency). Information provided by a member of the Data and Support Services team, 13 October 2005.

<sup>186</sup> Source: “Qualifications Obtained” data tables, Higher Education Statistics Agency [http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com\\_datatables&Itemid=121&task=show\\_category&catdex=3](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_datatables&Itemid=121&task=show_category&catdex=3).

<sup>187</sup> The analogy perhaps ought not to be stretched too far, but the Government’s policy response to the increasing proportion of students getting excellent A level grades has been to seek to introduce greater “stretch” and new ways of recognising high achievement. The latter includes the introduction of a new starred A grade from 2010. In other words, the grade scale is being lengthened, not condensed or removed.

*IoD members' views on the quality of education provided by universities*

15. A further strand of the Committee's inquiry is the monitoring of degree standards and the level of confidence in the value of degrees awarded by universities in the UK. Clearly, the issue of quality in higher education is an extremely important one, particularly in the context of the forthcoming government review of tuition fees. If the fee cap is raised, this will only be tenable if the standard of provision remains high or, indeed, increases. Ultimately, price must reflect quality.

16. Over the course of the last year, the IoD has published two pieces of research giving an insight into businesses' perspective on the quality of education provided by universities, and of students themselves. Overall, IoD members are generally upbeat:

- 52% of directors surveyed in October 2007 said that their organisations recruited recent graduates. Of these, 71% were satisfied with their overall quality (12% dissatisfied); 68% were satisfied with their occupational and technical knowledge (9% dissatisfied); and 55% were satisfied with their wider employability skills (18% dissatisfied).<sup>188</sup>
- 51% of directors believe the quality of education provided by universities to be good or excellent; 35% to be average; and only 10% to be poor. This compares very favourably to directors' reflections on the performance of other areas of the education system (schools: 22% good/excellent; further education colleges: 31% good/excellent).<sup>189</sup>
- However, a greater proportion of directors believe that the quality of education provided by universities has declined (35%) since 1997 than believe it has improved (27%, with 32% believing it has stayed the same).<sup>190</sup> Again, however, this compares favourably to other areas of the education system. The fact that a significant minority of members believe that standards in higher education have deteriorated may, indeed, reflect their more pessimistic view of quality in the pre-university system.<sup>191</sup>

Thank you once again for giving the Institute of Directors the opportunity to submit evidence to the Committee's inquiry. We hope you find our comments useful. If you need any further information about the points raised in this submission, please do not hesitate to contact us. We have included a copy of the 2008 *IoD Education Briefing Book*, referenced in this paper, for your interest.

December 2008

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**Memorandum 57**

**Submission from the Open University**

**INTRODUCTION**

1. The Open University welcomes this inquiry into Students and Universities and believes this is an optimum time for the Committee to be exploring these relevant issues.

2. The Open University is, in effect, the UK's only national university and as such plays a significant role in higher education, not just because of the scale of its operation but because of the way in which it enables people with diverse educational backgrounds to participate in higher education.

3. The Open University would be pleased to supply further evidence, orally or in writing, on any of the issues identified in this response.

**SUMMARY**

3. In this submission the Open University has outlined its position in respect of the following issues:

- The Open University believes that government targets for participation will not be achievable without increasing the scale of part-time and flexible provision, and reviewing the support available to the part-time HE sector
- The Open University believes that removing the boundary between part-time and full-time and introducing a formal Credit Accumulation and Transfer system, would help to reduce non-completion rates in HE

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<sup>188</sup> Source: *Graduates' employability skills* (IoD skills briefing, December 2007). A representative sample of 500 directors was surveyed on the IoD's behalf by GfK NOP in October 2007. The paper is available on the IoD website at: [http://www.iod.com/intershoproot/eCS/Store/en/pdfs/policy\\_paper\\_graduates\\_employability\\_skills.pdf](http://www.iod.com/intershoproot/eCS/Store/en/pdfs/policy_paper_graduates_employability_skills.pdf).

<sup>189</sup> Source: *IoD Education Briefing Book 2008* (IoD, August 2008). A representative sample of 500 directors was surveyed on the IoD's behalf by GfK NOP in June 2008. The paper is available on the IoD website at: [http://www.iod.com/intershoproot/eCS/Store/en/pdfs/policy\\_paper\\_Edu\\_Briefing\\_Book\\_website.pdf](http://www.iod.com/intershoproot/eCS/Store/en/pdfs/policy_paper_Edu_Briefing_Book_website.pdf).

<sup>190</sup> Source: *IoD Education Briefing Book 2008* (IoD, August 2008).

<sup>191</sup> This is, in part, backed up by an IoD survey of 100 admissions tutors conducted earlier this year and included in the 2008 *IoD Education Briefing Book*. Although survey is evidently of a limited sample, and the results are a more complex affair than demonstrating a general perception of decline in standards, 72% of the admissions tutors surveyed thought that the quality of students beginning a university course in their department had either remained the same (32%), or had deteriorated (41%), over the course of their involvement with admissions.

- The Open University believes that government should review the whole ELQ policy and in the meantime should immediately offer exemption from the policy to all those who are in receipt of benefits.
- The Open University believes that government should undertake a fundamental root and branch review of university financing that sets us down the road of creating a single, unitary system of funding for higher education and lifelong learning.
- The Open University welcomes the fact that HEFCE has earmarked £5.7 million of funding for the period up to 2011 for open educational pilots, but believes that more investment and commitment will be required to ensure the good work done at the Open University, and elsewhere, is built on, and to help ensure UK HEIs are well positioned to compete in the global market for students.

#### ADMISSIONS

*The UK's ability to meet government targets for higher education participation and the relevance of these targets*

4. The Open University believes that government targets for participation will not be achievable without increasing the scale of part-time and flexible provision.

5. It is widely recognised that current targets cannot be met simply by activity at the point of Higher Education (HE) admission.

6. Aimhigher is now focusing on earlier stages of young people's school careers, particularly from age 14, but also at primary school level. And there is increasing evidence (eg the Gorard report)<sup>192</sup> that children's life outcomes are determined very early in life and that parents are the biggest single influence on these. So widening participation policies for HE need to be joined up with other aspects of the government's social exclusion agenda. And they need to build a culture of learning within families, encouraging the educational aspirations of parents as well as young people.

7. In addition, as the government has recently recognized, targets for participation in higher education should not focus exclusively on young people. The Leitch report has demonstrated that if we are to aspire to be a high skills economy we must give greater encouragement to lifelong learning and to workforce development.

8. The Open University agrees with the findings of Prof. Christine King<sup>193</sup> that flexible delivery would help the growth in participation:

*"Flexible delivery on campus, in the workplace, at a University Centre, in an FE college in cyberspace or in a combination of these is beneficial for both current and future full- and 'part-time' students and would encourage growth in participation and greater employer engagement."*

*The implementation and success of widening participation initiatives such as Compact Agreements, and the impact of the current funding regime on these objectives*

9. The Open University is not involved in Compact Agreements, but sees partnerships with intermediary organisations as critical to its work in recruiting and supporting mature "Widening Participation" students. These include national partnerships eg with the Workers Education Association (WEA), Unionlearn, Unison and the Royal College of Nursing (RCN). They are designed to enable those in work to progress in their chosen careers.

10. The Open University also has locally based partnerships with organisations which have objectives which are complementary in tackling social exclusion, community and voluntary sector groups, children's centres, extended schools and regeneration organisations in the areas of highest deprivation.

11. These local partnerships are resource intensive, but can be very effective at targeting potential students in lower socio-economic groups. There has been a steady increase in the Open University's recruitment of students from these groups<sup>194</sup> from 13.8% of new undergraduate students in 2004–5 to 15.8% in 2008–9 (latest figure).

12. HEFCE's proposals in its recent consultation on changes to the funding method "The future support for teaching enhancement and widening participation", to increase the weighting of widening access premium for students from the lowest quintile is a much more accurate recognition of the high level of resource required to recruit students from the most disadvantaged areas. But the consultation also contains

<sup>192</sup> "Overcoming the Barriers to Higher Education" 2007 by Stephen Gorard, Nick Adnett, Helen May, Kim Slack, Emma Smith, Liz Thomas. Trentham Books Ltd.

<sup>193</sup> "Part-Time Study in Higher Education" (para 32 p6). Prof. Christine King, Vice Chancellor & Chief Executive, Staffordshire University Sept 2008. Report commissioned by John Denham, Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills, as a contribution to his review of the future of the HE sector.  
[http://www.dius.gov.uk/policy/documents/part\\_time\\_studies\\_and\\_he\\_131008.pdf](http://www.dius.gov.uk/policy/documents/part_time_studies_and_he_131008.pdf)

<sup>194</sup> Defined as those who have no higher education and live in the 25% most deprived super output areas as defined by the index of multiple deprivation.



proposals to take funding away from retention activities and put it into widening participation activities. It seems counterproductive to reduce the funding available to support those students most in need of support as well as the support given to those HEIs most engaged in this work.

#### STUDENT SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

*The effectiveness of initiatives to support student engagement in the formulation of HE policy, and how the success or otherwise of these initiatives is being assessed*

13. The Open University does not believe there is strong evidence to suggest that initiatives to support student engagement in the formulation of HE policy have been effective and would like to see more evidence that such initiatives are being assessed.

*Strategies to reduce non-completion of HE programmes by part-time students*

14. The Open University has submitted a proposal to HEFCE which aims to increase the level of collaboration between HEIs. The “Shared Returns” project, a part of our “National Role” initiative, seeks to help non-completing students return to HE.

15. The Open University believes that, using its regionally based information, advice and guidance service, it can combine with other universities and with UCAS to offer students who are at risk of dropping out support and advice on the options open to them for continuing their studies. The Open University estimates that between 10 and 15% of non-completing students could be retained within the sector as a result of this programme. The written off cost to higher education of the withdrawal of a student is estimated at around £4,000, not including the fee paid by the student whilst the cost of retaining a student through this scheme is estimated at approximately £500.

16. The Shared Returns project will impact particularly strongly on students brought to HE through widening participation initiatives since these are disproportionately represented in the number of non-completing students. And vulnerable students will be supported at a time when they would otherwise drop out of HE by finding institutions better placed to meet their specific needs.

17. In a separate initiative, The Open University has been developing a generic model for analysing the learning experience of its own students, identifying strengths and gaps in provision and targeting proactive and reactive support at key points in the student learning journey. This has a number of stages:

- tracking the experience and progress of students using quantitative and qualitative data, insights into the student experience, and reported problems
- identifying areas of risk—key points or issues which impact on completion
- development of an action plan which identifies areas for improvement.

18. This approach was used within the Open University to develop a Learner Support Framework which aims to concentrate advice and services around 10 key activity areas in order to develop a coherent and holistic model of student support.

19. A key element has been the combination of reactive and proactive elements and evidence has been gathered which indicates that initiating personal contact, usually by telephone, at a number of stages in a course improves retention on an individual courses module and re-registration for a further module.

*Reasons for non-completion of higher education programmes by students*

20. The Open University believes that removing the boundary between part-time and full-time HE and thus making it easier for students to move between different intensities and patterns of study in line with their changing circumstances would help to reduce non-completion rates in HE.

21. The Open University also agrees with Prof Ramsden’s suggestion<sup>195</sup> that a system of credit based funding should be introduced in place of degree based funding as a necessary reform to effect the flexibility in the funding system which is now required.

22. The Open University believes that a formal Credit Accumulation and Transfer system, which could be built on existing practices for accreditation of prior and experiential learning would encourage more students to complete their studies, because they could vary the intensity and/or place of study.

*the adequacy of UK higher education (HE) funding and student support packages, and implications for current and future levels of student debt*

23. A significant proportion of part-time HE students incur debts, despite the fact that most (83%)<sup>196</sup> are in employment. The low level of financial support available to part-time students is a likely contributor to this situation.

24. At a time when the boundaries between full- and part-time study are rapidly breaking down, the Open University believes that the funding and student support packages available to part-time HE students should

<sup>195</sup> The Future of Higher Education Teaching and the Student Experience, Prof. Paul Ramsden, para 3.7 page 11 [http://www.dius.gov.uk/policy/documents/teaching\\_and\\_student\\_experience\\_131008.pdf](http://www.dius.gov.uk/policy/documents/teaching_and_student_experience_131008.pdf)

<sup>196</sup> Callender, C *et al.* (2006) Part-time research strand 3: A survey of students’ attitudes and experiences of part-time study and its costs.

be enhanced to bring them more into line with the support available to full-time students. With four out of ten HE students officially classed as part-time the disparity between the support made available to full-time and part-time students needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

25. In a policy briefing issued in 2006 UniversitiesUK highlighted the financial challenges faced by part-time students;

*“All the evidence indicates that the majority of part-time students pay their own fees up-front or through a series of instalments. Fee levels (together with the availability of financial support for fees for poorer students) are therefore the major factor in determining the future demand for part-time higher education provision in the UK”.*<sup>197</sup>

*“Government should re-examine public support for part-time students, including eligibility criteria. A high proportion of part-time students do not gain any benefit from the public support packages potentially available to them, and these packages often do not meet the overall costs of being a part-time student...”*<sup>198</sup>

26. In 2007 the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee also questioned the distinction between full-time and part-time students:

*“As participation in higher education has increased, so the nature of the student body has changed. Forty per cent of students are defined as studying part time. Full time students, however, work on average 14 hours a week in paid employment, and 20% work more than 20 hours a week. It is hard to see how someone employed for 20 hours or more each week can be defined as a full time student; yet those students have access to the full range of student support denied to others defined as part time.”*<sup>199</sup>

*“The distinction between part time and full time students for the purpose of fee and income support is now so blurred as to be no longer sustainable. We recommend that the Government reviews as a matter of urgency the current arrangements for fee support payable to institutions for part time students and the availability of support for part time students themselves. For the future, we believe that students should be seen as one group with a variety of needs for support rather than being arbitrarily divided into categories of part time and full time.”*<sup>200</sup>

27. The Open University believes that HEFCE’s decision to phase out funding for most students in England studying for an HE qualification, equivalent to, or lower than, a qualification they already have (an ELQ) will make HEIs more reluctant to offer courses to such students as the HEIs will not receive any finance from HEFCE to cover the cost of educating these students. And those ELQ students who do choose to study may incur far greater debts than they otherwise would do.

28. The Open University believes that many more prospective students will be affected by the ELQ decision than HEFCE originally envisaged when they announced the policy. And whilst HEFCE cannot have predicted that the UK economy would be entering a recession when they devised the policy this is not a good time to be withdrawing support for many thousands of prospective students, many of whom may be unemployed or at risk of redundancy and looking to prepare for new jobs in often new industries.

29. The Open University believes that government should not only review the whole ELQ policy but should immediately offer exemption from the policy to all those who are in receipt of benefits.

30. Finally, The Open University trusts that the government will honour the undertaking it gave during the passage of the HE Bill in 2004 to review in 2009 not only the impact of variable fees on full-time students but also the system of financing part-time study. Part-time providers have not been able to increase their undergraduate fees to the levels now being charged by full-time providers because part-time students do not have access to the publicly-subsidised financial support arrangements that make these fees affordable to full-time students. Consequently, The Open University has received no benefit from the extra resource flowing into other parts of the HE sector, even though it is subject to the same cost pressures and investment needs as other universities. We urgently need a fundamental root and branch review of university financing that sets us down the road of creating a single, unitary system of funding for higher education and lifelong learning.

<sup>197</sup> UniversitiesUK (2006) Policy briefing. Part-time students in higher education—supporting higher level skills and lifelong learning (section 3.12)

<sup>198</sup> UniversitiesUK (2006) Policy briefing. Part-time students in higher education—supporting higher level skills and lifelong learning (conclusions p10)

<sup>199</sup> House of Commons Education and Skills Committee; The future sustainability of the higher education sector: international aspects. Eighth Report of Session 2006–07 (para 32 p14). <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmselect/cmeduski/285/285i.pdf>

<sup>200</sup> House of Commons Education and Skills Committee; The future sustainability of the higher education sector: international aspects. Eighth Report of Session 2006–07 (para 34 p15) <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmselect/cmeduski/285/285i.pdf>

*any further action required by the Government and/or HEFCE to ensure that UK HEIs offer students a world class educational experience*

31. The Open University recognizes that government, HEIs and HEFCE have to work in partnership in order to offer students a world class educational experience. Student expectation levels are greater than they have ever been and with greater participation comes greater student diversity. As Prof Ramsden pointed out;<sup>201</sup>

*“A greater variety of types of students has inevitably increased the range of expectations—students with caring responsibilities, students who are less well prepared academically, less able, or less independent as learners, students living at home, students working significant hours off-campus in paying jobs, students with a disability, students learning in the workplace, international students whose first language is not English, and so on.”*

32. The Open University believes that government and HEFCE policy and decision making should be carried out following proper consultation with the HE sector and that there should be greater recognition of the diversity within the HE sector when formulating policy and making decisions.

33. Developing innovative teaching methods, especially those which utilize the latest technical advances, requires sufficient financial commitment. The Open University welcomes the fact that HEFCE has already allocated funding for open educational pilots, with monies earmarked until 2011, but believes that more investment and commitment will be required to ensure the good work done at the Open University and elsewhere is built on, and to help ensure UK HEIs are well positioned to compete in the global market for students.

34. The Open University is currently pioneering the use of open access course materials<sup>202</sup> and is ideally placed to become a national centre for open access learning. But creating such a centre would require long term financial investment to overcome obstacles such as intellectual property rights issues.

35. The Open University has submitted a proposal to HEFCE which aims to increase the level of collaboration between HEIs in this regard. The SCORE project—creating a Support Centre for Open Resources in Education—forms part of our wider “National Role” initiative. The Open University believes that given adequate support from HEFCE, it can promote and lead a collaboration between institutions in the development of educational resources and services that will not only enhance teaching quality and the learning experience but also drive down the cost of course development in participating institutions. It will also enhance the international brand of the UK higher education sector. To do this, the Open University plans to establish a national centre, SCORE to identify and promote good practice and effective strategies across the sector. SCORE will draw on aspects of the CETL model. It will run programmes of workshops and events across the country which will build understanding of OERs and their benefits to teaching within higher education.

January 2009

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## Memorandum 58

### Submission from the Edge Foundation

The Edge Foundation is a charity and company limited by guarantee. Our aim is to make the case for practical learning, by which we mean learning by doing, for real. The Foundation funds projects which develop or demonstrate good practice in practical learning, and seeks to improve perceptions of practical learning in the eyes of young people, teachers, parents and the general public.

#### SUMMARY

- Higher education is much more diverse than the inquiry’s terms of reference seem to suggest. HE is about more than just degrees, it’s as much for adults as for young people, it’s about part-time study as well as full-time courses, and it’s offered by many further education colleges as well as universities.
- We need to challenge the widespread belief that academic qualifications such as A levels are the only route into HE. The belief arises partly because –
  - many HE admissions tutors do favour academic qualifications such as A levels and discriminate against vocational qualifications such as NVQs. We need a national programme to improve admissions tutors’ knowledge of apprenticeships and vocational qualifications.

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<sup>201</sup> The Future of Higher Education Teaching and the Student Experience, Paul Ramsden, para 1.6 page 3 [http://www.dius.gov.uk/policy/documents/teaching\\_and\\_student\\_experience\\_131008.pdf](http://www.dius.gov.uk/policy/documents/teaching_and_student_experience_131008.pdf)

<sup>202</sup> The OU’s OpenLearn materials were accessed 1.7 million times in 18 months—overwhelmingly by users outside the UK.

- school teachers and careers advisors don't appreciate just how many adults enrol on HE courses after successfully completing vocational programmes. UCAS and HEFCE should collect and disseminate data about part-time HE students so that the full facts are more widely known.
- Apprentices should be encouraged to progress into HE. To make this happen, apprenticeship frameworks should be included in the UCAS tariff, and apprentices should be offered extra help (if they need it) with skills such as essay writing.
- The Government should change the HE participation target to apply to all adults, not just people below the age of 30.
- HE provision should be fully flexible to meet the needs of adults. For example, there should be more weekend tuition, plus greater use of credit accumulation and transfer so that adults can study in different places over a period of time.
- All students—not just those studying for explicitly vocational qualifications such as a degree in medicine—should have the opportunity to learn by doing for real, by which we mean practising their knowledge and skills in a real-world setting.
- Employers should be involved in the design and delivery of every degree-level qualification, not just explicitly vocational degrees.
- Higher-level NVQs should be treated as mainstream HE qualifications.

#### INTRODUCTION: A COMMENT ON THE SCOPE OF THE INQUIRY

1. The Committee's invitation to submit evidence on students and universities appears to limit the scope of the inquiry in some important ways:

- the title of the inquiry, "Students and Universities", seems to overlook the growing role of further education colleges in the provision of higher education (HE)
- the call for evidence contains an implicit emphasis on first full (bachelors) degrees, particularly in the section headed "degree classification", to the exclusion of other HE programmes
- in the context of admissions to HE, the call for evidence refers to A-levels, Advanced Diplomas, apprenticeships and university entrance tests: these are, of course, not the only route into HE
- the call for evidence mentions "government targets for Higher Education participation", which relate to participation by people under the age of 30; participation in HE is increasingly important for adults of all ages.

2. It is of course very sensible to limit the scope of the inquiry in some way: an entirely open-ended inquiry would be unmanageable! However, it is not clear whether these particular restrictions have been arrived at deliberately. Either way, we are worried that they may reinforce –

- a widespread bias in favour of what might be called "traditional" first degree programmes
- an assumption that "HE" and "university" are synonyms, and
- a belief that HE is something which people do soon after they leave school.

3. In practice, the scope and role of HE is much broader and more diverse than the call for evidence might suggest. Many of our comments (below) reflect this broader view.

4. We will comment only on those aspects of the Committee's inquiry where we have a particular point of view.

#### *Effectiveness of the process for admission to Higher Education Institutions, and the role of the Government in developing and promoting fair access and admissions policies for the UK Higher Education sector*

5. One of DIUS's three core priorities for the future of HE is that HEIs should work to widen participation beyond young people leaving school or college with good A levels. It is particularly important for DIUS to lead the way in promoting progression to HE from apprenticeships and other vocational programmes.

6. However, it is currently very difficult for young people to progress to university unless they have conventional "academic" qualifications such as A levels. There are three main reasons for this:

- very few apprenticeship frameworks are recognised in the UCAS tariff system
- very few admissions tutors recognise the potential of young people who have completed competency-based apprenticeships: they are much more familiar with A levels and other knowledge-based qualifications
- few apprenticeship frameworks develop generic skills needed by new entrants to HE, such as essay writing, research and debating skills; and some do not develop specific skills needed for progression to HE (eg A level maths is generally required for entry to a degree level programme in engineering, but is not a compulsory element of the engineering apprenticeship framework).

7. As a result of these factors, it is not surprising that only 2–4% of apprentices currently progress to higher education.<sup>203</sup>

8. To help improve progression from apprenticeships to HE, Edge recommends that:

- (i) apprentices should have the option to undertake an access to HE course alongside, or after completing, their apprenticeship
- (ii) all level 3 qualifications (including NVQs) should be included in the UCAS Tariff, and DIUS should fund UCAS to develop a “points calculator” to give credit for completing an apprenticeship framework
- (iii) admissions tutors should not discriminate against vocational qualifications, nor in favour of academic qualifications such as A levels; and there should be a national programme of continuous professional development to improve admissions tutors’ knowledge of apprenticeships and vocational qualifications
- (iv) the Government should introduce a national bursary scheme for students who enter HE following an Apprenticeship or other vocational programme at level 3

9. It is too soon to know whether admissions tutors will routinely discriminate against young people who gain new Diplomas. However, 65% of HE applications made by A Level students are successful, compared with 11% from BTec students:<sup>204</sup> this is surely a powerful warning for the future, as is the NAO’s comment that “The absence of clear progression pathways for non-academic qualifications in England marks a clear distinction from the other countries [we have] studied.”<sup>205</sup>

10. Indeed, we are concerned that some HEIs are already suggesting that some diplomas will not equip students for HE. Accordingly, Edge suggests that:

- (v) the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills, Sector Skills Councils and the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals, should –
  - a. review HEIs’ policies on admitting students who hold qualifications other than A levels and
  - b. recommend ways to overcome admissions tutors’ reservations.

11. Taking a slightly wider view, there is a real need for better information, advice and guidance (IAG), to counter prejudice against vocational learning among teachers and careers staff. Such prejudice currently results in many young people being steered away from vocational options, because adults believe other options (eg A levels) are the only guaranteed route into HE. Edge recommends that –

- (vi) UCAS and HEFCE should collect and disseminate data about the characteristics of part-time HE students: this will demonstrate that a high proportion of adult students do not hold A levels or other “academic” qualifications when they first enter HE

12. Finally, admissions policies should encourage participation and progression amongst adults of any age: we comment further on this point in the next section.

*The UK’s ability to meet government targets for Higher Education participation and the relevance of these targets*

13. The Government’s principal target is for 50% of young people to participate in HE before the age of 30.

14. We support the Government’s view that “participation” can take many forms, from a short part-time course to a full-time degree programme. It is a pity that so many commentators fail to understand this point.

15. However, we see no reason to limit the participation target to a particular age group. A total of 12 million adults in the workforce (69%) have qualifications below level 4. According to recent research, 30% would consider going to university at some time in the future and 6% were already seriously considering this option.<sup>206</sup>

16. Edge therefore recommends that –

- (vii) the Government should no longer limit its participation target to people under the age of 30 and should instead actively encourage entry to HE at any age.

17. There are, of course, some barriers to adult participation in HE (and other forms of learning, for that matter). Adults often have additional responsibilities—for example, as parents and carers—which make full-time participation very difficult.

<sup>203</sup> Source: University Vocational Awards Council.

<sup>204</sup> Source: UCAS.

<sup>205</sup> National Audit Office: “Partnering for success: preparing to deliver the 14–19 education reforms in England”, 2007.

<sup>206</sup> University is Not Just for Young People: Working Adults’ Perceptions of an Orientation to Higher Education, DIUS Research Report 2008.

18. There are already opportunities to study at home, notably through the Open University and learndirect, and many HEIs (including FE colleges) offer part-time programmes which include evening classes. Digital and web-based technologies are helping to transform the ways HEIs can deliver learning, so that high-quality learning can be delivered off-campus at a time and location of a learner's choosing, while maintaining close links with the HEI "hub".

19. That said, there is still some way to go before HE offers a fully flexible approach to learning. For example, HEIs should be challenged to teach more part-time students on Saturdays and Sundays, as well as Monday to Friday, and to accelerate the development of innovative and flexible teaching methods.

20. In addition:

- (viii) it should be much easier to study for units at more than one institution (eg at a Further Education college, a university, via learndirect, and so on), over an extended time period. To support this, there should be –
- (ix) greater consistency in the use of credit accumulation and transfer frameworks; for work-related HE, these frameworks should be developed and overseen by Sector Skills Councils.

#### *The balance between teaching and research in UK HEIs*

21. Current government policy places too much emphasis on research, sometimes at the expense of teaching. Accordingly, Edge recommends that:

- (x) every HE institution should publish a statement of its core mission, setting out very clearly whether it wishes to be regarded as –
  - a research-led institution
  - a teaching-led institution
  - a hybrid.

22. Funding formulae should recognise the mission of each type of HEI. For teaching-led institutions, there should be additional incentives to broaden the range of courses and qualifications offered to students, particularly to promote part-time and short courses for adults.

#### *The quality of teaching provision*

23. The Government, HEFCE and QAA view of teaching and learning is, we believe, too narrow. It focuses too closely on the quality of the teaching which takes place within the confines of the HEI, and tends to underplay the importance of learning which takes place elsewhere.

24. Knowledge gained in the lecture theatre or the library is never enough on its own: students need opportunities to practise what they learn. This is obvious in some contexts, but less so in others. Medical students' performance in examinations is a poor predictor of their clinical skill, for example, and medical schools therefore provide a large amount of work-based learning for all their students.

25. However, work-based learning is entirely absent in many other HE courses. Practice, or the practical application of knowledge, is too often rooted in the classroom, the desk exercise and the case study. Edge believes that –

- (xi) all students—not just those studying for explicitly vocational qualifications such as a degree in medicine and surgery—should have the opportunity to learn by doing for real, by which we mean practising their knowledge and skills in a real-world setting
- (xii) access to opportunities to learn by doing should be monitored and reported on by the QAA

26. "Learning by doing" will include students developing their own real-world projects (eg drama students producing and performing their work before a live audience, management students setting up their own business, etc), but must also include working with people, businesses, charities and other organisations outside the HEI, in real work settings. All "learning by doing" should support—and explicitly count toward—the award of higher education qualifications.

27. To support this, HE teaching staff should themselves be required to spend a meaningful amount of time in work placements outside their institution, in order to refresh their knowledge and understanding of modern working practices and the skills needed by employers.

28. Edge strongly believes that employers should have much greater influence over the structure and content of HE courses. At present, some HEIs concentrate on attracting students to courses they want to offer, and neglect the needs of the wider labour market. At the same time, many students believe that HE automatically opens the door to a graduate-level job and to a lifetime earnings premium: although this may be true on average, it has ceased to be true for *some* disciplines and *some* HE departments.

29. Employers are already closely associated with some HE programmes. It would be inconceivable for an HEI to offer a degree in medicine without the active support of the NHS, and most engineering departments have excellent relationships with individual employers and their professional bodies. However, many courses—especially in the arts and social sciences—are designed and delivered with little or no input from employers. Edge strongly recommends that –

- (xiii) no degree-level qualification should be awarded unless employers have been involved in its design, and HEIs should be required to involve employers in the delivery of every programme at Foundation Degree or first degree level. Employer involvement in the design of degree-level programmes should be led by Sector Skills Councils, co-ordinated by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills

#### *The quality of learning facilities*

30. There has been sustained investment in HE facilities (including FE colleges) over the last decade. This is very welcome, and many campuses readily stand comparison with the best in the world. Our reservation is that some of the investment in facilities has been too timid and conventional.

31. In order to raise the status of vocational learning, provide clear progression routes and improve the employability of students, Edge recommends that –

- (xiv) providers of HE should be funded to develop new centres of vocational excellence, endorsed by employers.

32. Wherever possible, centres of vocational excellence should be co-located with relevant businesses (or public and third sector employers). Alternatively, they should operate as businesses in their own right.

33. For example, Edge has agreed to sponsor a hotel school which will be run by the University of Essex and Colchester Institute. The new venture has the full support of leading employers and is part of the National Hospitality Skills Academy set up by People 1st, the Sector Skills Council for hospitality and tourism. It will offer 5\* service to paying customers, and will enable students to study for HE qualifications through a combination of work-based learning and off-the-job lectures, seminars and projects. Students will be able to enrol at three points in the year, and to progress more rapidly than they would in a more conventional HE setting.

34. We believe the Edge Hotel School will be a template for other centres of vocational excellence, not just in hospitality, but in many sectors of the economy.

#### *Degree classification*

35. We do not wish to comment on this issue, except to repeat our earlier comment: the inquiry places an undue emphasis on degrees. HE must provide a broad range of opportunities if it is to make a full contribution to the skills and knowledge needed by the UK workforce in the 21st century.

#### *Further action required by the Government and/or HEFCE to ensure that UK HEIs offer students a world class educational experience*

36. It is important to see learning as a process which may or may not be linear. The conventional view is that someone who has completed a level 2 qualification will progress to level 3, and then on to level 4 or 5. In practice, someone who has completed a level 5 qualification might legitimately follow this with a fresh period of learning at level 2 or 3.

37. Treating further and higher education as separate phases, with separate qualification frameworks, is therefore both unhelpful and unrealistic. There should be more and better integration between qualification frameworks and types of institution. As noted earlier, there should also be opportunities to study for individual units over an extended period—that is, a series of “bite size” opportunities which could lead to the award of a full qualification at a later date. This would also help many employers, especially small and medium-sized businesses, to develop the skills and knowledge of their workforce.

38. We would like to see greater recognition of work-based learning as a means of developing higher-level skills and knowledge. In partnership with the University Vocational Awards Council, Edge is supporting HE@Work, which is working with employers and universities to find ways to give academic recognition to workplace learning and make it easier for working people to gain undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications.

39. Linked with this, it is wrong that NVQs at level 4 and 5 sit outside the core list of HE qualifications, because this suggests that they are inferior to other higher-level awards. Edge recommends that –

- (xv) higher-level NVQs should be routinely offered by HEIs, both alone and in tandem with other qualifications, with the active support, encouragement and funding of HEFCE.

**Memorandum 59****Submission from Nigel Dyer**

I am writing in response to your request for information on the “dumbing down” of universities. I have had very specific experience of the changes that have taken place in that 25 years after obtaining a degree in engineering I have returned to university to obtain an MSc in Biological Sciences and so I am studying alongside students who have come through the system a generation later. An additional perspective comes from the experience of my son doing double maths, physics, chemistry A-levels as I did one generation earlier.

My experience is very much that standards have dropped over the 25 year period and I would like to pick out two amongst many significant changes I have noticed.

The first involves student’s maths abilities. At the start of my MSc we did a maths assessment, and of the 20 or so students, some of whom had just completed maths degrees, I came top (albeit only by a few percent). As I had not been using this maths in my work for the previous 25 years, I was a little rusty, so I should not have come top. The fact that I did immediately rang alarm bells.

I had been monitoring my sons progress at school, and had got the impression that hole swathes of maths have now disappeared from the school curriculum (with little extra maths in its place from what I could see). As my university course progressed, this impression was reinforced, and much of what I had learnt at school now had to be taught at University, inevitably pushing out other material that would otherwise have been taught. This is one reason why students will not be as advanced at the end of their degrees as they were a generation earlier.

Examples of topics that have moved from school to University include vectors, matrixes and set theory, all of which are essential to much of what we needed to cover in the MSc, and which are now only covered in optional further maths modules at school, which many of the students on my course had not done. We had to rush through the basics of these topics in a very unsatisfactory way at the start of the MSc. I covered much of this in the early years of the secondary school and have the exercise books to prove it.

I became aware of another reduction in standards when I saw the work my son did for his Physics A level. When I did my physics A-level, I gained extensive experience in performing and writing up experiments; 20 or so of which were submitted as assessed coursework (Again, I still have my notebooks to prove this). In contrast, when my son did his A-level, only one or two experiments were done and written up in this way.

Consequently I entered University far more experience in general principles of experimental technique, something I believe I have retained, and this difference between myself and my cohort during the MSc was very clear. (During the intervening 25 years I had not been doing this sort of work, so a large amount of the difference I believe comes from our school and University work).

My course involves taking exams at the end of each module, and I became aware that there was a distinct difference in the exams compared to what I was used to 25 years earlier. I felt now I was being led through the problem step by step, rather than having to work out all the steps unprompted. It was this that was a major factor in the fact I was able to come top in the initial exam, and is symptomatic of the fact that students are less equipped to tackle new problems than they used to be, a significant drawback when it comes to further research. A number of the course tutors have lamented the poor problem solving ability of students.

I was interested to see that this change in the style of exam questions has been noticed by others and the results of the five decade exam challenge set by the Royal Society of Chemistry seem to align closely with my experience.

A further area where I have felt there has been a reduction in standards is when I have taken modules where there are considerable numbers of students from all around the world. The varying abilities of the students, and their poor English meant that I had the impression at time that things had to be pitched at the lowest common denominator. I was interested to hear that one of my lecturers was being asked to slow his lectures down so that the significant number of Chinese students could follow what he was saying. His speed was fine for native English speakers, so I would assume that any slowing down will have an impact on the material covered.

There are other ways in which I have become aware that there has been a reduction of standards in the education system, but I felt these were some of the more telling examples.

I look forward to the outcome of your enquiry, which will no doubt conclude that there has been no reduction in standards.

*December 2008*

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## Memorandum 60

### Submission from the 1994 Group

#### 1. SUMMARY

1.1 Higher Education has been undergoing significant changes over the past decade, and no group has been more affected by these changes than students. With the growth since the 1980s of the UK HE marketplace, enhanced in recent years by changes to the full-time undergraduate fee system in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, students are becoming more conscious of the quality of experience they receive.

1.2 The challenge for universities is to keep abreast of the shifting expectations of an increasingly diverse and informed student population and to adjust accordingly to provide the best possible experience to each of them. This is a challenge not only for universities but also for policy-makers and all student-facing groups across the sector if UK HE is to continue to be one of the leading higher education providers in the world.

1.3 It is important for universities and Government to emphasise the importance of higher education as a key stage of development for people of all backgrounds and that the relationship between student and university is one of partnership, a two-way contribution to develop and enhance a person's knowledge and skills and prepare them to become important contributors to society.

1.4 The good news is that students continue to be excited and engaged by higher education and continue to see it as an important stage in their own development. In light of variable fees applications to HE have continued to rise and many recent student surveys have indicated that students are satisfied and engaged with their university life. Institutions in receipt of variable tuition fees have launched ambitious investment plans designed to meet the increased expectations of students. This has included enhancing faculty numbers, teaching resources and student accommodation. The move to a regulated student marketplace has been a success.

1.5 However, students find themselves in a swiftly changing environment and the future of higher education contains some large challenges for them, for universities and for Government. Institutional investment in student support, scholarships and bursaries to widen participation and to attract the very best students from all backgrounds, places increased expectations on institutions to perform within this new market environment. Universities must also demonstrate continued and strengthened commitment to providing excellent teaching, support and facilities in order to ensure that the experience of university life continues to be as appealing to students as it has been in the past decade. They must achieve this within a relatively constrained funding environment. Furthermore, these funding constraints vary across the UK, with the devolved systems facing similar expectations from students as in England but receiving different levels of resource to meet them.

#### 2. ABOUT THE 1994 GROUP

2.1 The 1994 Group brings together eighteen internationally renowned, student-focused, research-intensive universities. The Group provides a central vehicle to help members promote their common interests in higher education, respond efficiently to key policy issues, and share best methods and practice.

2.2 The National Student Survey results published on 11 September 2008 confirmed that, for the fourth successive year, the 1994 Group had emerged as the leading group of universities. Some 88% of students in the Group's 18 member universities said they were satisfied with the student experience compared to a national average of 83%. 1994 Group member universities were rated above average in each of the six categories surveyed. This includes Teaching, where they received 88% positive responses (sector average 83%) and Organisation and Management 81% (sector average 73%). The average for 1994 Group member universities for all six categories was 80% (sector average 76%).

2.3 Member universities are: University of Bath, Durham University, University of East Anglia, University of Essex, University of Exeter, Birkbeck University of London, Goldsmiths 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.

#### 3. ADMISSIONS

3.1 The 1994 Group welcomes the work undertaken by the National Council for Educational Excellence to identify mechanisms by which the links between schools and colleges can be enhanced and for better support to be given to schools to raise the aspirations of their pupils to apply to the most selective universities. Effective engagement with schools and colleges is key to the efforts of the most selective universities to increase and widen participation. If we are successfully to reach out to applicants from all backgrounds there is a need for a wider availability of information about university admissions requirements and about the nature of the student experience. This will better inform the life-changing decisions that pupils are making.

3.2 We also welcome the recommendation that data on the predictability of the award of the A\* grade be collected and reviewed before it is used by universities in the applications process. The Group has expressed concern at the potential impact of the introduction of the A\* grade on the admissions practices of research-intensive universities. It is right, given these concerns, that the impact of the A\* grade be fully evaluated before universities start using it.

3.3 In recognition of the importance of the government's curriculum reforms and as part of our strong commitment to the student experience, in January 2007, the Group launched a joint project with the DCSF to assess the impact of the changes to 14–19 education on our member institutions. The resulting report, published in January 2008,<sup>207</sup> provided the empirical evidence needed to inform policy discussions and plan more detailed consideration of the reforms. Equally, the report provided to government a critical and informed assessment of how the reform package is likely to interact with, and influence, the dynamics of undergraduate admissions.

3.4 During 2007 senior staff and admissions tutors at member universities were surveyed for their thoughts on the reforms and their impact on admissions patterns. The main conclusions were that:

- the award of the A\* grade at A-level would allow research-intensive universities across the board to select with more discrimination among applicants. However, as detailed in paragraph 3.2 above, there were some concerns that the new A\* award might have an impact on the social composition of the undergraduate population in these universities;
- 1994 Group universities were likely to take a close interest in applicants who have taken an Extended Project, either as a mandatory part of their Diploma studies or alongside awards such as AS and A2 at A-level;
- it seemed very likely that almost all 1994 Group universities would be in a position to accept applicants completing Diplomas onto undergraduate courses from 2010 and that, as such, the government's aim of establishing Diploma study as a route from school or college to higher education for a number of "the most capable students preparing for the most demanding university courses" will be achieved. Subsequently, all member institutions confirmed that they would be willing to accept applications from Diploma students for 2010 entry.

3.5 The 1994 Group supports the implementation of Progression Accords as an effective means to develop and maintain productive engagement between FECs/Diploma Consortia and Universities. Progression Accords provide a means to initiate and embed good practice in the management of progression to HE helping to ensure that Diploma and other FE learners are well prepared for the HE learning experience.

#### 4. THE BALANCE BETWEEN TEACHING AND RESEARCH

4.1 1994 Group institutions are amongst the most research-intensive in the UK and research-led teaching is key to their mission. They operate in the strong belief that there is a clear connection between excellent and innovative research and the highest quality teaching and they offer their students the opportunity to learn in a research-enriched community.

4.2 Research Assessment is, and must continue to be, about supporting research excellence, wherever this is found. Excellence is primarily measured by research output, and there must be peer oversight of the assessment process. The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) has enabled the UK to prove its demonstrable excellence in research in all fields of study. We have strongly supported the Government's desire to reform the RAE in order to lighten the burden on Higher Education Institutions but have emphasised that such reform must strengthen, not weaken, our ability to demonstrate the excellence of UK research. The RAE allows reliable comparisons to be made between subject units, institutions, and countries. It is essential that this aspect is preserved in the Research Excellence Framework (REF) if the UK is to retain its position as a world leader in higher education research. There should be a continuing role for higher education institutions and HEFCE in the development and operation of the revised assessment and funding system and the revised assessment system should be based on a commitment from Government that the dual funding system for research will be maintained.

4.3 With undergraduate students now behaving more like consumers in a market place, it is essential that there is a mechanism by which they can assess the relative qualities of Higher Education institutions and the courses they offer. The National Student Survey offers students the information they require to make such a value judgement. The 1994 Group values highly the feedback and opinions of its students, and so takes the National Student Survey extremely seriously. At the Group's institutions the survey is used as a tool for identifying problem areas and much effort is going into evaluating and improving these in the hope that the student experience can be enhanced in the future. The 1994 Group supports the continuation and further development of the National Student Survey and strongly recommends that a postgraduate taught student survey is developed.

<sup>207</sup> "New Foundations, Enduring Values: Undergraduate Education, Research-intensive Universities and the Government's Reforms of 14-19 Education in England." Findings from a research project funded by the DCSF and the 1994 Group. Available at: <http://www.1994group.ac.uk/documents/public/NewFoundationsEnduringValues.pdf>

## 5. DEGREE CLASSIFICATIONS

We welcome the recommendation of the Burgess Report that degree classifications be examined and potentially restructured, following a complete review of assessment systems, and possibly replaced by a degree transcript and summative judgement. We take very seriously the conclusion that appropriate change is needed to the degree classification system to maximise its usefulness to students and employers, and are committed to playing our part in effecting that change. Our member institutions are studying the report in depth to assess the detailed implications of its recommendations.

## 6. STUDENT SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

### 6.1 *The effectiveness of initiatives to support student engagement in the formulation of HE policy, and how the success or otherwise of these initiatives is being assessed*

6.1.1 The changing environment of fees and expectations has brought the nature of the relationship between student and university into focus. As the marketplace develops, there is certainly a growing need to encourage and consider the “student voice”. There is a growing importance for universities and Government to listen to the opinions of students through forums and surveys, and acknowledge their role as “change agents” when updating policy approaches to teaching and learning, student support and any other aspects which affect their experience of university. This has begun to be recognised by Government by the very welcome creation of a Minister for Students in October 2007 and the formation of an independent National Student Forum which advises ministers on student issues.

6.1.2 There is an increased responsibility on institutions to work in close partnership with the NUS in recognition of its role as the national voice of students, as well as with local students’ unions in their role as the voice of students on campus and providers of many aspects of the non-academic student experience. Student unions are, of course, independent organisations but there needs to be a carefully managed partnership between universities and students’ unions if we are going to deliver and meet the highest standards which are increasingly expected of us.

### 6.2 *Examples of reasons for, and potential strategies to reduce, the non-completion of higher education programmes by students*

6.2.1 Specific stages of early university life such as the admissions process, the open day, the welcome week and the first lecture are vital stages in the development of a strong relationship between student and university, which works to greatly enhance the chances of retention. From an HE Academy survey examining the experience of first year students in HE, it appears 41% of students who knew little or nothing about their course before enrolment had thought of withdrawing, compared with 25% of those who knew a moderate amount or a lot.<sup>208</sup> The Government must work closely with universities to ensure that proper information, advice and guidance is available to prospective students. The Group strongly endorses the recommendations of the NCEE to improve provision in this area and enhance aspiration at school level.

6.2.2 The 1994 Group’s November 2007 “Enhancing the Student Experience Report”<sup>209</sup> suggested that a strong link exists between engagement in co-curricular activity and high levels of student satisfaction and retention. It also highlighted the need to conduct further research to evaluate in more detail these programmes in order to understand this link more fully. Some examples of current practice are detailed below.

- (i) Accreditation of co-curricular activity through co-curricular transcripts is at varying stages of development at each 1994 Group institution. The Leicester Award for Employability Skills is a 20 week programme for up to 150 students involved in work-related extra-curricular activities including paid or voluntary employment, enterprise or Students’ Union activities. The Award provides an opportunity for them to reflect on, develop and gain recognition for their broader life or work experiences by participating in learning activities, pursuing an active programme of personal development, and gaining an accredited qualification. Similarly, the York Award, the University of York’s certificate of personal development, provides a framework within which students can reflect on their experiences in work, volunteering, study and personal interests. It enables students to identify the personal development resulting from these activities and builds their abilities to articulate this to future employers. For 2008-09, the University of Exeter has introduced the framework of the Exeter Award to recognize its students extra-curricular activities. Designed to build scale, 2400 students have currently enrolled on the Award. A second Award, the Exeter Leader Award, will be introduced in January 2009 and is designed to recognize stretch and challenge.
- (ii) It is also important to examine case studies which do not necessarily have accreditation attached, but nonetheless play a large part in the experience and retention of students, as well as enhancing their employability. An example of this would be the large-scale volunteering services at institutions, such as “Community Action” at Exeter. This service involves around 600 students and has been adopted

<sup>208</sup> “The First Year Experience Survey”, HEA 2006. See: <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/FYEsurvey.htm>

<sup>209</sup> “Enhancing the Student Experience”, 1994 Group Policy Report, November 2007. Available at: <http://www.1994group.ac.uk/documents/public/SEPolicyReport.pdf>

as a model of best practice by the Higher Education Active Community Fund (HEACF). Student volunteers at Exeter gave 100,000 hours of service last year to disadvantaged people in the city—the equivalent of 70 full-time voluntary sector workers.

### 6.3 *The adequacy of UK higher education (HE) funding and student support packages, and implications for current and future levels of student debt*

6.3.1 International and postgraduate students across the UK have been paying tuition fees since the 1980s, and this was the real beginning of the HE student marketplace. Across the UK, international student fees are not capped, and universities have the power to set fees as they like. Despite this, demand for UK HE from international students continues to rise,<sup>210</sup> and these students make an extremely important contribution to the sustainability of many parts of the sector. Similarly, postgraduate fees are uncapped but demand for these programmes is increasing at a rate faster than for undergraduate courses across the UK, and this is particularly the case for postgraduate taught programmes.<sup>211</sup>

6.3.2 Since September 2006, universities and colleges in England have been able to charge new full-time home undergraduate students a variable fee. We have yet to see the full implications of the new variable fee system in England, but so far the signs have been encouraging. Following fears that the new system would reduce participation and drive students to apply to other HE systems the evidence is that applications have risen significantly once again, resuming the trend over the past decade of unprecedented increase in HE participation.

6.3.3 As the implications of the new system unfolds, there is no doubt that its long-term success depends greatly on the successful implementation of grants and bursary schemes. As a group we are rightly proud of the substantial new investment in bursary and scholarship schemes and outreach activities made possible in our institutions this year through the introduction of the new variable fee arrangements. In 2006–07, 1994 Group institutions invested £15.5 million in new bursary and scholarship schemes and outreach activities. This investment is estimated to rise to £45 million in 2008–09. These sums are in addition to the significant amounts already invested by members in bursaries and scholarships from charitable and other sources.

6.4 Any further action required by the Government and/or HEFCE to ensure that UK HEIs offer students a world class educational experience. The challenge for universities and policy-makers is to keep abreast of the shifting expectations of an increasingly diverse and informed student population and to adjust accordingly to provide the best possible experience to each of them if UK HE is to continue to be one of the leading higher education providers in the world. The 1994 Group “Enhancing the Student Experience Report” concluded that there were seven priority areas for the sector and Government to take forward if we are to meet the challenges of a changing environment of student experiences and expectations.

These priority areas are:

1. A requirement to provide transparent and accurate information around the student experience, building on the National Student Survey, and extending to include graduate students, and making better use of existing data.
2. Promoting the “well-rounded” graduate. Striving to achieve recognition amongst the top employers and the sector skills councils for “well-rounded” graduates who benefit from excellent academic and non-academic experiences, and to ensure that the value of these graduates is understood outside universities.
3. Promoting the student voice. Universities, Government, the NUS and local students’ unions working together to fully promote and listen to the student voice and implement a partnership approach to the student experience.
4. More effective engagement with schools and colleges to increase and widen participation in higher education and central involvement in the introduction of the 14–19 curriculum reforms.
5. Developing a better understanding of student needs when universities implement their student-focussed resources, including new strategies to provide more joined-up and accessible student services, support and facilities.
6. Taking a new approach to the creation of an international strategy for UK higher education, linking universities, government, devolved governments, the British Council, funding agencies and other sector stakeholders to maintain and build the UK’s strength in challenging international markets.

<sup>210</sup> Full time international students in UK rose from 95,900 in 1992 to 240,390 in 2004–05. “The Economic Costs and Benefits of International Students”, Vickers & Bekhradnia, HEPI, July 2007, p2

<sup>211</sup> UK postgraduate student numbers (FTE) rose from 254,671 in 2000–01 to 309,478 in 2005–06, a growth of 9.7%, compared to a 6.6% growth in undergraduate student numbers (FTE). This trend was particularly marked in PGT student numbers, which grew 11.3%. HESA, Planning Plus 2007.

7. Giving students the role of “change agents”. Universities must be prepared to adapt approaches to teaching and learning in light of student demand and technological advancement, including placing teaching and learning in a research-enriched environment and truly international context.

December 2008

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## Memorandum 61

### Submission from Imperial College London

#### INQUIRY ON STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

##### *Context*

1. Imperial College London aims to understand and solve the scientific, engineering and medical problems of tomorrow and to transmit that knowledge. Its graduates often become leaders of professions, business or academia. The student population is of high quality, with the average tariff points score of entrants being 355 in 2007–08 (where 120 points is an A grade). Around 45% of the student population come from outside the UK and approximately 28% are from outside the EU. About one-third of all students are postgraduate. 35% of staff are non-UK nationals.

##### SUMMARY

2. Quality should underpin all activity undertaken by the sector. The UK has four universities ranked in the top 10 in the World and, as such, strong Government support should enable the sector to maintain and enhance its position both as a world-leader and as one of the very best performing UK sectors.

3. Key priorities should be to nurture, recognise and reward excellence in all its forms, to enable and ensure financial sustainability and to maintain institutional autonomy and diversity. The College’s main points are thus:

- The strength of the UK higher education sector is a consequence of, and will be sustained by, continued institutional autonomy.
- Each Higher Education Institution (HEI) is necessarily different and will contribute in a unique way to the continued development of the UK higher education sector.
- Specific Government objectives should determine HEI priorities only where relevant and appropriate and at the discretion of the HEI concerned.
- Funding should be directed towards supporting a high quality student experience, thereby benefiting the student personally and the economy and society more generally.
- The future of the UK’s economy will depend on ensuring that its graduates have the specialist subject knowledge to equip them with the understanding and skills to address global problems.
- A world-class research base, and selective funding of the highest quality research, is necessary to ensure that the economic and social benefits of higher education are realised fully.
- Research assessment and other measures of quality should be able to identify the highest quality research and be able to distinguish the best research from that which is very good.

##### INTRODUCTION

4. A key strength of the UK higher education sector is the heterogeneity of its constituent institutions. Each has a different mission, ethos and history and thus its priorities and contribution will vary significantly. Institutional autonomy enables HEIs to respond, where appropriate, to Government priorities in a manner which accords to their wider mission and recognised strengths. It enables an appropriate balance between teaching and research to be achieved across the sector as a whole and facilitates the provision of a variety of excellent educational opportunities. The successful US university model, where institutional autonomy is paramount, illustrates this point further.

5. Diversity in mission and contribution is to be expected and encouraged and Government policies should, in recognition, not stipulate a “one size fits all” approach. A recent paper by Evidence Ltd (commissioned by HEFCE) on *Strategically important and vulnerable subjects* stated: “Differentiation of mission and practice between universities is a powerful means through which vulnerability may be mitigated...a centrally directed university system will be less flexible, responsive and effective than a system in which individual institutions have considerable autonomy.” It is thus important that core priorities and excellence are supported and not discouraged (perhaps even indirectly).

## ADMISSIONS

6. In accordance with its mission, the College aims to recruit those students most able to benefit from its courses. It remains committed to selecting students on the grounds of academic ability, potential and aptitude, irrespective of background. The College's entrance requirements are high (the average tariff point score for students on entry being 355 for 2007–08, where 120 points is an A grade) since students have to demonstrate that they are likely to be able to cope with, and thrive on, the high academic standards of College courses.

7. The Joint Council for Qualifications showed, in August 2008, that the percentage of A grades awarded at A-Level had increased from 12% in 1990 to 25.9% in 2008. However, this improvement in A Level grades has not been accompanied by a comparable increase in knowledge and understanding. This is a particular issue for the College since its subject base necessitates prior subject knowledge as an important pre-requisite for entry. The College is thus considering various methods to support its student selection processes, including the possible introduction of an entrance exam and the development of more complex interview procedures.

8. Any new school qualifications must contain sufficient academic content to prepare students adequately for undergraduate, and potentially postgraduate, study. The College remains concerned that the new forms of qualifications being developed do not provide sufficient academic content and rigour. For example, the present restriction on the advanced specialist learning element of the Advanced Engineering Diploma to the equivalent of 1.5 A levels means that the Diploma would not, by itself, contain sufficient academic content to demonstrate that students could cope with College courses.

9. The future of the UK's global economy will depend on its ability to supply sufficient graduates with specialist subject knowledge, supported by transferable skills developed at university. Many high value and innovative areas of the economy require graduates with specialist knowledge and skills of the highest order. Thus funding of strategically important subjects must continue. Equally, the resource required to teach and stretch the most talented students is often the greatest.

10. Many of the submissions to the DIUS State of the Nation Review (which may inform the development of the Higher Education Framework), encouraged the provision of more flexible learning methods for students, including a growth in part-time provision, modular courses and teaching at evenings and weekends to accommodate students who are also in employment. Any such developments should, of course, recognise the distinctive contribution of individual HEIs. In particular, funding should not be diverted away from the conventional modes through which many of the most innovative of our workforce are likely to continue to graduate and must not discourage academic and research careers.

11. A broad range of widening participation and outreach activities are undertaken across the sector. The role of each HEI can, and should, vary in accordance with its mission and purpose. Each contributes in many different ways; for some there is a direct correlation between those involved with outreach activities and entry to that particular HEI, for other HEIs their role is to widen aspirations and awareness of higher education more generally. Both are important and valid contributions.

12. The profile of the student population at each HEI is, to an extent, impacted by its entrance requirements. The Independent Schools Council has shown wide variations in A Level performance between different types of schools, with the percentage of students from independent schools achieving top grades at A Level being significantly in excess of the state school sector. Similarly, the number studying science subjects is far higher in the independent school sector (with 30.1% of the A Level students in independent schools studying Mathematics in 2006 compared with 17.2% in state schools). Thus for HEIs which should not, in the national interest, lower or amend their entrance requirements, the socioeconomic profile of students will be very different.

## THE BALANCE BETWEEN TEACHING AND RESEARCH

13. World-class research enables teaching to be informed by the latest research knowledge. Researchers will enthuse their students with their findings and the students themselves will stimulate further thought in the researchers. Research findings facilitate the development of a knowledge-based workforce and equip graduates with the understanding necessary to address pressing national and global challenges (eg climate change, energy production, security, global health). Little or nothing would be gained by funding an artificial integration of teaching and research in HEIs whose strengths do not lie in the latter.

14. Internationally excellent research is, by its very nature, expensive. As such, a world-class research base can be maintained only through a policy of the selective funding of the highest quality research.

15. Significant research advances are achieved often through blue skies thinking and thus funding needs to continue to be provided to HEIs in a discretionary non-targeted manner, with the freedom for the HEI to determine its own strategic priorities and to direct its funds accordingly. Discretionary funding, *inter alia*, enables the pursuit of research which is independent of non-academic agendas thereby preserving the Haldane principle. Secondly, it protects institutions from interruptions in funding caused by reorganisations in other parts of the system (as demonstrated by the hiatus in funding prompted by the dissolution of PPARC and CCLRC and the establishment of STFC).

16. The success of the policy of research selectivity depends not only on the availability of sufficient levels of funding but also on an appropriate mechanism to recognise, and distinguish sufficiently, between different levels of research excellence. The College considered the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) to be fit for purpose since it involved peer review and was not expensive when compared with alternative assessment and allocation methods or with the amount of funding allocated both directly and indirectly as a result. As a pilot institution, the College is contributing to the development of its replacement, the Research Excellence Framework (REF). The implementation of any new system of research assessment should though, occur only when it can be demonstrated that it is robust, fit for purpose and able to identify the highest quality research across all subjects.

17. Increasingly, and particularly during times of recession and thus competing economic priorities, those in receipt of public funding are required to demonstrate the impact, benefit and contribution of their activities. Measuring impact cannot be prescriptive since it can be felt in many different forms, over different time periods and the scale and significance will vary depending on its nature. Impact must be measured in terms of quality, excellence and advancement. Applicability alone should not be a measure of quality.

18. The UK research base needs to be on a sustainable footing with research projects funded on a full economic basis to ensure future economic prosperity. Only a small subset of research sponsors (namely UK Research Councils and some, but certainly nowhere near all other Government Departments) formally use full economic costing (fEC) to determine funding, and only at a rate of 80% of fEC for Research Councils.

19. The balance between teaching and research is a matter solely for each HEI. A sufficient number of sources of both teaching and research income exist in the UK for each HEI, as a business, to determine for itself the optimum balance, taking due account of external demand for both teaching and research, the supply of staff having appropriate expertise and abilities and the availability of appropriate infrastructure.

#### DEGREE CLASSIFICATIONS

20. By virtue of institutional autonomy and diversity of mission, degree standards are not uniform across HEIs or subjects. It is thus important that all stakeholders (including applicants, students and employers) are aware of this and that uniform standards are not inferred including, for example, in League Tables.

21. Individual HEIs themselves have responsibility to ensure that degree classifications are consistent and comparable across the institution and across different years. The College's percentage of I/II degrees awarded during the last ten years has changed very little. Thus, transparency and clarity of standards are maintained by a system of institutional autonomy accompanied by external regulation. It is primarily the responsibility of each HEI to operate robust internal mechanisms for setting, maintaining and reviewing standards supported by periodic review by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). The current degree classification system should thus remain since there is no better alternative.

22. The College supports the aim to develop a credit framework for England which enables portability and recognition of our UK degrees worldwide. However, experience with the Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR) has shown that there is still some way to go to achieving this. Any framework would need to be developed with recognition that learning and knowledge based outcomes are of paramount importance and thus should be the main measure of the educational progress and achievements of each student.

#### STUDENT SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

23. The provision of appropriate levels of support and assistance to students is possible only when HEIs are able to charge fees which, with Funding Council grant, reflect the full costs of their provision. Such fees would enable appropriate investment in staff, infrastructure and facilities available to students. The current cap on the level of tuition fees able to be charged to Home and European Undergraduate students is artificial, misleading and not based on a full consideration of costs. It should thus be lifted.

24. The College aims to attract students of the highest quality and would not want financial considerations to deter prospective applicants. Removing the tuition fee cap would enable HEIs to provide bursaries at the levels necessary to attract students who might not otherwise be able to afford to pursue their programmes.

#### CONCLUSION

25. The diversity of the UK higher education sector provides its strength and resilience. Any intervention or change should be undertaken in a cautious manner so to not destabilise a successful model which has been built around excellence and quality.

*December 2008.*

## Memorandum 62

### Submission from Research Councils UK

#### INQUIRY INTO STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

##### *Key Points*

- The balance between teaching and research is an important consideration, especially for institutions and individuals, however it is not a matter for the Research Councils to comment on.
- HEI receipts from Research Councils between 01/02 and 06/07 have shown the largest annual percentage real-terms increase (7.0%) of any income stream; tuition fees and education grants (6.5%) and overall Funding Council QR grants (5.2%) are not far behind. A recent component of the RC increase has been the uplift of £748 million (compared to the 2007–08 baseline) provided to RCs in the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review to meet the additional costs of paying 80% of full Economic Cost (fEC) on research grants and fellowships.
- RCUK believes that the new research excellence framework must adequately recognise and reward excellent research (including multidisciplinary research) that achieves impact not only academically but also in terms of the economy and wider benefits to society. RCUK supports a key objective underpinning the proposed framework: the reduction of administrative burdens on HEIs.
- Whilst plagiarism at undergraduate level represents a different and (from the evidence available) larger problem from that at the research level, it is nevertheless a critical factor in creating the culture of the organisation. Making clear at the very earliest level therefore that plagiarism is unacceptable is critical to ensuring a culture of good research conduct (and the unacceptability of misconduct) throughout the organisation.
- RCUK considers that the degree classification system should not compromise the ability to select the best candidates for doctoral research, and any changes to the system should factor this in.

##### *Introduction*

1. Research Councils UK is a strategic partnership set up to champion the research supported by the seven UK Research Councils. RCUK was established in 2002 to enable the Councils to work together more effectively to enhance the overall impact and effectiveness of their research, training and innovation activities, contributing to the delivery of the Government's objectives for science and innovation. Further details are available at [www.rcuk.ac.uk](http://www.rcuk.ac.uk)

2. This evidence is submitted by RCUK on behalf of all Research Councils and represents their independent views. It does not include or necessarily reflect the views of the Science and Innovation Group in the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills. The submission is made on behalf of the following Councils:

- Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)
- Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC)
- Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC)
- Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)
- Medical Research Council (MRC)
- Natural Environment Research Council (NERC)
- Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC)

3. All Research Councils have contributed to the main text of this response.

4. RCUK welcomes the opportunity to provide input and contextual information on areas that are relevant to the Research Councils, and we have addressed specific points in the next section.

#### RESPONSE TO SPECIFIC POINTS

*Levels of funding for, and the balance between, teaching and research in UK HEIs, and the adequacy of financial support for the development of innovative teaching methods and teaching/research integration*

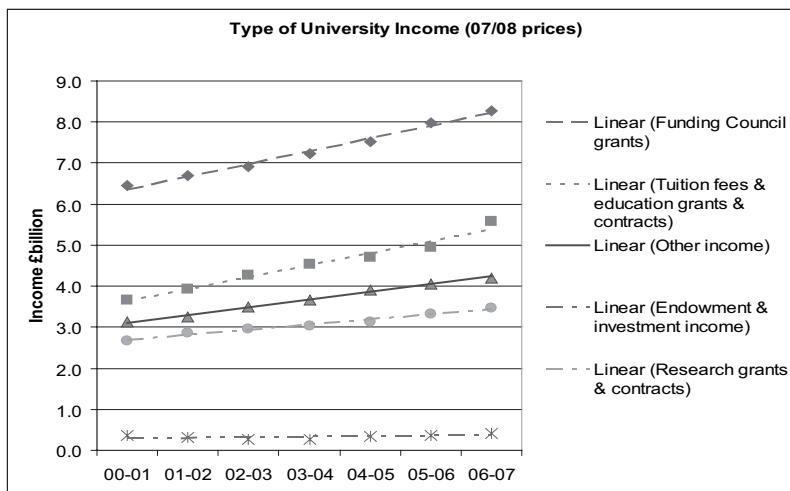
5. The balance between teaching and research is an important consideration, especially for institutions and individuals, however it is not a matter for the Research Councils to comment on.

##### *Full Economic Costing*

6. During the period 01/02 to 06/07 the average annual increases for all components of HEI income (see Figure 1) in 07/08 prices were as follows: Funding Council grants including Quality Related (QR) £309 million (4.2% increase); tuition fees, education grants and contracts £292 million (6.5% increase); research grants and contracts including Research Council (RC) grants £126 million (4.1% increase); other income £188 million (5.1% increase); endowment and investment income £12 million (3.7% increase). This represents a total real-term increase of £928 million (4.9% increase) annually.

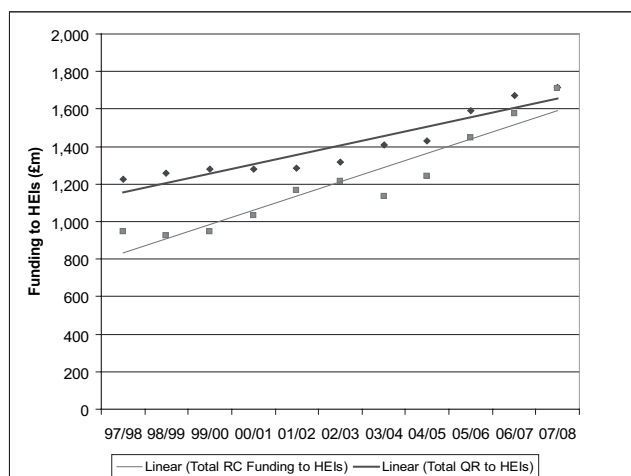


**Figure 1**  
**HESA FINANCE RETURNS FOR TOTAL HEI INCOME AT CONSTANT 07/08 PRICES (USING THE TREASURY GDP DEFLATOR)**



7. Both Research Council (RC) and Funding Council (QR) research funding have increased significantly over the past 10 years (see Figure 2). In 07/08 prices, the annual increase has averaged £49.6 million for QR and £75.3 million for RCs. Since 01/02 the average annual increase has been even higher at £77.5 million (5.2%)<sup>212</sup> and £94.7 million (7.0 %) respectively, again in 07/08 prices. Thus, whilst HEI receipts from Research Councils between 01/02 and 06/07 have shown the largest annual percentage real-terms increase (7.0%) of any income stream; tuition fees and education grants (6.5%) and overall Funding Council QR grants (5.2%) are not far behind.

**Figure 2**  
**RESEARCH FUNDING TO UK HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTES FROM FUNDING COUNCILS (QR) AND RESEARCH COUNCILS (RC) IN 07/08 PRICES (ADJUSTED USING THE TREASURY GDP DEFLATOR)**



8. A recent component of the RC increase has been the uplift of £748 million (compared to the 2007–8 baseline) provided to RCs in the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review to meet the additional costs of paying 80% of full Economic Cost (fEC) on research grants and fellowships (see Table 1). An uplift of around £400 million was provided in the SR2003 period.

<sup>212</sup> Annual percentage increases are calculated using the slope of the linear regression divided by the average income for each category in constant 07/08 prices.

Table 1

FEC ADDITIONS TO CSR 07 ALLOCATION (DIUS EVIDENCE TO HOC SELECT COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY, 2008)

	2008–09	2009–10	2010–11	CSR07 Total
AHRC	6,350	10,053	11,796	28,199
BBSRC	30,135	43,523	49,824	123,482
ESRC	15,236	22,005	25,190	62,431
EPSRC	73,479	106,124	121,486	301,089
MRC	29,079	41,998	48,077	119,154
NERC	14,154	21,810	25,413	61,377
STFC	12,139	18,487	21,474	52,100
Total	180,572	264,000	303,260	747,832

9. A review on the degree of uptake of fEC methodology by all funders, and its impact on the HEI sector is currently underway and will report on 13 April 2009.<sup>213</sup>

#### *Research Teaching Linkages*

10. RCUK has been aware of the debate in recent years in the sector around Research Teaching Linkages and has engaged in particular with the Higher Education Academy, Quality Assurance Agency (Scotland) and the HEFCE-funded Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning which is addressing undergraduate research. The Research Councils have a direct interest in this topic, in particular the extent to which undergraduates systematically gain a better perspective and experience of research. It is not yet clear to RCUK whether this awareness is being developed optimally at present but it is clear that the benefit of a systematic approach would be that the best graduates are: a) better placed to make an informed choice and consider a research career; and b) more likely to embark on higher research degree level training (primarily doctoral). A further benefit would be that all graduates are more aware of the contribution of research in relation to society and are more likely to become informed participants in public engagement.

#### *The suitability of methods of assessing excellence in teaching and research and the impact of research assessment on these activities*

11. RCUK is working closely with HEFCE on revised proposals for the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in order to ensure that the two arms of the Dual Support System operate together efficiently and effectively. The RCUK response to the HEFCE consultation on the REF can be found on the RCUK website.<sup>214</sup>

12. RCUK believes that the new assessment framework must adequately recognise and reward excellent research (including multidisciplinary research) that achieves impact not only academically but also in terms of the economy and wider benefits to society. It is essential that measures of impact relating to economic benefit, contribution to public policy, development of practice in the public and private sectors, and public engagement are included in the new assessment approach.

13. RCUK has a very strong preference for a system of assessment that is more uniform across the research spectrum than that proposed in the consultation. This should draw on a full range of discipline specific output metrics that measure research impact across a range of dimensions including academic impact, user-relevance and societal benefit. It should use “light-touch” peer review to evaluate those aspects of research impact that cannot be captured using qualitative metrics, and use expert opinion to select and weight metrics on a discipline-by-discipline basis.

14. RCUK supports a key objective underpinning the proposed framework: the reduction of administrative burdens on HEIs. In order to achieve the maximum administrative efficiency RCUK will work with HEFCE and the other Funding Councils in agreeing the final set of metrics and also in the area of subsequent data collection, so as to both minimise volume and frequency of data collection from HEIs.

#### *The extent to which student plagiarism is a problem in HE, and the availability and effectiveness of strategies to identify, penalise and combat plagiarism*

15. RCUK recently published a Code of Conduct and Policy on the Governance of Good Research Conduct for consultation, as part of our commitment to the highest possible standards in good research conduct and research integrity. The consultation document can be found on the RCUK website.<sup>215</sup>

16. We consider that in addressing issues of good research conduct, the Research Organisation (RO) should ensure that it covers all matters set out in the Code of the Conduct, not only those which appear the most serious. Issues such as minor plagiarism, misrepresentation of credentials, partial misrepresentation of

<sup>213</sup> The “Alexander Review” ([www.rcuk.ac.uk/reviews/fEC](http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/reviews/fEC))

<sup>214</sup> <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/cmsweb/downloads/rcuk/consultations/ref.pdf>

<sup>215</sup> <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/cmsweb/downloads/rcuk/reviews/grc/consultation.pdf>

findings and false claims of authorship, should be treated appropriately as examples of unacceptable research conduct. RCUK expects all ROs to be equally attentive to creating an over-riding culture of best practice, as well as investigating major breaches.

17. Whilst plagiarism at undergraduate level represents a different and (from the evidence available) larger problem from that at the research level, it is nevertheless a critical factor in creating the culture of the organisation. Making clear at the very earliest level therefore that plagiarism is unacceptable is critical to ensuring a culture of good research conduct (and the unacceptability of misconduct) throughout the organisation.

*The advantages and disadvantages of the UK's system of degree classification and the introduction of the Higher Education Academic Record*

18. RCUK considers that the degree classification system should not compromise the ability to select the best candidates for doctoral research, and any changes to the system should factor this in. The Burgess report which recommended the HEAR, and to which RCUK contributed to, can be found on the UUK website.<sup>216</sup>

January 2009

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### Memorandum 63

#### Submission from Oxford Brookes University

##### STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES INQUIRY

###### Summary

- Continued growth in the sector is important for economic and social reasons, including widening participation.
- Improvement in school performance is central to widening participation, and universities can play a part in this.
- The issue of admission to the most selective universities has the potential to be a distraction from the central issues.
- On international benchmarks there is no evidence to suggest that teaching is overfunded in comparison with research or vice versa.
- Selectivity in research funding is inevitable, but increasing the gradient of funding would not be helpful.
- Innovative teaching is best supported by providing adequate funding for teaching, although the subject centres and CETLs have been useful. There is a need to look for ways of rewarding universities for excellent teaching.
- Additional capital investment in universities would provide economic and environmental benefits.
- Teaching at HE level needs to be supported by CPD. Existing subject networks are working well. Assessing excellent teaching is not easy.
- HEFCE is a funding body and its role in monitoring quality is and should be limited. Quality monitoring undertaken in relation to health and teacher education is onerous.
- The issue of degree classifications needs to be kept in proportion. The system is probably nearing the end of its useful life, and a gradualist approach to change is appropriate.
- Plagiarism can be dealt with through the use of detection software, and through changing assessment practice, and Oxford Brookes University is taking an important role in this area.

##### ADMISSIONS

1. it is very important that the Government maintains targets for the expansion of higher education for the following reasons:

It is a necessary condition for widening participation. If participation rates overall remain stable, it is unlikely that higher education, or Government, will be able to broaden access by under-represented groups when that broadening would have to be at the expense of groups who are already participating and have clear expectations of their continued ability to participate.

Current participation rates are still below those of many other developed countries. In a global economy in which intellectual assets are increasingly the dominant driver of success, having a highly educated population will be vital to the future of the UK. The Leitch report suggests that

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<sup>216</sup> [http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Publications/Bookshop/Documents/Burgess\\_final.pdf](http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Publications/Bookshop/Documents/Burgess_final.pdf).

we currently have a significant skills gap in the working population now, and that this is so large that it cannot be met simply by recruiting more 18 year olds into higher education, so that we need to grow participation by those already in the workforce.

Whether the specific target of 50% is “right” or not is not very important. The key issue is to continue to allow the sector to grow. There is plenty of evidence that there is demand there to support meeting the target. Over recent years, the limiting factor on the sector has been the availability of Additional Student Numbers to fund growth, not demand.

2. With regard to widening participation initiatives, much has been done to break down barriers to participation through low aspirations, and information barriers, although the existing efforts made by universities and others must continue. A major barrier to participation is poor achievement at GCSE and low staying on rates post-16. A major research programme into raising school achievement, combined with work which ensures that evidence of effective practice is transferred to schools, could make a real and sustained difference to participation by underrepresented groups.

3. It is unfortunate that the Government seems to have spent a disproportionate amount of energy on the issue of students from low participation backgrounds accessing the most selective universities, as opposed to the key issue of raising participation in higher education. Admission to HE should, of course, be “fair”. In general, universities and their staff are strongly motivated to admit the candidates who are best qualified to do well in their institution. For all their shortcomings, the fairest criteria in this regard are bound to be the existing nationally assessed qualifications held by applicants. While it is reasonable to ask institutions to make efforts to make some allowances for differences in opportunity, our main attention ought to be focused on reducing those differences. There is a real risk that arguments about fairness of admission to elite institutions can become a diversion from the real issues.

#### THE BALANCE BETWEEN TEACHING AND RESEARCH

4. Teaching and research are both core to the mission of higher education, and in a zero sum game it would be dangerous to assume that there is anything to be gained from shifting the balance. International comparisons suggest that the UK produces more high quality research per pound of public expenditure on research than other developed countries. This suggests that there is no “fat” in research budgets. Reductions in research spending would lead to less research and/or lesser quality. Similarly, spending on teaching per head is relatively low.

5. The current selective allocation of research funding is inevitable given the very high cost of international research, especially in STEM subjects. Further intensification of that level of selectivity would be a mistake because:

All universities must employ some staff who conduct research if the UK sector’s brand is to be maintained.

Greater selectivity would worsen the sector’s existing tendency to be static. It cannot be healthy for some universities to know that they can never progress beyond a certain point, or for others to be confident that they will never lose their position.

Less research intensive universities employ staff who are strongly motivated to undertake research, some of whom will move on and attain international prominence in other universities.

6. The best way to develop innovative teaching is to fund universities adequately and enable them to compete in recruiting the best students. That said, there is a role for overarching subject organisations, and for the CETL projects. Oxford Brookes University is proud to host two subject centres and two CETLs, and we believe that they have brought significant benefit to the sector.

7. The integration of learning and teaching and research is an important issue and our joint CETL with the University of Warwick, the Reinvention Centre, is focused on integrating research into the undergraduate curriculum.

8. There is a real dilemma in rewarding excellence in teaching at university level. Excellent research draws in more competitive funding through the rae and research councils. Providing an excellent student experience promotes the reputation of the institution and enhances its ability to select the best students, but it does not lead to opportunities to grow and offer that experience to more students, as the growth of the sector overall is constrained, and the funding model is designed to allow for the redistribution of funding only in a very slow and indirect way, in part to avoid destabilising institutions in difficulty. A free market in home student recruitment, with funding following students directly, and no cap on the growth of individual institutions, would reward success, but perhaps at the price of unacceptable levels of turbulence in the system. A degree of rebalancing away from block grant for T would provide greater incentives to offer a high quality student experience without risking institutional failure at an unacceptable level.

9. As with other parts of the public sector, universities struggle with an inheritance of poor quality buildings from the 1960s and 70s. The problem is being tackled, and the HEFCE EMS statistics show progress in reducing backlog maintenance and improving condition and functional suitability. Progress is necessarily limited by availability of funds. Additional capital funding would enable universities to accelerate investment in infrastructure which would help to boost the economy and offset the decline in

construction in the private sector. Given that modern buildings and refurbishments are being designed to meet much higher standards of environmental performance there is also a case to be made in terms of reducing long term energy costs and contributing to sustainability targets.

10. Initial training for academic staff in learning and teaching is now securely in place across the sector. The next challenge is to embed CPD for staff as they move through their careers. As in other areas of professional practice, there is a need for a sound evidence base on what promotes effective learning, and mechanisms for ensuring that this is reflected in practice across the sector. The subject centres have proved to be effective in this latter role. At Oxford Brookes as at other universities, we have criteria in place for rewarding excellent teaching. Gathering objective evidence of excellence is more challenging than it is in the research arena. Greater incentives to institutions to achieve excellent teaching might encourage a greater focus on rewards to staff. There is a role for teaching only staff in HE, but the proposition that there is a large number of high quality staff who wish to work in higher education and have no wish to undertake research is not borne out by experience.

11. HEFCE is a funding council, and its role in quality and standards is to ensure that its funding methodology supports their maintenance, and that institutions are properly accountable for how the money is spent. Higher education is appropriately regulated in general by the QAA and, where appropriate, by professional bodies. We do have some concerns about the onerous nature of the quality regimes in health and teacher training, and their interaction with contract compliance.

13. We support the gradualist approach to exploring other approaches which will, in due course, replace the current classification system. It would be optimistic to think that employers will, in general, have the capacity to make use of a very detailed profile in selection, as opposed to using grade point averages, at least at the initial stage in the selection process. Recent remarks by the Chief Executive of the QAA were unhelpful and exaggerated the scale of the problem with the current system, which employers of our graduates do not raise as an issue. Nonetheless, classifying degrees is probably an approach which is nearing the end of its useful life, and we need to prepare for something new in an orderly fashion.

14. Plagiarism is clearly a matter of concern but the term covers a wide spectrum of issues from poor referencing to deliberate cheating, and there is a risk that this is not widely understood outside HE. The Assessment Standards CETL at Oxford Brookes has undertaken valuable work on how assessments can be structured to minimise plagiarism, and alongside clear articulation of expectations to students, and processes for detecting and dealing with plagiarism, it is a manageable issue.

#### STUDENT SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

15. The key issue in student support is the continued gulf between the levels of support available to full- and part-time students. This distorts the existing market by encouraging students to study full-time rather than part-time. It also prevents the participation of part-time students who would study if they could access equivalent levels of support to full-timers.

*January 2009*

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### Memorandum 64

#### Submission from the Institute of Education (IOE), University of London

##### INQUIRY INTO "STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES"

This submission has been coordinated on behalf of the Institute by the Centre for Higher Education Studies (CHES—see [www.ioe.ac.uk/ches](http://www.ioe.ac.uk/ches)).

The Institute would like to offer a number of propositions to assist the Committee in its work, together with an indication of relevant research findings, many of which based on studies conducted at the Institute. Reflecting the breadth of the inquiry, this submission draws on a wide range of work from different research centres at the Institute. The Institute hosts the ESRC's Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP), which has conducted, among other themes, an important series of investigations of aspects of widening participation in higher education (see David, 2008 and [www.tlrp.org](http://www.tlrp.org)). We also draw upon some of the work of the TLRP-TEL (Technology-Enhanced Learning Phase), based in the London Knowledge Lab (LKL), jointly hosted by the IOE and Birkbeck College. The IOE's new ESRC Research Centre—Learning and Life Chances in Knowledge Economies and Societies (LLAKES)—has projects examining the FE/HE/work interface in relation to changing economic and social conditions at the level of city-regions. The aim of this submission is to outline some of the key issues and to highlight key reports which should prove useful to the Committee in their inquiry.

## 1. OVERVIEW

The main propositions presented in this submission are as follows (we have arranged these to follow the broad outline of the Committee's call for evidence):

- 1.1 The main barriers to widening participation mean that attention needs to be focussed on the education system prior to application and admission to universities, and higher education has an obligation to assist with this (see 2.1 below);
- 1.2 It is important to recognise that higher education has potentially profound social as well as economic effects (2.2);
- 1.3 Greater attention should be paid to the differential effects of courses, institutions and mode of study on the life-chances and economic returns of individuals (2.3);
- 1.4 To achieve its goals fully, HE requires teaching to take place in a research-sensitive environment (3.1);
- 1.5 There is special challenge in designing and developing technologies to support higher education (3.2);
- 1.6 The "service" or "third-stream" mission of universities is increasingly important (3.3);
- 1.7 The continuation of a quality-assured "controlled reputational range" is of significant value to the UK HE sector (4.1);
- 1.8 The process of degree classification requires overhaul (and ideally replacement by a device like the Higher Education Record of Achievement [HERA]). However it is also important to resist "moral panics" about the sector's approach to examinations (4.2), especially in a context where assessment is also important in its formative role (4.3);
- 1.9 While the new arrangements for fees and student support in England and Wales are proving to be broadly progressive, they will continue to draw in a large public subsidy which may affect the ability of the system to expand sensibly (5.1);
- 1.10 It is important for the Committee to understand and respond to the role of the student body in constructively moulding their own experience, through—for example—choice of subjects and mode of study, as well as their experience beyond the campus (5.2); and
- 1.11 The impact of a rapidly internationalised system should also be considered in the Committee's deliberations (6.1).

## 2. ACCESS AND ADMISSIONS

### 2.1 *The need to separate issues of widening participation from those of fair access*

2.1.1 Equitable access to higher education is an emotive as well as a highly complex issue. From the evidence we know the following about widening participation (WP).

2.1.1.1 WP is not about consistently perverse decisions by higher education admissions tutors. If anything university admissions have improved rather than further undermined distributional fairness.

2.1.1.2 Nor is WP undermined by well-qualified students from poorer or minority backgrounds making what at first sight may appear irrational choices regarding HE participation or of institution. The economic returns outlined in section 2.3 are not the only consideration.

2.1.1.3 WP is not just about aversion to debt. We need to look at attitudes to debt in the wider young population more generally.

2.1.1.4 WP is not simply about supply-side issues, such as the lack of short-cycle alternatives to traditional degrees.

2.1.1.5 WP in the UK is potentially about improving the quality of school-based experience for all students, but especially those from under-represented groups. Success in compulsory education is vital. The gap in higher education participation between richer and poorer students is almost entirely explained by the weak academic achievement of poor children in secondary school (Chowdry *et al.*, 2008). To be effective on a significant scale, WP requires intervention well before the point of entry into higher education.

2.1.1.6 WP is about parental expectations throughout the educational lifecourse and effective information, advice and guidance (IAG) throughout the school career.

2.1.1.7 Perhaps most importantly it is about getting employers to live up to their rhetoric of supporting both younger and older workers in their personal learning trajectories (especially the former). Further education colleges have a major role here in terms of bridging the transition from work to HE (see Fuller and Unwin, 2008).

2.1.2 A set of TLRP (Teaching and Learning Research Programme) projects examining different areas of HE demonstrates that recent UK government policies on widening participation have indeed led to increasing opportunities for learners from diverse families and disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. However, these policies have not led to fair or equal access to equivalent types of higher education that may lead to equal benefits in the graduate or professional labour markets. Nevertheless, the projects show that

policies have also provided the opportunities for the development of potential new institutional practices and pedagogies to engage diverse students. The projects ranged across broad questions of policy for systems of post-compulsory, further and higher education, to questions about students' educational outcomes from school and their access to differential forms of higher education, especially across academic, vocational and/or mathematical subjects (David, 2008).

2.1.3 The problems of raising aspirations, or of "fair access" to prestigious institutions on the part of well-qualified non-standard students, could be viewed trivial when set against the genuine widening participation challenge of getting more people to the starting gate (Watson, 2006a).

## 2.2 *The need to understand HE as a positional good*

The really serious issue raised by HE expansion is about polarisation: the growing gap between those with access to this good, and those without. At the heart of the matter is the question of social mobility. The debate can all too easily descend into a competition between two narratives: one stressing the role of HE in reproducing patterns of elite formation; the other more confident about the effect of expanded, more democratic systems in enabling new entrants. A new study shows how in the UK both narratives can be true (Williams and Filippakou, forthcoming).

## 2.3 *The importance of combining personal and social rates of return*

2.3.1 Globally, we are currently going through a neo-liberal phase where human capital and personal economic returns rule. It is true that the average value of higher education in economic terms is substantial, both to the individual, in terms of higher earnings (Blundell *et al.*, 2005), and to society as a whole. However, in recent years the wage premium earned by some new graduates appears to be falling (O'Leary and Sloane, 2005). The rate of return to a degree varies by institution (Chevalier and Conlon, 2003; Iftikhar *et al.*, 2008; Power and Whitty, 2008). It also varies by subject, with quantitative degrees and some vocationally oriented degrees having greater value (Walker and Zhu, 2003; Sloane and O'Leary, 2004). It is imperative that students are well informed of these nuances of the graduate labour market in order to ensure students are making fully informed decisions.

2.3.2 Non-financial benefits to education also need to be taken into account. The Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning at the Institute of Education has demonstrated (on the basis of study of cohorts born in 1958, 1970 and now 2000–01) that participants in HE in the UK are likely to be happier, healthier and more democratically tolerant (Feinstein *et al.*, 2008).

2.3.3 There is a further issue: "drop-out." Evidence from Chowdry *et al.* (2008) indicates that students from more deprived backgrounds are more likely to drop out even if they are equally qualified when they enter HE. As HE expands, retention and completion are as important as widening participation.

## 3. THE BALANCE BETWEEN TEACHING AND RESEARCH

### 3.1 *The importance of teaching in a research-sensitive environment*

The main effect of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) will be to freeze funding at a level set as it was somewhere between 2001 and 2007. There are potential dangers in this development, which could affect the student experience. Missions could become narrower as internal concentration of resource mirrors external funding. They will also be increasingly dominated by medicine and science; not least because funding required to "match" investments in science and technology will progressively bleed the arts and humanities (Watson and Amoah, 2007: 81–108).

### 3.2 *The challenge of pedagogical development, in particular the use of information and communications technologies*

For the learning process to be fully supported, it is important for technology to be able to elicit and facilitate "intensive, active learning", which requires several technology features to be in place, and integrated (Laurillard *et al.*, 2008). The technology-based tools currently being used in HE have not been created for "intensive, active learning" of the kind our desired learning outcomes require and our students expect (Entwistle, 2005). The complexity of degree-level study as an activity requires a wide range of digital tools, technologies and features to be integrated within a learning environment if the learner is to be supported adequately. Few enterprises other than HE have such extensive and complex requirements, but education as an industry does not have the commercial power to attract significant R&D to serve its technology needs. By working only with the emerging technologies created for commercial and leisure use, education is inadequately served.

### 3.3 *The relevance of "service," "third stream," and "knowledge exchange" to a contemporary teaching and learning environment*

"Third stream" or "third mission" activities are not only good ways of embedding in enterprises (public and private) the knowledge that exists within universities. These activities are also means of producing new knowledge, and, probably more typically, re-configuring existing knowledge, so making it applicable to new contexts, to the benefit of students at undergraduate as well as postgraduate level (Temple, 2008).

#### 4. ASSESSMENT AND DEGREE CLASSIFICATION

##### 4.1 *The role of quality assurance (QA) in maintaining the “controlled reputational range” of the UK system*

One of the most distinctive features of the development of the UK system of higher education has been its willingness to take academic responsibility for its own enlargement. However, there is serious work to be done on quality assurance: to bring up-to-date the system of external examination; to identify and take account of the issues raised by innovations in teaching and learning, and especially in student assessment; to probe the deeper issues raised by the relationship between teaching and research; to take steps to ensure that collaborative provision between institutions—sometimes across wide distances, and making use of new media—lives up to its intentions on quality and standards; to calibrate external interventions so that they are led by secure assessment of risk and not just reputation; to think hard about acceptable standards of advertising and promotion; and so on (Watson, 2006b).

##### 4.2 *The desirability of replacing degree classification*

There is widespread recognition that the system of honours degree classification historically utilised in the UK system is no longer fit for purpose. It is now clear that there is substantial variation across degree classes earned in institutions with similar intakes, as well as by subject (Yorke, 2007). Development—and implementation—of a Higher Education Record of Achievement (HERA), as recommended initially in the Dearing Report and more recently by the group chaired by Professor Robert Burgess, is overdue.

##### 4.3 *The role of assessment in teaching and learning as well as qualifications*

The role of assessment in promoting learning is often associated with a distinction between formative assessment, in which learners are given feedback to enable learning, and summative assessment for grading purposes, although in practice the two overlap. The amount of feedback a learner receives varies across the sector often with too much emphasis on the summative assessment (Gibbs and Dunbat-Goddet, 2007).

#### 5. STUDENT SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

##### 5.1 *The need to separate and understand the balance between institutional and student support*

5.1.1 The new arrangements for student support from 2006 have proved broadly progressive but will have significant effects on the long-term financing of the system as the government contribution to the HE sector has actually increased not least through the increased generosity of grants and interest-free loans.

5.1.2 Dearden *et al.* (2008) illustrate who pays for these latest reforms by means of a circular flow of payments. The table below sets out their calculations of the net balance of payments (-ve on the table) and receipts (+ve on the table) between different participants within the HE system—universities, students, graduates and taxpayers—under the 2003-04 system (old) and current system of HE funding in England.

5.1.3 Looking at the first column of the table, we see that under the old system, universities received about £5.5 billion in total funding for teaching, coming mainly from taxpayers (via direct payments to universities in the form of the recurrent teaching grant made to HEFCE each year, and fee exemptions), and also students (via up-front fees). Graduates also gained around £0.6 billion, from maintenance loan subsidies (paid for by taxpayers). The second column shows that under the new system university income is increased, to around £6.7bn. This increase is paid for by graduates, through deferred fees (subsidised by taxpayers). Students become net recipients, receiving around £1.1 billion in total from new grants and subsidies.

##### 5.1.4 Circular flows of payments: old and new systems, £billions

	<i>OLD</i> 2003–04 system	<i>NEW</i> 2008–09 system	<i>New system</i> compared to old system
Taxpayers	–£5.6	–£6.7	–£1.1
Students	–£0.5	£1.1	£1.6
Graduates	£0.6	–£1.1	–£1.7
Universities	£5.5	£6.7	£1.3
<i>Sums of gains and losses</i>	£0	£0	£0

Note. Totals may not sum due to rounding.



5.1.5 The final column of the table shows the net impact. First, universities' net position improves by around £1.3 billion, from £5.5 billion under the old system to around £6.7 billion under the new system. Second, the overall taxpayer contribution to the costs of HE rises by around £1.1 billion compared with an unchanged 2003–04 system for tuition and student support. Third, students are better off under the new system due to grants and fee deferral, by around £1.6 billion. Finally, graduates contribute around £1.7 billion more, through increases in fees, offset by new loan subsidies from the taxpayer.

5.1.6 This analysis highlights the changing balance of funding between the public and private sector as a whole as a result of the new reforms. Taking students and graduates together, we see that the net increase in contributions from these two groups combined amounts to the relatively small sum of £100 million, whilst the net increase in contribution from the taxpayer amounts to around £1.1 billion. This highlights an important constraint on any future reforms to HE funding. Further increases in fees, for example, necessarily involve additional government spending (because of the subsidised nature of loans for fees) unless other changes are made.

## 5.2 *The value of understanding contemporary student cultures*

5.2.1 A key challenge is to design and develop technologies that are genuinely inclusive, personalised and productive—as well as flexible in the sense of crossing pedagogical and technological boundaries between home, college and social contexts. This is a major commitment of the London Knowledge Lab (LKL), as well as the TLRP-Technology Enhanced Learning Phase (TLRP-TEL), directed by the head of LKL. From a policy point of view, there needs to be recognition that the development of 21st century technologies alongside 21st century pedagogies is a precondition for rising to the immense challenges faced by HE. Students—as young adults—live in a different world from that of many of their teachers. Their world is what the TLRP-TEL characterises as Web 2.0: “an umbrella term for a host of recent internet applications such as social networking, wikis, folksonomies, virtual societies, blogging, multiplayer online gaming and mash-ups” (TLRP-TEL, 2008: 4).

5.2.2 It is important not to underestimate the role of students in moulding their higher education experience. The decline in sciences (other than the biosciences) and technology may be irreversible (and we have shielded ourselves from its full effects in the UK because of overseas recruitment) (see Watson, 2006c). There is evidence of a negative correlation between objective “development” of countries and enthusiasm for science and technology (Nuffield Foundation, 2008).

5.2.3 Student engagement is best developed through a combination of cognitive, practical and reflective elements. The formation of the student’s “will to learn” may be understood as the imparting of certain kinds of dispositions and qualities: of personal initiative, courage, carefulness, resilience and so forth (see Barnett, 2007).

## 6. ANOTHER IMPORTANT ISSUE

### 6.1 *The international campus*

UK university campuses are now inescapably international, with many having students from more than 100 countries and several with a majority of students for whom English is not their first language. This is of more than economic importance. Too often, the experience of international students is one of relative loneliness, of separation from UK students, and a tendency to find themselves in groups of students from their own home country.

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## Memorandum 65

### Submission from the Royal Society of Chemistry

*RSC response to the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Select Committee inquiry into Students and Universities*

The RSC welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Select Committee inquiry into Students and Universities.

The RSC is the UK Professional Body for chemical scientists and an international Learned Society for advancing the chemical sciences. Supported by a network of over 46,000 members worldwide and an internationally acclaimed publishing business, our activities span education and training, conferences and science policy, and the promotion of the chemical sciences to the public.

This document represents the views of the RSC. The RSC's Royal Charter obliges it to serve the public interest by acting in an independent advisory capacity, and we would therefore be very happy for this submission to be put into the public domain.

The document has been written from the perspective of the Royal Society of Chemistry.

#### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. The RSC would like to highlight the following points to the Select Committee:

- In order to meet government targets for HE participation, diversity of course provision and geographical location must be a priority. Chemistry has gradually lost provision at the HND/HNC level as departments have closed (particularly in the post-92 sector) and others have moved away from part time to full-time honours degree provision. The former change limits opportunities in chemistry restricting diversity of course provision, and the latter limits opportunities for more flexible ways of studying which will affect mature students in particular.
- The RSC has been running a very successful widening participation outreach scheme called Chemistry: The Next Generation (CTNG). The aims of CTNG are to raise the aspirations of under-represented school pupils and to widen and significantly increase participation in HE chemical science courses. Recent independent evaluation of the scheme has shown that it is having a positive impact. Such widening participation and outreach schemes should be increased to maximise HE participation.
- Research Assessment has concentrated Funding Council derived research funds into fewer universities. Strategically it makes sense to resource institutions well to allow them to invest in state of the art resources. However, over concentration may lead to areas of the country where particular HEI research expertise are lacking. In addition, some HEIs put an emphasis on raising research funds which can lead to an overly competitive culture which predicates against cooperative research and also serves to put a number of people off research careers, in particular women.
- The RSC concurs with the view of many in that the degree classification system is out of date. It is only relevant to UK HE and poorly understood elsewhere. This could hinder the portability of UK degrees. The UK should be moving towards a more universal grade point average system with greater use of diploma supplements.
- An RSC study has found that student debt has a clear impact on post-graduation options, with many final year students stating that they would have to forgo further study as a result of debt. Geographical locations where graduates could work would be limited by having to live with their parents or not being able to afford to travel far to work leading to a negative impact on chemical science employers in the UK.

#### INTRODUCTION

2. The RSC is the UK Professional Body for chemical scientists and an international Learned Society for advancing the chemical sciences. Supported by a network of over 46,000 members worldwide and an internationally acclaimed publishing business, our activities span education and training, conferences and science policy, and the promotion of the chemical sciences to the public.

3. This document represents the views of the RSC. The RSC's Royal Charter obliges it to serve the public interest by acting in an independent advisory capacity, and we would therefore be very happy for this submission to be put into the public domain.

4. The document has been written from the perspective of the Royal Society of Chemistry.

## ADMISSIONS

*The effectiveness of the process for admission to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), including A-levels, Advanced Diplomas, apprenticeships and university entrance tests*

5. The RSC believes that at this point in time, chemistry departments within HEIs are able to discriminate between candidates for admission using the current process for admission. Exceptions to this could include the most selective institutes, for example, Oxford and Cambridge.

6. The RSC has concerns regarding the amount of students achieving a grade A at A-Level. The fact that a large proportion of students essentially achieve the same grade is not a good driver for ambition.

*The UK's ability to meet government targets for Higher Education (HE) participation and the relevance of these targets*

7. Chemistry has gradually lost provision at the HND/HNC level as departments have closed (particularly in the post-92 sector) and others have moved away from part-time to full-time honours degree provision. The former change limits opportunities in chemistry restricting diversity of course provision, and the latter limits opportunities for more flexible ways of studying which will affect mature students in particular.

8. One issue which may affect the government targets for HE participation is the geographical diversity of HE courses. Students may live with their parents or not being able to afford to travel far to study. There needs to be a comprehensive geographical coverage of HE courses to maximise HE participation.

*The implementation and success of widening participation initiatives such as Compact*

9. The RSC has been running a very successful widening participation outreach scheme called Chemistry: The Next Generation (CTNG) for over four years. Funding for the scheme has been provided by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). The aims of CTNG are to raise the aspirations of under-represented school pupils and to widen and significantly increase participation in HE chemical science courses. The number of students studying chemistry has increased by 32% over the last five years returning to a level that was last seen in the late 1990's.

10. CTNG is a national programme that operates on a regional level (currently in six English regions) and involves partnership working between HEIs, schools, colleges, industry, employers and STEM organisations. 25 universities offer outreach activities as part of CTNG. Over 47,000 students from 800 schools have been involved with the scheme over the last two years. 70% of the students involved in activities are from an Aimhigher cohort (students with no heritage of HE in the family).

11. Recent independent evaluation of the scheme has shown that it is having positive impact in three key areas:

1. Raising school students' awareness of HE
2. Influencing students' future intentions (future study and careers plans)
3. Enhancing students' understanding of the relevance and usefulness of chemistry

12. Good practice was particularly noted around the extent of collaboration and multi-agency working that is being achieved in delivering the CTNG project.

*The role of the Government in developing and promoting fair access and admissions policies for the UK Higher Education sector*

13. No Comment.

## THE BALANCE BETWEEN TEACHING AND RESEARCH

*Levels of funding for, and the balance between, teaching and research in UK HEIs, and the adequacy of financial support for the development of innovative teaching methods and teaching/research integration*

14. The RSC believes that the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) has driven most universities to have bias towards the research element. Teaching and learning is a fundamental responsibility of universities and should be both recognised and rewarded as such.

*The quality of teaching provision and learning facilities in UK and the extent to which they vary between HEIs*

15. The quality of laboratory equipment varies considerably across HEIs within the UK leading to non-equal opportunities for students studying chemistry. Efforts are required to ensure consistency throughout the UK.

*The suitability of methods of assessing excellence in teaching and research and the impact of research assessment on these activities*

16. Assessment of teaching in chemistry has not been carried out in chemistry by Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) since 1993, and when it was done it was part of the pilot stage of teaching assessment.

17. Assessment of research has significantly affected the research in universities generally and in chemistry departments specifically. The RAE has used peer review as its main element and this approach has the confidence of the community. The community remains sceptical about proposals for the use of metrics in the new Research Excellence Framework (REF) and looks forward to examining the results of the pilot studies.

18. Research Assessment has without doubt concentrated Funding Council derived research funds into fewer universities and this has had an effect on the viability of some chemistry departments which have consequently closed. On the other hand that concentration of funds has also meant that the higher rated departments have been able to strengthen their research infrastructure and provide a better environment for research.

19. The question arises, however, as to whether it is appropriate to concentrate research funding to such a degree. Strategically it makes sense to resource institutions well to allow them to invest in state of the art resources. On the other hand over concentration may lead to areas of the country where particular HEI research expertise are lacking.

20. Another consequence is the emphasis that (some) HEIs put on raising research funds either directly, through grant applications, or indirectly, by maximising the RAE grade. This emphasis can lead to an overly competitive culture which predicated against cooperative research and also serves to put a number of people off research careers, in particular women.

*The availability and adequacy of training in teaching methods for UK academics and the importance of teaching excellence for the academic career path, including consideration of the role of teaching fellows*

21. The RSC recognises the introduction of the compulsory teaching qualification for all new academics as a positive move forward and stresses the need for future analysis of whether this qualification has proved to be effective.

*The responsibilities of the Government and HEFCE in assuring (a) the quality of teaching provision and learning opportunities in UK HEIs; and (b) the balance between teaching and research in HEIs*

22. (a) Many universities have systems in place to assure the quality of teaching within their institution. The Government and HEFCE need to ensure that each institution has an adequate internal monitoring system.

23. (b) The RSC feels that it is the duty of the HEI to define their own strategies regarding the balance between teaching and research in HEIs.

#### DEGREE CLASSIFICATION

*Whether the methodologies used by UK HEIs to determine degree classifications and the distribution of degree classes awarded are appropriate, the potential methodologies for the standardisation of degree classifications within, and between, HEIs, and the effectiveness of the Quality Assurance Agency in monitoring degree standards*

24. The RSC concurs with the view of many in that the degree classification system is out of date. It is only relevant to UK HE and poorly understood elsewhere. The UK should be moving towards a more universal grade point average system with greater use of diploma supplements.

*The advantages and disadvantages of the UK's system of degree classification and the introduction of the Higher Education Academic Record*

25. Recent years have seen increased controversy about degree class inflation somewhat mirroring arguments about grade inflation at A-level. Degree classifications have long been part of the UK higher education system but, as with any grading system, suffers the disadvantage that candidates with almost the same mark can end up with different degree classes. The degree class system has some advantages for discriminating between groups of candidates for jobs or for higher degree funding, but remains a crude discriminator at the end of a long period of study.

26. Systems like the HE Academic Record provide a more sophisticated method for discriminating between graduates. For example, in a subject like chemistry where different branches of the subject require different skills, a potential employer will be able to judge more easily whether a particular candidate has the skills profile required for a specific role.

*The actions that universities, Government and others have taken, or should take, to maintain confidence in the value of degrees awarded by universities in the UK*

27. Universities should continue working with the Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRB) through their accreditation systems and so ensure degree programmes are professionally relevant.

*The relationship between degree classification and portability*

28. The Bologna Declaration has put in motion a series of reforms needed to make European Higher Education more competitive and more attractive for Europeans and for students and scholars from other continents. The UK degree classification system does not mirror the recommendations from the Bologna Declaration, is out of date, only relevant to the UK HE and poorly understood outside of the UK. This could hinder the portability of UK degrees.

*The extent to which student plagiarism is a problem in HE, and the availability and effectiveness of strategies to identify, penalise and combat plagiarism*

29. No comment.

#### STUDENT SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

*The effectiveness of initiatives to support student engagement in the formulation of HE policy, and how the success or otherwise of these initiatives is being assessed*

30. The RSC feels that it is good practice to involve students in the decision making process and welcomes activities such as the National Student's Survey.

*How the student experience differs in public and private universities*

31. No comment.

*Examples of reasons for, and potential strategies to reduce, the non-completion of higher education programmes by students*

32. Many students find the transition from school to university very difficult and as a result may choose to leave university. The RSC-managed Chemistry for our Future programme (funded by HEFCE as part of the Strategically Important and Vulnerable Subjects (SIVS) programme) is operating a number of projects aimed at improving the transition process for students on chemical science courses. [www.rsc.org/cfof](http://www.rsc.org/cfof)

33. The projects are focussing on:

- better preparation for the HE experience for incoming undergraduates
- supporting the students through mentoring schemes
- providing access to e-learning resources for the purposes of revision and as an alternative to traditional teaching methods
- developing first year curricula to provide better matching to students' prior learning

*The adequacy of UK higher education (HE) funding and student support packages, and implications for current and future levels of student debt*

34. As part of the RSC-managed Chemistry for our Future programme, a study has been undertaken by the Warwick Institute for Employment Research and the Higher Education Careers Services Unit into the factors affecting the post-university employment of UK Chemical Science graduates. Student debt was found to have a clear impact on post-graduation options, with many final year students stating that they would have to forgo further study as a result of debt. Some students also commented that the locations where they would be able to work would be limited by having to live with their parents or not being able to afford to travel far to work (see paragraph 8). This could have a negative impact on chemical science employers in the UK if they are unable to attract qualified applicants who are willing to relocate to particular areas of the country.

*Any further action required by the Government and/or HEFCE to ensure that UK HEIs offer students a world class educational experience*

35. No comment.

December 2008

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## Memorandum 66

### Submission from Engineering Councils UK

#### CALL FOR EVIDENCE: STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES INQUIRY

1. This response has been prepared by Engineering Council UK (EC<sup>UK</sup>). It is based on first-hand experience gained by EC<sup>UK</sup> as the UK accrediting body for engineering degrees and as holder of the national register of engineers and engineering technicians.

#### SUMMARY

2. Universities can be trusted to develop systems and criteria to assess applicants that suit their mission and the demands of their programmes.

3. The single biggest constraint on achieving wider participation in engineering HE is the requirement for a good understanding of mathematics on entry. Any programmes aimed at widening participation must therefore include strategies that enhance and support maths teaching.

4. Admissions processes must be fair and robust. They must also be applicable to the likely increasing numbers of applicants who are returning to learning and who therefore present with different qualifications and/or experience than applicants from school.

5. EC<sup>UK</sup> strongly supports the concerns expressed by the Engineering Professors Council (EPC) about the under-funding of engineering teaching in HE, and the risk to the long-term sustainability of engineering disciplines that are strategic to the UK, based on findings in a recent report commissioned by the EPC and the Engineering and Technology Board (ETB).<sup>217</sup> The quality of the student experience is increasingly under threat.

6. EC<sup>UK</sup> strongly supports the work of the HEA's Engineering Subject Centre to facilitate the spread of innovative teaching practice for engineering academics. It is very concerned about current proposals by the Higher Education Academy to reduce the funding of the Subject Centre.

7. EC<sup>UK</sup> is concerned about the possible detrimental effect on engineering education of a growing number of engineering academics not being professionally qualified engineers. This is reportedly caused by the priority and demands on an academic's time of the research assessment exercise, by the lack of recognition within HE for professional qualification as an engineer, and by a funding regime that militates against employing those from industry who lack a publications record.

8. It is difficult to see how QAA could be independent of government and funding agencies. Rather than simply reporting on HEIs, QAA should be given more channels for advising HEFCE and DIUS on trends in HE.

9. EC<sup>UK</sup> welcomes the recommendations of the Burgess Report, in particular the introduction of the HE Achievement Record (HEAR) alongside the existing honours degree classification system. The introduction of the HEAR has important advantages for the UK in striving for compatibility with the Bologna Process, leading to a wider understanding and recognition of UK qualifications within Europe and beyond.

10. Providers of UK engineering degrees have the added benefit of an internationally recognised EC<sup>UK</sup> degree accreditation process that complies with the aims of the UK's HE Concordat and that has been recommended as exemplary practice by the Higher Education Regulation Review Group (HERRG).

11. EC<sup>UK</sup> supports the recognition of an individual student's personal development planning. This provides an important opportunity for engineering students to begin recording the development of their engineering competence and instills good habits which will be necessary to underwrite their future continuing professional development and retention of professional status.

#### ABOUT EC<sup>UK</sup>

12. EC<sup>UK</sup> regulates the UK's engineering profession, setting and maintaining standards of competence and ethics for engineers and engineering technicians. It operates through 36 engineering institutions, which are licensed to assess members for inclusion on the EC<sup>UK</sup> Register of Engineers. This has three sections: Chartered Engineer, Incorporated Engineer and Engineering Technician. EC<sup>UK</sup> also formally represents the interests of UK engineers abroad. For more information visit: [www.engc.org.uk](http://www.engc.org.uk)

#### ADMISSIONS

13. The publication by EC<sup>UK</sup> in 2004 of the "Accreditation of Higher Education Programmes" handbook marked a shift in focus from looking at students' entry grades towards the consideration of learning outcomes when considering engineering programmes for accreditation. The accreditation criteria are rooted in the UK Standard for Professional Engineering Competence (UK-SPEC), which sets out the competence required for registration as a professional engineer or engineering technician.

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<sup>217</sup> The costs of teaching engineering degrees. EPC and ETB. Nov 2007. [http://www.etechnology.co.uk/\\_db/\\_documents/ETB\\_EPC\\_-\\_Costs\\_of\\_Teaching\\_Engineering\\_Degrees\\_Final\\_Full\\_Report.pdf](http://www.etechnology.co.uk/_db/_documents/ETB_EPC_-_Costs_of_Teaching_Engineering_Degrees_Final_Full_Report.pdf)

14. Notwithstanding the emphasis in accreditation processes on learning outcomes and output standards, HE engineering departments who seek EC<sup>UK</sup> accreditation are still required to provide information about programme entry and how the cohort extremes will be supported. UCAS data indicates that a quarter of applicants accepted to engineering courses in 2006–7 were from non-EU domiciled students, which may present particular challenges for the UK HE engineering admissions process. Our reflection since the introduction of UK-SPEC in 2004 is that universities can be trusted to develop systems and criteria to assess applicants that suit their mission and the demands of their programmes.

15. EC<sup>UK</sup> encourages wide access provided that the graduate outcomes can still be attained. Given the government's demographic data indicating a decline in 18 year olds from 2007 onwards, it is likely that future entry cohorts to HE will include increasing numbers of applicants who are already in the workplace and are returning to learning. Following the Langlands Report (2005) on Gateways into the Professions, EC<sup>UK</sup> was awarded funding to develop an integrated learning and professional development model for working engineers who register on an academic programme. Already nearly 50 students are enrolled on such innovative programmes that aim to attract those who would not otherwise have been attracted to HE. Admissions processes will need to take account of such students, and include fair and robust procedures for accrediting prior learning and experiential learning.

16. The 14–19 Diploma in Engineering presents an opportunity for students to see a clear pathway into engineering. EC<sup>UK</sup> looks forward to applications for registration from those achieving a (14-19) Diploma, and has encouraged its Licensed Members to carry out any necessary mapping exercises against the UK-SPEC standard competences to enable them to identify any gaps and then consider providing advice and guidance for Diploma learners, particularly in respect of additional and specialist learning.

17. With regard to widening participation, encouraging female participation in engineering and technology from 15% to a level more representative of HE as a whole remains a key issue (Engineering UK, 2008. ETB).

18. However, the single biggest constraint on achieving wider participation is that engineering requires a good understanding of mathematics on entry if students are not going to struggle.

#### THE BALANCE BETWEEN TEACHING AND RESEARCH

19. We support the concerns expressed by the Engineering Professors Council (EPC) about the under-funding of engineering teaching in HE, and the risk to the long-term sustainability of engineering disciplines that are strategic to the UK. These concerns are based on the findings in a report commissioned by the EPC and the ETB (2007) that demonstrate how under-funding has created an imbalance between the resources for, and the needs of, engineering subject teaching in HE, such that the quality of the student experience is increasingly under threat. The capacity for further efficiency savings is limited and funding must better reflect the true costs of teaching engineering, given the requirements for space, laboratory equipment and investment in changing technology.

20. Within the joint engineering accreditation process undertaken by the Engineering Accreditation Board (EAB) and administered by EC<sup>UK</sup>, we see evidence of innovative teaching practice and EAB endeavours to share this. In our view, the HEA's Engineering Subject Centre based at Loughborough University plays a vital role in supporting the development of new teaching methods by UK engineering academics, and EC<sup>UK</sup> strongly supports the work of this excellent centre. We are therefore extremely concerned by the proposals currently being discussed by the Higher Education Academy, which would significantly reduce the Centre's funding. The Engineering Subject Centre is very well respected within the engineering community, not only amongst academic departments but also within the professional bodies and other influential organisations such as the Royal Academy of Engineering and the Engineering Professors' Council. The Royal Academy of Engineering report on Engineers for the 21st Century (June 2007) praised the work of the subject centre and called for it to receive more resources if it was to help the sector implement the changes needed in engineering education to meet the demands of the knowledge led economy.

21. As part of the engineering accreditation process, data about engineering academics is required. EC<sup>UK</sup> is concerned about an apparent decline in the number of academic staff who are professionally qualified engineers. Thus, increasingly, engineering students are being taught by staff who may have little direct experience of engineering practice. Almost invariably, the reasons cited by academics for this lack of engagement with the engineering profession revolve around the pressing demands of the research assessment exercise and the subsequent lack of time available to devote to becoming professionally qualified. Further, funding constraints militate against universities employing engineering academics who are from industry as they lack the required publications record. Despite efforts by EC<sup>UK</sup> and some of the engineering professional bodies, the registration levels of engineering academics remain low, and are likely to remain so until there is some system of credit for this within the HE sector.

22. EC<sup>UK</sup> supports the work of the QAA and has collaborated with the agency to good effect resulting in QAA adopting the EC<sup>UK</sup>'s UK-SPEC degree output standards (2004) as the UK's engineering subject benchmark statement. Whilst it is ideal for the agency that quality assures to be independent of government and funding agencies, it is difficult to see how this could be effected. Rather than simply reporting on HEIs, QAA should be given more channels for advising HEFCE and DIUS on trends in HE.



## DEGREE CLASSIFICATION

23. EC<sup>UK</sup> is broadly supportive of the UK honours degree classification system, believing that this is understood by employers, and welcomes the recommendations of the Burgess Report, in particular the introduction of the HE Achievement Record (HEAR) alongside the existing honours degree classification system. The introduction of the HEAR will assist both students and employers, and importantly, it will assist the UK in striving for compatibility with the Bologna Process, leading to a wider understanding and recognition of UK qualifications within Europe and beyond.

24. In addition to degree classification, providers of UK engineering degrees have the added benefit of being able to apply for programme accreditation by EC<sup>UK</sup>. The process and criteria of EC<sup>UK</sup> degree accreditation have been reviewed internationally and deemed to be a high standard by the European Network for Accreditation of Engineering Education (ENAAE). Thus, in addition to the UK system for degree classification, students, graduates, employers and society in general can have a high level of confidence in an EC<sup>UK</sup>-accredited degree.

25. As a consequence of the ENAAE review, EC<sup>UK</sup> has been licensed to award the ENAAE's EUR-ACE label to EC<sup>UK</sup> accredited degrees, so UK engineering departments have a further mechanism available to them to help maintain confidence in their degrees outside the UK.

26. EC<sup>UK</sup> remains committed to ensuring that UK degrees are valued outside the UK and seeks to do so as a signatory to various international agreements.

27. The methodology used by EC<sup>UK</sup> for engineering degree accreditation was also reviewed by the Higher Education Regulation Review Group (HERRG) and deemed to meet the aims of the HE Concordat: reducing the burden on universities without compromising quality standards. Further, the Final Report of the HERRG recommended that government use the engineering profession as an example of good regulatory practice.

## STUDENT SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

28. Non-completion of HE engineering programmes is highly correlated with poor A level performance and probably inadequate maths skills. Any programmes aimed at widening participation must therefore include strategies that enhance and support maths teaching. The establishment of "maths drop-in centres" or equivalent by some universities to support engineering students have been deemed good practice by engineering accrediting panels, but these are resource-intensive.

29. EC<sup>UK</sup> supports the recognition within the Burgess Report of the importance of an individual student's personal development planning. For engineering students this would provide an important opportunity for them to begin recording the development of their engineering competence and instills good habits which will be necessary to underwrite their future continuing professional development and retention of professional status.

January 2009

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## Memorandum 67

### Submission from the Biosciences Federation

#### STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

##### *Introduction*

The Biosciences Federation (BSF) is a single authority representing the UK's biological expertise, providing independent opinion to inform public policy and promoting the advancement of the biosciences. The Federation was established in 2002, and is actively working to influence policy and strategy in biology-based research—including funding and the interface with other disciplines—and in school and university teaching. It is also concerned about the translation of research into benefits for society, and about the impact of legislation and regulations on the ability of those working in teaching and research to deliver effectively. The Federation brings together the strengths of 45 member organisations (plus nine associate members), including the Institute of Biology. The Institute of Biology is an independent and charitable body charged by Royal Charter to further the study and application of the UK's biology and allied biosciences. It has 14,000 individual members and represents 37 additional affiliated societies (see Appendix). This represents a cumulative membership of over 65,000 individuals, covering the full spectrum of biosciences from physiology and neuroscience, biochemistry and microbiology, to ecology, taxonomy and environmental science.

##### *Summary*

- Government should ensure that school provision, qualifications and assessments facilitate widening participation.
- The playing field is by no means level for research and teaching.

- 
- Lack of adequate funding for biological research degrees in British universities leads to skills shortages.
  - The quality of teaching provision is generally good across the sector in the biosciences.
  - Bioscience courses have not yet been allocated additional funding for learning facilities to allow the course content to reflect the discipline in the 21st century.
  - At most HEIs, teaching quality and the scholarship of teaching and learning still count for considerably less than research in determining progress up the career ladder.
  - A culture that encourages and recognizes teaching excellence needs to be established.
  - The current system of degree classification does not assure equivalence between HEIs.
  - There needs to be provision of funds into the biosciences to allow students access to top-rate equipment and to facilitate student placements for enhancing employability.

### 1: Admissions

#### *(Effectiveness of the process for admission to Higher Education)*

i. The Government needs to appreciate that many vocational qualifications prepare students less well for University than A levels.

#### *(Government targets for Higher Education participation)*

ii. The UK needs to be more strategic about the areas of HE in which it wishes widening participation to be focused.

#### *(Widening participation initiatives, developing and promoting fair access and admissions policies)*

iii. The Government should ensure that school provision, qualifications and assessments facilitate widening participation. The school education system favours the better off. For example the policy of being able to re-submit coursework and re-sit assessments discriminates against parents in the lower economic groups who do not know how to help their child and/or are unable to pay for re-sits. This is not about resourcing of schools but about creating a level playing field for assessing the pupils.

iv. There needs to be a clear, widely publicised provision for under-privileged students, so that financial considerations are not a factor in actually making an application. Publicity of these provisions, together with the courses and opportunities available in the Higher Education sector should be improved in schools where students do not commonly proceed to further education.

### 2: The balance between teaching and research

#### *(Levels of funding for, and the balance between, teaching and research in UK HEIs)*

v. The playing field is by no means level for research and teaching, with the Research Assessment Exercise driving most HEIs to put undue emphasis on the former. In general, academic staff are appointed on the basis of their research record rather than on their ability to teach or interest in teaching innovation. There is a perception that researchers bringing income into the University are more “highly prized”. This should not be the case as excellence in teaching is paramount to creating a world class education system. The creation of University Teacher posts has gone some way to resolve this but perhaps this could be developed further.

vi. The question of funding will result in different answers from those whose primary interest is in biological research and those that are more strongly interested in teaching their subject. Funding is never as high as one would wish. It is more difficult for young lecturers starting out to get funded or decide where they should put their greatest effort.

vii. Research funding gets more and more difficult, with success rates from grant applications being about one in 25, unless the lecturer already has a track record. In some universities a higher proportion of staff time is given to research and there is sometimes a subsidy of research by teaching, especially in research intensive departments. In the less intensive research departments there is often a budget deficit.

viii. Lack of adequate funding for biological research degrees in British universities leads to skills shortages for example within the pharmaceutical sector. This has led to Learned Societies such as the British Pharmacological Society (BPS) providing schemes to maintain taught practical classes in UK universities. The BPS has seen the number of universities who fit their funding criteria drop from 12 to eight, which can only exacerbate skills shortages in this area. It would appear that the government has responsibility as it set the level of funding for practicals.

*(The quality of teaching provision and learning facilities in UK)*

ix. The quality of teaching provision is generally good across the sector in the biosciences. However, it is disappointing that, unlike chemistry and physics, bioscience courses have not yet been allocated additional funding for learning facilities to allow the course content to reflect the discipline in the 21st century. To do this successfully is at least as costly as teaching physics and chemistry, requiring expensive specialist equipment and facilities (eg animal houses, plant growth facilities) and adequate provision for practical and field work.

*(Availability and adequacy of training in teaching methods for UK academics and the importance of teaching excellence)*

x. Although most HEIs now insist that new lecturing staff undergo formal training in teaching (normally an HEA-accredited Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education), the reality is that this is often not regarded as a high priority either by University senior managers or (by association) by the participants themselves. At most HEIs, teaching quality and the scholarship of teaching and learning still count for considerably less than research in determining progress up the career ladder.

*(Responsibilities of the Government and HEFCE in assuring the quality of teaching provision and learning opportunities in UK HEIs)*

xi. The issue is not one of assuring quality of teaching provision and learning opportunities in UK HEIs (which is already addressed through the work of the Quality Assurance Agency) but of establishing a culture that encourages and recognizes teaching excellence.

**3: Degree classification***(Methodologies, standardization, quality assurance)*

xii. The current system does not assure equivalence between HEIs. The methodology for calculating degree classifications varies widely across disciplines and HEIs and even within HEIs. Few other countries have the same system of classifying degrees as the UK.

xiii. Standardisation is extremely important as it is clear that many believe a 2:1 from for example Oxbridge is of higher standard than a 2:1 from for example an ex-college/polytechnic. External examiners tend to be drawn from similar era of institutions. If the QAA were to standardize these then some newer institutions would probably not ever award 1sts—this comes from the better students achieving entry at the more competitive institutes in the first place

xiv. Classification boundaries are arbitrary (the bottom 2i is effectively identical to the top 2ii) so there may be some merit in letting the transcript speak for itself. On the other hand, classified degrees have a “currency” that employers understand. It is important that any revised system of classification is readily understood by employers and facilitates the comparison of applicants from very different HEIs

x. 1st class degrees vary between institutions. Failure to recognize such differences in rigid application forms such as for foundation year and specialist training posts in medicine leads to difficulties in grading applicants. The institution granting the degree as well as its class must be available to make a valid assessment

xv. There is a general perception that there has been a shift in the distribution of degree classifications with many more students receiving a 2:1. Without a 2:1 it is impossible to progress to many post-graduate studies e.g PhD. Therefore, the introduction of Higher education Academic Record may be a more accurate reflection of a student’s overall academic ability and achievements. Whilst there may be instances of grade (degree class inflation) in a few places, we still need a substantial body of evidence to be certain that this is a cause of general concern.

xvi. Undoubtedly with increasing student numbers since the 1980s (and especially the last decade or so), more and more degrees are being awarded, and as with A-levels, more students are getting top grades. This has caused many critics to be concerned about falling standards. Inevitably with more students graduating, the “scarcity” value of having a degree declines.

xvii. The structure of university degrees has evolved, so we are not comparing like with like. There is more modularity and more course work within the present day degree structure, whereas in the past, end of year examinations provided the major, if not the only form of assessment.

*(Student plagiarism in HE, the availability and effectiveness of strategies to identify, penalise and combat it)*

xviii. Plagiarism is possible to detect, but there needs to be a will to detect it. Plagiarism from the internet is currently a problem but this can be deterred (rather than combated) in lots of ways; innovative assessments- assessments requiring personal input; use of detection software. Advice is available- from the plagiarism advisory service and from the HEA and, especially, the HEA subject centres. Institutions require clear, concise policy on plagiarism carefully explained to the students at the outset of their studies so they are fully aware of the consequences. There should be provision and training of staff in anti-plagiarism tools/software for staff.

4: *Student support and engagement*

xix. There needs to be increased flexibility between modes of attendance. Since most “wastage” occurs in year one we need to adopt strategies as highlighted by several well known projects to ease the transition into university but, very importantly, to ensure that students are on the right course. Institutions need to create a sense of belonging and promote those activities which encourage the “socialisation” of the student. Lifelong learning opportunities would be more conducive to keeping students rather than rigid government targets

xx. Government and HEFCE need to be more strategic and put funds where there is identified employer need. They need to provide funds into the biosciences to allow students access to top-rate equipment and to facilitate student placements for enhancing employability.

This response was written with contributions from the Biosciences Education Committee, the Institute of Biology, the British Pharmacological Society and the Society of Endocrinology.

**APPENDIX**

MEMBER SOCIETIES OF THE BIOSCIENCES FEDERATION

Association for the Study of Animal Behaviour  
Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry  
AstraZeneca  
Biochemical Society  
Bioscience Network  
British Andrology Society  
British Association for Psychopharmacology  
British Biophysical Society  
British Ecological Society  
British Lichen Society  
British Mycological Society  
British Neuroscience Association  
British Pharmacological Society  
British Psychological Society  
British Society of Animal Science  
British Society for Developmental Biology  
British Society for Immunology  
British Society for Matrix Biology  
British Society for Medical Mycology  
British Society for Neuroendocrinology  
British Society for Plant Pathology  
British Society for Proteome Research  
British Toxicology Society  
Experimental Psychology Society  
Genetics Society  
Heads of University Biological Sciences  
Heads of University Centres for Biomedical Science  
Institute of Animal Technology  
Institute of Biology  
Institute of Horticulture  
Laboratory Animal Science Association  
Linnean Society  
Nutrition Society  
Physiological Society  
Royal Microscopical Society  
Royal Society of Chemistry  
Society for Applied Microbiology

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Society for Endocrinology  
Society for Experimental Biology  
Society for General Microbiology  
Society for Reproduction and Fertility  
Syngenta  
Universities Bioscience Managers Association  
UK Environmental Mutagen Society  
Zoological Society of London

ASSOCIATE MEMBER SOCIETIES

Association of Medical Research Charities  
BioIndustry Association  
Biotechnology & Biological Sciences Research Council  
GlaxoSmithKline  
Merck, Sharp & Dohme  
Pfizer  
Royal Society  
Wellcome Trust  
Medical Research Council

ADDITIONAL SOCIETIES REPRESENTED BY THE INSTITUTE OF BIOLOGY

Anatomical Society of Great Britain & Ireland  
Association for Radiation Research  
Association of Applied Biologists  
Association of Clinical Embryologists  
Association of Clinical Microbiologists  
Association of Veterinary Teachers and Research Workers  
British Association for Cancer Research  
British Association for Lung Research  
British Association for Tissue Banking  
British Crop Production Council  
British Inflammation Research Association  
British Marine Life Study Society  
British Microcirculation Society  
British Society for Ecological Medicine  
British Society for Research on Ageing  
British Society of Soil Science  
Fisheries Society of the British Isles  
Freshwater Biological Association  
Galton Institute  
Institute of Trichologists  
International Association for Plant Tissue Culture & Biotechnology  
International Biodeterioration and Biodegradation Society  
International Biometric Society  
International Society for Applied Ethology  
Marine Biological Association of the UK  
Primate Society of Great Britain  
PSI—Statisticians in the Pharmaceutical Industry  
Royal Entomological Society  
Royal Zoological Society of Scotland

Scottish Association for Marine Science  
Society for Anaerobic Microbiology  
Society for Low Temperature Biology  
Society for the Study of Human Biology  
Society of Academic & Research Surgery  
Society of Cosmetic Scientists  
Society of Pharmaceutical Medicine  
Universities Federation for Animal Welfare

ADDITIONAL SOCIETIES REPRESENTED BY THE LINNEAN SOCIETY

Botanical Society of the British Isles  
Systematics Association

*December 2008*

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**Memorandum 68**

**Submission from Professor Robert Burgess, Vice Chancellor, the University of Leicester and Chair of the Burgess Implementation Steering Group**

STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

*Summary*

This submission:

- Provides a brief outline of the work that the various advisory (Burgess) groups have undertaken in relation to degree classification and recording student achievement;
- Highlights the principles that have guided the work;
- Indicates the criteria used when considering proposals for change;
- Comments on the relevant questions, drawing upon the work of the various groups; and,
- Briefly reports on the current trialling of the Higher Education Achievement Report.

INTRODUCTION

1. Submission from Professor Robert Burgess, Vice-Chancellor, the University of Leicester and chair, Burgess Implementation Steering Group. Previous chair of the Measuring and Recording Student Achievement Scoping Group and Steering Group (the Burgess Group).

2. The various advisory groups established by UniversitiesUK and GuildHE, supported by the funding councils, the Quality Assurance Agency, the Higher Education Academy and other organisations have been considering the issue of degree classification since 2004. The issue which these groups saw as the core focus of their work, to ensure that student achievement is recorded and represented in its broadest sense, has been an issue that many in the sector have considered for a much longer time than the existence of the groups. This has been demonstrated by the way the higher education sector has always thoughtfully and positively engaged with discussions on the topic even if they have not necessarily agreed with our proposals.

3. The groups involved in supporting this work have consistently agreed that the UK honours degree is a robust and highly-valued qualification. The UK higher education experience is considered to be of a very high standard. The interest of the groups has been in the ways in which the diverse and complex achievements of honours graduates can be appropriately summarised and represented by a single judgement or number, drawn from a small classificatory scale.

4. In summary the work undertaken since 2004 came to the conclusion that, for a number of reasons outlined below, that while the honours degree is of a very high quality and admired worldwide the degree classification system is no longer fit for purpose for a modern, complex and diverse higher education system. The group considered making it more detailed with more possible outcomes but agreed this would be too complex. A shorter, simpler classification scale was consulted upon but it still replicated some of the problems associated with the current system. The group came to the conclusion that the problems with the degree classification were problems associated with the use of a summative judgement.

5. The groups recognised that one strength of the existing system was that it was well recognised and a change to a different system would be complicated, costly, take a long time to bed in and given that it would replicate some of the existing problems be of questionable value. Removing a summative judgement itself would be a radical step and there are strong concerns about this not just from institutions but from students

and employers as well. The groups preferred approach is to test and trial the Higher Education Achievement Report, with the degree classification system remaining in place, so that the value of this new approach can be demonstrated and the potential for it to replace the degree classification system gains strength.

6. In carrying out their work, the various Burgess groups have been guided by an important and valuable set of principles that are outlined in the attached Memoranda.

7. Whilst it would not be possible to completely satisfy all of these principles, they served as a very good benchmark for the work of the groups and we commend them to the committee.

#### DEGREE CLASSIFICATION

*Whether the methodologies used by UK HEIs to determine degree classifications and the distribution of degree classes awarded are appropriate, the potential methodologies for the standardization of degree classifications within, and between, HEIs, and the effectiveness of the Quality Assurance Agency in monitoring degree standards.*

8. The various Burgess groups considered what would be the characteristics of an ideal classification system, or methodology and identified a number of criteria which are also outlined in the attached Memoranda.

9. We consulted widely on both the principles and criteria and they received considerable positive feedback, with varying degrees of emphasis on particular aspects. Clearly, the criteria cannot all be satisfied and can come into conflict but they provide a comprehensive indicator of the issues that need to be considered when discussing assessment and classification processes and any system-wide change.

10. Higher Education Institutions outline their methodologies in their assessment/academic regulations which are widely available and often included in student course handbooks. These regulations both inform staff of the procedures operated by the institution and make it clear to students what the expectations are and how the degree classifications are calculated and awarded. They are made widely available to all students and staff.

11. These regulations will have been discussed throughout the institution, within departments and faculties, and approved by the Senate, which represents all the academic subjects within an institution. In particular the regulations will show how the institution calculates the final degree classification (the “algorithm”) which takes account of differing assessment methods, different grading methods, achievement at different levels and combined subjects/modular structures.

12. Institutions set regulations that they consider appropriate to their circumstances and given the extensive involvement of academic staff, they benefit from the experience academic staff have had in other institutions and through the roles they play as external examiners for other institutions.

13. The setting of academic regulations are not simply an internal matter given the role of the Quality Assurance Agency the regulations will be informed by the code of practice on assessment and the frameworks for higher education qualifications throughout the UK. Professional, Statutory or Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs) will also play a significant role, especially those that accredit programmes and courses that lead to a professional or vocational qualification. PSRBs are often involved in the design, approval, monitoring and review of courses with some universities having arrangements for joint accreditation and/or validation events.

#### METHODOLOGIES FOR STANDARDIZATION—WITHIN HEIS

14. From the individual academic/department level some members of staff will have experience of being external examiners in other universities and participating in validation/periodic/annual review panels in other universities so this experience will be brought into departmental discussion and feed into discussions at course boards, examination boards and when the department itself goes through validation/periodic/annual review. They will also respond to the comments and advice of external examiners and there will be the reports of professional and statutory bodies which will be considered at various levels within the university.

15. Centrally the academic registry and the examinations office (or equivalent) will have a key role in setting, monitoring and implementing the regulations of the institution. These regulations will be informed by practice in other institutions and the QAA Academic Framework. They will also have a key role in terms of collating, considering and analyzing degree results. Often there are additional faculty or school based structures which allow for further consideration of practice and outcomes across a number of departments within a school or faculty.

#### METHODOLOGIES FOR STANDARDIZATION—BETWEEN HEIS

16. Practice within HEIs is informed by the experience of some staff as external examiners and their participation in other institutions quality assurance processes. Staff with specific responsibility for this area in institutions will be members of networks, such as the Academic Registrars Council which are constantly sharing best practice.

17. Professional and Statutory Bodies play a significant role in terms of standardization of practice across institutions within particular subjects, for example the Engineering Council operates the United Kingdom Standard for Professional Engineering Competence (UK-SPEC) which outlines key learning outcomes that institutions will need to incorporate into their programmes and assessment strategies. The accreditation visit will include consideration of examination papers and marking strategies and will review the internal quality assurance system.

18. The processes and frameworks of the Quality Assurance Agency also provide methodologies for standardization across institutions.

19. Although the assessment regulations will have been judged appropriate by the university and this judgement will have been informed by the external examining, internal quality assurance and external QAA processes, comparability of degree classifications remains a challenge for the sector both within institutions and between institutions. The groups have seen this challenge primarily from the perspective of a large, diverse, complex and ever-changing higher education system having to channel its outcomes into the “straight-jacket” of the degree classification system rather than from a concern that standards were dropping or being undermined.

20. A personal view, but I believe the membership of the current group and past groups would agree, any centrally driven or imposed attempt to have a national marking scheme in higher education would severely undermine the professional status and role of academic staff. More often than not it would call into question the academic judgement of individual academic staff rather than the marking schemes of universities and for there to be central interference in academic judgement would be a disaster.

21. Effectiveness of QAA—the audit process is used by universities as an opportunity for self-reflection, the audit reports have long been used by the sector to identify and share good practice. The *learning from* publications have significantly helped this by bringing together and reflecting on institutional practice in key areas in single publications. The fact that the QAA can highlight the issues of concern, based on audit evidence and provide information on the wider context of good practice in HEIs allows and encourages a mature evidence-based debate.

*The advantages and disadvantages of the UK’s system of degree classification and the introduction of the Higher Education Academic Record.*

22. The advantages of the degree classification system include;

- Well known both at home and abroad;
- To a large degree still understood and trusted by employers;
- It is durable;
- It accommodates differences between subjects;
- Existing systems are aligned to this;
- Provides an incentive to students; and,
- Helps employers to screen large numbers of applications.

23. The disadvantages of the degree classification system

- A summative system, which gives the appearance of “signing-off” a person’s education with a simple numerical indicator, is at odds with lifelong learning. It encourages students and employers to focus on one final outcome and perceived “end point”, rather than opening them to the concept of a range of different types and levels of achievement, which are each part of an ongoing process of learning that will continue beyond the attainment of their degree;
- There is a need to do justice to the full range of student experience by allowing a wider recognition of achievement to be made public;
- The higher education sector has been transformed out of all recognition from that which gave rise to the traditional honours degree classification mechanism, which was devised for a traditional concept of higher education in the 19th Century;
- The present system cannot capture achievement in some key areas of interest to students and employers and many employers could be missing out on the skills and experience of potential recruits merely because these students had not attained a First/Upper Second;
- The focus on the top two degree classes wrongly reinforces an impression that a Lower Second or a Third Class degree is not an achievement when, in fact students with such degrees have met the particular standard required for honours degree level, graduate qualifications;
- There is a fixation on achieving a number that is considered “good” to the detriment of other information; and,
- Institutional methods for calculating the degree classification could be clearer in order to help students’ understanding of what they are being awarded and what is being recognised by the institution.



## 24. The possible advantages of the Higher Education Achievement Report

- Builds on existing information provided by institutions;
- Provides the opportunity to highlight a wider range of student achievements (eg employment skills, work experience, volunteering, representing or working for the students' union—subject to validation by the HEI);
- May provide a more effective focus for information given that it combines and develops the existing transcript and the European Diploma Supplement

## 25. The possible disadvantages of the Higher Education Achievement Report

- May provide too much information for employers (although work is begin undertaken to ensure that this is not the case);
- May lead to students and others being able to “reinvent” the degree classification from the more detailed information.

26. The current model of the Higher Education Achievement Report is available from the final report of the Measuring and Record Student Achievement Steering Group (the “Burgess Group”)—  
[http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Publications/Bookshop/Documents/Burgess\\_final.pdf](http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Publications/Bookshop/Documents/Burgess_final.pdf)

27. The HEAR, with support from the funding councils across the UK, is being trialled by eighteen institutions:

University of Leicester; Goldsmiths, University of London; University of St Andrews; University of Manchester; Newcastle University; University College London; University of Aberystwyth; University of Northumbria; University of Wales Institute, Cardiff; University of Derby; University of Northampton; University of Gloucestershire; University of Greenwich; Keele University; University of Ulster; University for the Creative Arts; York St John University; and Newman University College.

28. The trialling will involve two distinct phases, the first will trial the HEAR with data relating to students who have already graduated across a limited range of subjects. The second phase will involve “live trials with existing students and will be starting in the early Spring of 2009.

*The actions that universities, Government and others have taken, or should take, to maintain confidence in the value of degrees awarded by universities in the UK.*

29. The Burgess groups have consistently stated that the UK honours degree is a robust and highly valued qualification and the student experience is consistently rated, by students, as high quality. The groups, however, have still expended significant effort to consider ways in which the degree classification system can be improved, we have been impressed by the willingness of the vast majority of institutions to consider our proposals and engage in constructive debate, demonstrating the seriousness with which the sector considers degree classification.

30. The key conclusion that the Steering Group drew from its work is outlined in the attached Memoranda which was a recognition that any change would involve significant risks and any changes should be thoroughly tested before implementation was considered.

31. The external examiner system in many cases does provide a robust and challenging enhancement mechanism that promotes the sharing and understanding of good practice. Whilst some of the current criticisms are valid in some cases these should not necessarily lead to the scrapping of the entire system.

32. We are working with the Higher Education Academy to bring together practitioners across the sector to share and develop good practice in assessment, following the express wish for this by those colleagues from the sector who have engaged with our debate. This adds to existing good practice developed and shared by existing academic and professional networks and such bodies as the subject centres managed by the Higher Education Academy.

## MEMORANDA

Principles underpinning the work of the Measuring and Recording Student Achievement Steering Group:

- to ensure that the interests of students are a primary concern of all aspects of the Group's work;
- to respect institutional autonomy and academic professionalism;
- to ensure that proposals are, as far as possible, “owned” by the sector via effective communication and consultation;
- to propose change which has general support, even if a significant minority of institutions are opposed to it;
- not to shy away from suggesting radical change if this is the consensus of the Group;
- to ensure clarity about the problems we are trying to address/opportunities we are trying to exploit or create;

- to ensure that proposals are, as far as possible, evidence-based through reviewing previous work as well as commissioning further research and highlighting examples of good practice;
- at all times to be concerned about the possible burden of recommendations on institutions and staff;
- proposals should, where possible, go with the grain of existing developments; and.
- proposals must be seen to be useful by the sector and contain practical examples to show they are workable.

*(Beyond the honours degree classification—The Burgess Group final report, UniversitiesUK, October 2007, pages 11–12)*

Key criteria “that would characterise an ideal classification system and against which and new approach or system should be considered”:

- acceptability: should be acceptable to all stakeholders;
- administrative efficiency: the process should be as efficient as possible and not increase the administrative burden on staff;
- equity/fairness: similar levels of performance should be recorded in a similar way;
- information: should provide appropriate information to meet a range of different needs;
- motivation: should encourage learners to achieve their full potential;
- reliability/consistency: should produce reliable and consistent results regardless of time, subject or institution;
- simplicity: should be as simple as possible for stakeholders, particularly external stakeholders, to understand;
- transparency: the record of how the learner’s achievement is arrived at should be clear and transparent to all stakeholders;
- validity: should be robust and credible in academic terms; and,
- verification: should be verifiable.

*(Beyond the honours degree classification—The Burgess Group final report, UniversitiesUK, October 2007, pages 17–18)*

#### KEY CONCLUSION

“Our deliberations have shown, however, that both conceptually and practically, establishing a replacement system for the current honours degree classification is fraught with critical dangers that would need to be fully addressed before such a radical change was made. Furthermore, consensus among wider stakeholder groups about a replacement approach has been difficult to achieve. We acknowledge that, although our work has stimulated considerable interest and thoughtful and reflective responses, reactions from stakeholders have been mixed and some parts of the sector remain largely unconvinced of the need for radical change. With all of this in mind, we have tempered our proposals by recommending a stage of detailed exploration, development and testing to be carried out in parallel with, and complementary to, the continuation of the existing honours degree classification system at a pace which we trust the sector will find reasonable.”

*(Beyond the honours degree classification—The Burgess Group final report, UniversitiesUK, October 2007, paragraph 55, page 33)*

January 2009

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**Memorandum 69**  
**Submission from Staffordshire University**

**SUMMARY POINTS**

- The introduction of 14–19 diplomas should be welcomed in their own right and for their potential contribution to improving the HEIPR which is currently falling well short of the 50% target.
- Compact agreements we believe are an excellent method of motivating young people to consider progressing to University.
- Broad support for Lifelong Learning Networks in the provision of additional opportunities for potential students by creating clear and transparent progression routes into HE for vocational learners.
- The University welcomes the proposed HEFCE changes to how the Widening Participation premium is allocated but greater clarity is needed around targeting, accountability and evaluation.
- There needs to be greater alignment between the government’s expectation of greater flexibility in provision and funding models. In particular, the government needs to radically rethink how it incentivises part-time students and employers to develop their skills and contribute to the economy.
- To ensure that creativity and innovation in teaching and learning continues to flourish it would be appropriate that a proportion of the replacement fund to the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF) (say 30–40%) should be dedicated for this purpose.
- It is absolutely essential that all universities engage in research and scholarship and that this is appropriate to and aligned to their mission. This diversity in research should be recognised in terms of a funding methodology that ensures that the infrastructure for research is supported in all universities.
- The continued professionalisation of both academic and academic support staff is essential to the ongoing quality enhancement of the sector.
- The Government should be confident in the findings of the Quality Assurance Agency and, hence, in the teaching provision, learning opportunities and value of degrees awarded by universities in the UK. The work of the QAA should be more proactively promoted to prospective students and employers.
- The introduction of the Higher Education Academic Record (HEAR) is at the pilot stage will need careful evaluation. The current system of the UK’s systems of degree classification has served the sector and students well over the years and is well understood by employers and students alike.

**1. ADMISSIONS**

1.1 The sector as a whole has made significant advances in providing alternative routes into higher education. Staffordshire University is at the forefront of recognising alternative routes into Higher Education, attracting many students from diverse backgrounds and offering a variety of non-traditional qualifications. The principal criterion is that students are admitted on the basis that they are able to demonstrate their potential to succeed. It is recognised that this is not always demonstrated through the achievement of formal qualifications.

1.2 It is disappointing that recruitment levels to the first wave of Diplomas have been low. However, we believe that they will become an increasingly attractive option. Staffordshire University has been involved in vocational qualifications and admissions projects for some time and we were the first HEI in the area to produce and share our admissions statements with local schools and colleges, local authorities, connexions advisors and other stakeholders with regard to the new diplomas. All our Faculties are involved at the developmental stages of the new diplomas and we have a diploma working group within the University to enable us to develop a co-ordinated approach to the University’s position and responses to this new progression route into HE.

1.3 While entrance tests are becoming more common in the sector, the University has not introduced these. However, all applicants are interviewed for particular awards ie nursing and art and design courses where portfolios are also considered. We have a very effective admissions process due to our centralised admissions team and close liaison with Schools and Faculties.

1.4 Compact agreements we believe are an excellent method of motivating young people to consider progressing to University. Staffordshire University is part of Aimhigher’s HE CARD scheme which offers young people the opportunity to make informed decisions about their future. Together with nine other universities, plus the Open University, Staffordshire University has made a promise to all students completing the HE CARD goals that they will receive special consideration when applying to one of the universities involved in the scheme. In addition, Staffordshire University also provides a number of its own progression opportunities.

1.5 Staffordshire University is the lead university for the regional Lifelong Learning Network. These networks have provided additional opportunities for potential students by creating clear and transparent progression routes into HE for vocational learners. However, it is too early to evaluate their success in this

key area. In addition, Foundation Degree provision helps many students to study in their locality prior to topping up Foundation Degrees on campus. The Staffordshire University Regional Federation is a very good example of successful partnership working between HE and FE so as to provide local HE progression opportunities.

1.6 The University welcomes the proposed HEFCE changes to how the Widening Participation premium is allocated. In future entrants from the most disadvantaged quintiles will attract funding at four times the rate of those from the second most disadvantaged quintile. This is to be welcomed as it recognises the cost of engaging the most disadvantaged groups. Similarly we welcome the de-coupling of retention and widening participation monies. However institutions need a strong guide as to the level of accountability required for widening access monies, the level of evaluation and how prescriptive HEFCE intends to be regarding targeting. There are particular concerns regarding adult learners as guidelines at present tend toward the school-centric.

1.7 The latest HEIPR figures produced in April 2008 (for 2006–7) records the participation rate for 17–30 year olds as 40%, which is less than the previous year. Therefore, it seems unlikely that the 50% target will be achieved by 2010. This possibly reflects that qualification framework is not appropriate for all potential learners. Over the longer term, however, the introduction of the new diplomas should assist increased participation.

## 2. THE BALANCE BETWEEN TEACHING AND RESEARCH

2.1 For all universities teaching and learning are important core activities and core funding for these activities are for most Universities the most significant component of their income. Important influences on the level of funding include the price band, whether part-time or full-time, premiums related to widening participation, foundation degrees. The current funding regime to a large extent tends not to be based on recognising student achievements, insofar as institutions will not receive funding for a student if that student leaves the institution before completing his/her course of study. This could be defined as not submitting the final piece of assessment in the final module. It is anticipated that this anomaly will be addressed in the revised Teaching Funding Method. There is also a disconnect between the government's desire for greater flexibility and the funding model. This is most clearly seen in the case of part-time students studying over an extended period. However, this is also apparent in the increasingly popular two year fast track degrees; at Staffordshire University there over 150 students on this type of award. Institutions receive only the equivalent of two years of funding (plus a 50% premium for a long course) whereas students study the same number of credits as three year students.

2.2 The current Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF) has been very helpful in supporting a range of innovative and creative learning and teaching developments in institutions including the valued research informed teaching strand (which has benefited post-1992 universities in particular). However, the recent HEFCE consultation on the future of the TQEF proposes that its successor fund should be embedded in a University's core budget and would not be subject to the current accountability requirements. This could result in a significant proportion of this funding not being ring fenced for teaching enhancement. To ensure that innovation in teaching enhancement continues to take place then it would be appropriate that a proportion of this funding (say 30–40%) should be dedicated for this purpose.

2.3 It is absolutely essential that all universities engage in research and scholarship and that this is appropriate to and aligned to their mission. The current RAE funding arrangements focuses very much, and rewards, research of international significance (4\* research). It is recognised that the funding of this type of research is important for a number of reasons. However, 1\* level research is of national importance and is often most appropriate to many SMEs, public sector bodies and charities. Much of 1\* level research is applied research which gives a direct benefit to companies and other organisations for whom it is tailored. However, universities that focus on this important 1\* level research receive little or no QR funding. As Million + have proposed "the QR allocation should recognise the importance of funding the diverse range of research that is demanded by the diversity of the public and private sectors in the UK. QR funding should ensure that the infrastructure for research is supported in all universities." Whether this is via QR or by some other approach would need detailed exploration. At Staffordshire University, to reflect that research is very much applied in nature and has strong relationships with business and industry and the public sector, a number of Applied Research Centres have been established to provide a clear focus for our activity.

2.4 The continued professionalisation of academic and academic support staff is essential to the ongoing quality enhancement of the sector. Staffordshire University, which is perhaps not untypical, has a range of development opportunities for staff. This includes an accredited professional development framework to support the enhancement in learning and teaching. A key component of this framework is a Post Graduate Certificate in Higher and Professional Development which although primarily designed for newly appointed lecturers, is also made available to experienced staff. It is very closely aligned to the strategic direction of the University by having a module focussing specifically on technology based learning. In addition a progression route is now available onto a Diploma and Masters stage, and this is currently being linked to requirements in the career development of lecturers.

2.5 Acknowledging the fact that the student experience in universities involves more than lecturing staff, Staffordshire University also have a well developed framework of accredited course for support staff. In particular the Working in HE Award, the Foundation Degree in Professional Support for Education and

the Higher Education Leadership and Practice Certificate. All these awards ensure that everyone working in the University has a wide perspective on the complexities of the organisation and how collectively it impacts on the student learning experience.

2.6 The University also operates a Learning and Teaching Fellow Scheme which we believe is a valuable way of recognising and rewarding excellence. We have also had some success with the National scheme. In broad terms we believe that the national scheme is fit for purpose, however, we also think it needs reviewing to ensure that a significant focus is on rewarding excellence in teaching (and supporting teaching) particularly at non-senior levels in Universities.

2.7 All HEIs are audited at regular intervals by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). Preparation for such audits is taken extremely seriously by HEIs and all reports are published and in the public domain. The Government should be confident in the findings of the QAA and, hence, in the teaching provision, learning opportunities and value of degrees awarded by universities in the UK. The External Examiner system in the UK is well established and robust.

The majority of university qualifications in the UK are credit rated and their portability should not be in doubt. Government should do more to reinforce the work of the QAA so that potential students and employers are assured that the standards in universities are appropriate and regularly monitored.

### 3. DEGREE CLASSIFICATION

3.1 The methodologies used by UK HEIs to determine degree classification have evolved over the years. The post 1992 universities have, in the main, adopted the former Council for National Awards Authority (CNAA) regulations which provided consistency in the way its regulations have also matured and been revised.

The key consistent element has been the external examiner system which enables external examiners from different HEIs to provide a judgement on a comparison with their own institutions and the sector on the standards of classification of awards. This system has worked well over the last couple of decades.

3.2 The current system of the UK's systems of degree classification has served the sector and students well over the years and is well understood by employers and students alike. The introduction of the Higher Education Academic Record (HEAR) is at the pilot stage and has yet to be evaluated. It remains uncertain how the additional information required by HEAR will be used extensively by employers to determine the suitability of a graduate in contrast with the degree classification results already provided.

3.3 The consensus, at present, is that international high flying companies select first and foremost on a) the HEI at which the graduate has studied and b) the degree classification obtained. Whilst the HEAR provides much more information regarding the graduate's profile, there is little evidence, at present, that the HEAR will replace the two criteria referred to above as far as companies are concerned.

Indeed, small to medium sized companies, may actually find the HEAR of little help in determining the best candidate for the job. A great deal of guidance will need to be provided to such companies to interpret the information provided if the HEAR is to have a positive effect on graduate recruitment.

### 4. STUDENT SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

4.1 Student engagement can be problematic if HEIs are not proactive in this area. The role of the Students' Union is vital to help students understand the importance of their engagement in HE policy. At Staffordshire University we work very closely with our Students' Union to ensure that students maximise their opportunities to engage with the University. We have a good Academic Representation Scheme in which students, at award level, are identified and trained by the Students' Union to enable them to participate fully in their roles.

4.2 It is important to emphasise that when students withdraw from their awards, there is often more than one reason for so doing. A huge amount of research has been carried out in the HE sector on this issue and it is clear that there are numerous reasons for students not to complete their awards. These include poor careers advice at school and college, financial reasons, personal problems, homesickness, health problems and insufficient research into their intended awards.

4.3 Whilst full-time students now have a reasonable financial package available to them, many families are debt adverse and prefer to fund their sons and daughters to significant debt. We are therefore aware of students who could be entitled to bursaries but who do not claim them because their parents are not willing to apply for financial support for their offspring. Most 18 year olds are clearly not aware of the implications of student debt and the level of ignorance, despite government initiatives, is staggeringly high.

4.4 Part-time students remain the forgotten group. For instance, if you are disabled and unable to study at least 50% of a full-time award in a year, you can expect to receive no help from the Disabled Students Allowance. This is a serious issue for many capable disabled people who can simply not afford to undertake an HE award.

4.5 Whilst HEIs are encouraged more and more to provide flexible provision, the student financial packages available to students are not moving at the same pace and part-time students are seriously disadvantaged, financially, by often trying to work and study. Employer engagement is a major plank of

government strategy and is welcomed by universities such as ourselves. However, students must not be disadvantaged, financially, by trying to improve their potential earning capacity by studying part-time in employment.

4.6 Government needs to radically rethink how it incentivises part-time students and employers to develop their skills and contribute to the economy. The need for flexible provision is well recognised by this university but it must be matched by flexible financial support packages for students.

January 2009

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## Memorandum 70

### Submission from United Kingdom Arts and Design Institutions Association

#### INQUIRY INTO STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

##### *Executive Summary*

United Kingdom Arts and Design Institutions Association (UKADIA), the interest group for specialist higher education institutions working in the creative and cultural industries welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee's inquiry into Students and Universities. The Committee seeks to cover a breadth of material so UKADIA has focused points as follows, recognising other expert material will be submitted from the Burgess Group; GuildHE, HEA; QAA, SPA; UCAS; Universities UK etc. This enquiry is a valuable opportunity to explore these topics more widely and we would be glad to provide more detail in oral evidence on any of the issues we raise in our written submission or on the wider set of issues covered in the call for evidence.

##### *Summary of key points:*

- Important contribution of specialist institutions to diversity, student choice and the high quality of UK creative industries;
- Use of student work, such as portfolios and live performance, in fair admissions process and in summative assessments;
- Use of teaching input from staff active in the creative professions;
- That the arts, design and creative industries disciplines are relatively new to the research assessment process and the value of a practice based view of research is an important feature;
- The experience of robust processes in quality assurance, especially for degree awarding powers but that these various processes need to respond proportionately to institutional diversity and scale.

#### INTRODUCTION

##### 1. UKADIA member institutions -

- comprise universities, university colleges, or further education colleges that are unique, and specialists in their chosen fields ;
- include world-class providers in the creative and cultural industries teaching visual arts, music, dance, theatre media and culture;
- embody communities of practice, with a clear commitment to high quality teaching enriched by research and knowledge exchange;
- make a unique contribution to the cultural life of their communities and have regional and global impact.

#### THEMES

2. An underlying theme of our evidence is the importance of the specialist provider in an increasingly homogenous sector populated by the larger university model. This is part of a more general agenda for diversity and breadth of opportunity to allow those who can to benefit appropriately from focussed learning provision to produce economically successful outcomes. In this regard UKADIA institutions have been active in the formation and implementation of the Creative Economy programme and have historically been significant in the progression of high quality graduates to the developing creative industry sector.

#### ADMISSIONS

3. The specialist arts and design sector has an excellent record of admitting students from a range of educational and social backgrounds. The benchmarks set for the HE sector are consistently met or exceeded. Of particular importance has been the admission of students with learning difficulties whose performance in normal matriculation does not reflect their potential for advanced study in arts and design subjects. Admission processes we employ allow students to show their real work through portfolio and audition

allowing teaching experts to identify latent as well as existing talent. The specialist sector has frequently offered a personalised alternative to the formula of UCAS admission and to the benefit of diversity and individual progression in HE.

4. The National Arts Learning Network which comprises UKADIA members has enhanced this approach to admissions and has created an internationally respected system which connects talent with institutions and gives real enhancement to the student experience. Evidence of the success of this approach is to be found in the Higher Education Statistics Agency data where levels of student retention in the specialist sector are significantly lower than the national average drop-out rate.

5. Areas of concern in regard to admissions:

- (a) the extent to which the current standstill on recruiting additional student numbers, other than those already agreed for 2009–10 and 2010–2011, coupled with the lack of flexibility in the system which prevents the redistribution of numbers from institutions which have failed to recruit, impacts more severely on smaller institutions particularly in subjects attracting high levels of application.
- (b) the candidates for art and design frequently have very modest levels of experience where work is literally “made”. An unintended consequence of the national curriculum has been a reduction in workshop practice in the 14–18 age group. This has affected applications for study the three dimensional areas in higher education which, in turn, have produced graduates of high quality. The UK advantage in areas like product design is at risk. Foundation Courses, in which students can be prepared for HE provision, remain of key importance. In addition we believe that a more informed approach, taken by HEFCE towards at risk areas of study would be helpful—with the equivalent for the creative industries of the Science/Language Strategically Important and Vulnerable Subjects.

#### TEACHING AND RESEARCH

6. The balance between teaching and research is of critical importance for our institutions. Whilst we share an approach to teaching which privileges studio-based learning and is highly student centred the characterisation of the specialist sector as teaching-only institutions is inaccurate. The link between research and teaching is a key aspect of higher education wherever it is delivered. There would be concern on our part at moves to concentrate research funding where this would compromise recognition of the developing research in specialist art and design institutions.

7. In pursuing our interests in research, the ways in which this informs teaching and to ensure a more even spread of funding, we welcome a broader view of research. This should encompass applied and practise based activity, which is more central to arts and design disciplines. Our subjects are relatively new to the research assessment process administered through the Higher Education Funding Council for England. The development of capability remains relevant and we welcome measures to nurture progress which continues to be in a formative stage as well as to support mature research of international standing.

8. A defining characteristic of specialist provision amongst UKADIA members is the role of practitioners in curriculum delivery. Staffing in our institutions has substantial input from visiting teachers who are otherwise engaged in professional practice. This gives currency to the provision and offers a business-integrated model of teaching delivery and from which the high levels of student progression to the creative industries is maintained.

9. Areas of concern with regards to teaching and research:

- (a) the move towards research concentration set against and a need for stronger recognition of practice-led applied scholarship and the development of capability demands attention.
- (b) The protection of the unit of funding for teaching is welcomed but the removal of the specialist premium and its expression in additionality is a significant challenge to the financial sustainability of areas of provision.
- (c) The capping of additional student numbers has a disproportional effect on smaller institutions particularly in subjects with high student demand

#### DEGREE CLASSIFICATION

10. It is to be recognised that there are instances where the division of the final degree into first class, second class and subsequent categories does not do justice to the full achievement of the students concerned. We acknowledge the recommendations of the Burgess Group that there are ways in which student performance may be more comprehensively recognised. For UKADIA institutions graduates leave with an award but also a portfolio which demonstrates achievement and capability. The summative and the particular are thereby available to potential employers. An elaborate transcript system does not necessarily suit specialist course provision in which subject components combine to form more than the sum of their parts.

11. UKADIA institutions are well placed to speak for the robustness of the systems of quality assurance which are in place. A number have successfully applied for and been granted degree awarding powers under the criteria set out in 2003 and following the Education White Paper, “The Future of Higher Education”

This involved periods of intensive scrutiny and review not easily matched elsewhere. Those members that do not have their own degree awarding powers but work in partnership with a university or other awarding body to deliver programmes leading to a degree will themselves undergo institutional audit. Audit outcomes are in the public domain and we welcome the transparency this brings.

12. Much has been accomplished in the assurance of academic standards. Given the position now attained we support the shift of emphasis to student enhancement and a halt to the over elaboration of audit systems which can act disproportionately on smaller institutions.

13. UKADIA contributes to the diversity of UK Higher Education. The scale and size of institutions are not variables which diminish quality rather we would argue these are factors which can enhance it.

14. Areas of concern with regard to Degree Classification:

- (a) the balance between summative and detailed records of achievement in specialist subject areas
- (b) the need for systems of academic assurance which recognise the diversity of institutional delivery

#### STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

15. UKADIA institutions have a strong record of student retention, achievement and professional progression. This has been assisted by well established networks which link schools with our members and through them to employers. The scale of institutions often favours informal mechanisms in sustaining these relationships and this has proved effective in the development of the curriculum and to the assurance of quality and standards. The good results we achieve reflects the level of care given in the delivery of teaching and learning and the support offered to students prior to entry, throughout their studies and as alumni.

January 2009

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### Memorandum 71

#### Submission from the British Dental Association

##### INQUIRY INTO STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

1. The British Dental Association (BDA) is the professional association and trade union for dentists practising in the UK. Its 23,000-strong membership is engaged in all aspects of dentistry including general practice, salaried services, the armed forces, hospitals, academia and research and students.

##### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2. The current system of admissions to dental courses in the UK relies heavily on academic achievement. This can negate the importance of skills and abilities vital to a successful career in dentistry, such as communication skills and dexterity. Some attempts to move away from admissions based exclusively on academic performance have been made, and these must be developed further.

3. There are significant pressures on the balance between teaching and research in dental academia, not least the competing pulls of the academic institutions and the NHS organisations that employ staff. To maintain quality in both fields it is important that teaching and research do not become divorced from one another. Ensuring a supply of high quality applicants wishing to undertake dental academic careers is vital to this.

4. Degree classification could be subject to change because of the proposed two-cycle structure, which would lead to a Bachelor degree to be awarded after three years and a Masters degree to be given after the final two years. If any changes are to be made, it will be important that the impact of the different funding streams at different stages of dental qualifications in the UK is properly considered.

5. Funding for dental students has been the subject of change in recent years, with the parental income threshold for qualification being altered. The BDA's own 2008 Student Debt Survey demonstrates that students on dental courses are incurring significant debts as a result of loans and relying heavily of parental contributions to allow them to complete their courses.

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<sup>218</sup> Nicholson, S. (2008) *Emerging trends in admissions*. European Journal of Dental Education. Vol 12 No 3 p194-195

<sup>219</sup> Ibid



## ADMISSIONS

6. Dentistry remains a popular career choice for many university applicants and selection for dental courses is challenging<sup>220</sup> with a ratio of eight applicants per dental place. 1,195 students began courses in dentistry in October 2007.<sup>221</sup> Basing judgments of students' suitability for dental school solely on educational attainment, such as A-levels, is proving difficult as an increasing number of candidates for dental schools are achieving the highest grades possible. Furthermore, evidence suggests that educational attainment is not a good predictor of the future ability of dentists. A study conducted by St Georges Medical School (University of London), found that following their adjusted criteria admission scheme, "students from poor-performing schools who are accepted with lower grades do just as well as their higher-grade peers".<sup>222</sup> It is clear that an admissions procedure which relies on educational attainment alone, neglects significant potential talent.

7. At present, UK dental schools select students using a combination of academic achievement, cognitive behaviour testing (UKCAT<sup>223</sup>), personal statements which indicate personal motivation and background knowledge of dentistry (such as work experience) and face-to-face interviews. Such stringent selection procedures are essential to ensure that students will be capable not only of academic success, but also of assuming professional responsibility for the treatment and care of patients early in their university careers.

8. The value of cognitive behaviour tests, which are used by admissions departments in many UK dental schools, is undermined by their limitations. For example, such tests are unable to assess dexterity, a particularly important skill for future dentists. In 2007 the BDA raised concerns about the UKCAT system and the validity of tests as a tool for admission to dental school. It remains unclear as to the validity of the scheme as UKCAT data will not become available for assessment until the initial phase of research has been conducted by UKCAT Board.<sup>224</sup> The BDA is also concerned that UKCAT Board member, Professor Chadwick, reinforces such criticism by stating, "we currently do not select students—rather restrict entry".

9. In order to educate the future generation of dental professionals, dental schools must have the flexibility to recruit the best students, rather than having to rely on the comparison of educational attainment across a particular cohort or adopting quotas or financial incentive systems that are counterproductive and restrict high quality candidates from accessing courses in dentistry.

## WIDENING PARTICIPATION

10. HEFCE's Strategic Plan for 2006–11 details the commitment to ensure that funding is available for the Government's widening participation initiatives.<sup>225</sup> In response to these initiatives, many universities are forming partnerships with local schools and further education colleges. Admission to dental school can then be based on a suitable combination of academic merit or through studying at a partner college.<sup>226</sup> The BDA is therefore concerned that students who do not study at colleges partnered with dental schools may face greater barriers to entry, should they wish to apply for dentistry courses.

11. In addition, studies have shown that many students choose to study at a university close to where they live, which can be a result of finance, social networks or cultural background.<sup>227</sup> In England there are only 12, dental schools, three graduate entry and nine undergraduate schools, therefore the choice of institutions is relatively limited. Given that students increasingly wish to stay at home whilst studying,<sup>228</sup> the opportunity to study dentistry can be restricted. This creates the risk that many high quality candidates may not even submit an application, thereby denying the profession future talent.

12. Candidates applying to dental school must pay for the UKCAT test and receive reimbursement for the cost. In addition to the cost of UKCAT testing, attendance/travel to interviews is also perceived as being a barrier to applicants, even though financial support is available those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

13. The BDA is concerned that the above factors all serve to undermine the ability of dental schools to recruit the highest quality candidates from a wide background. Accountable, transparent and flexible admissions procedures are needed to ensure student confidence in the application process.

## STUDENT SUPPORT

14. In 2007 the Government announced financial incentives, designed to recruit students from lower socio-economic groups and increase financial support for those students with a parental income of between £17,500 and £60,000 per annum. This was to support the widening participation agenda. It was estimated that one third of students would qualify for a full grant and one third for a partial grant. However, in October

<sup>220</sup> Nicholson, S. (2008) *Emerging trends in admissions*. European Journal of Dental Education. Vol 12 No 3 p194–195

<sup>221</sup> Ibid

<sup>222</sup> Ramrayka, L. (26/11/2008) *Opening up the playing field*. The Guardian

<sup>223</sup> United Kingdom Clinical Aptitude Test

<sup>224</sup> UKCAT Board (2008) Annual Report 2006.

<sup>225</sup> HEFCE (May 2008) Strategic Plan 2006-11.

<sup>226</sup> Attwood, R (20 Nov 2008) *No awards for equity*. Times Higher Education. Pp.30

<sup>227</sup> Davies, P., Slack, K., Hughes, A., Mangan, J., Vigurs, (2008) *Knowing Where to Study? Fees Bursaries and Fair Access*. Institute for Educational Policy Research and Institute for Access Studies. Staffordshire University, UK

<sup>228</sup> Davies, P., Slack, K., Hughes, A., Mangan, J., Vigurs, (2008) *Knowing Where to Study? Fees Bursaries and Fair Access*. Institute for Educational Policy Research and Institute for Access Studies. Staffordshire University, UK

2008, the Government cut the total funding available to students by restricting access to grants by reducing family income to qualify for a grant from £60,000 to £50,000 per annum.<sup>229</sup> A statement by John Denham, Minister for the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills revealed that 40% of students had in fact qualified for the increased student support (full grant) in 2008–09 rather than the predicted, 33%.<sup>231</sup>

15. Evidence gathered by the BDA 2008 Student Debt Survey shows a dental student completing a standard five year degree, graduates with debt of approximately £24,860 and a quarter of students accumulating debt of over £30,000. This is significantly higher than other students attending university undertaking non clinical courses.

16. At the time of the 2007 government announcement on incentives the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) criticised the move for not supporting those students coming from families which live below the £17,500 threshold. The IFS has further argued that investing in improved school results was preferable to increased subsidies for students.<sup>232</sup> The BDA would like to see those high calibre students in the lowest socio-economic background, those with parental income under £17,500, be given full access to the opportunity of dental school as well as reintroducing support for those in the £50–£60,000 bracket. The dental profession requires high calibre students regardless of socio-economic background in order to produce high quality graduates.

17. The BDA is concerned that high student debt on graduation along with the recent reversal by the Department, will seek to prevent many students entering higher education and in particular dental school.

#### THE BALANCE BETWEEN TEACHING AND RESEARCH

18. UK dental schools have a long history of excellence and innovation in both teaching and research. The quality of undergraduate dental education in the UK is monitored through the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and the General Dental Council (GDC).

19. Dental schools face considerable challenges in maintaining an appropriate balance between the expectations of their host universities (particularly with regard to research); their NHS commitments to deliver clinical services; and education of dental students.

20. Dental clinical academics are obliged to maintain a commitment to treating patients within the NHS as a practicing clinician, alongside teaching responsibilities and academic research. The “triple threat”<sup>233</sup> often results in conflicting interests and pressures being placed on clinical dental academics to stratify the three masters of, research, clinical provision and education. Currently there are particular difficulties with the recruitment of dental clinical academics because of the pressures on time as a result of NHS commitments (including postgraduate supervision and training of junior clinical staff) and university organisational changes to maximise output such as the metrics required for Research Assessment Exercises. There is a serious risk that these pressures may cause lasting damaging to UK dental research with undergraduate teaching increasingly being undertaken by dental teachers who are not engaged in academic research. With the recent 25% increase in dental undergraduate students and the opening of three new dental schools, this has exacerbated the pressures on the few dental academic staff. Dental schools have been recruiting “new” staff from existing dental schools rather than new dental academics. Despite the additional new schools and increased student numbers the DSC<sup>234</sup> survey shows only minimal change in overall staff numbers.

21. Research has shown that an ideal staff to student ratio is six to one, as dental undergraduates routinely perform irreversible surgical procedures on the general public. Many schools are struggling to achieve this supervision ratio and this places additional pressures on staff and potentially places patients at risk.

22. The BDA is concerned that this trend in reduced staff to student ratio will adversely impact on the dental curriculum.

23. There is a lack of applications for dentists entering academia as a career, essential for the future of academic teaching and research. There are significant financial differences between academic salaries and those in general practice. However barriers to recruitment are not always financial. Experience is vital in securing a clinical academic post and those who do not gain this experience early in their career find it difficult to enter academia. Studies have also shown that students perceive an adverse relationship between effort and reward in careers in academia compounded by a lack of career advancement and poor advice available on academia when choosing career paths. In 2008 the Dental Schools Council also highlight the gender imbalance noting that females were under-represented in dental academia and as part of this it is vital that the issue of female under-representation is addressed.<sup>235</sup>

24. Recruitment and retention of staff is vital as the current pool of clinical academics continues to decline.

<sup>229</sup> BBC News (2008) Grants cut over funding blunder. Available at: <http://newsvote.bbc.uk/mpspps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/7697171.stm> (Accessed 04/11/2008)

<sup>230</sup> John Denham (2008) Ministerial Statement, 29 October 2008 Department for Innovation Universities and Skills. Available at: [http://www.dius.gov.uk/speeches/denham\\_ministerial\\_statement\\_291008.html](http://www.dius.gov.uk/speeches/denham_ministerial_statement_291008.html) (Accessed 29/10/2008)

<sup>231</sup> Ibid

<sup>232</sup> Institute of Fiscal Studies. (2007) Press Release: *Are the Government's recent changes to Higher Education student support well-targeted?* (Monday 23 July 2007).

<sup>233</sup> Pine, C. (2008) *Evolving challenges in dental education*. European Journal of Dental Education. Vol 12 No 3 p189–194

<sup>234</sup> Dental Schools Council (2008) Clinical Academic Staffing Levels in UK Dental Schools.

<sup>235</sup> Dental Schools Council (2008) Clinical Academic Staffing Levels in UK Dental Schools.

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## DEGREE CLASSIFICATION

25. The BDA supports a transparent Higher Education Academic Record for students using degree descriptors to demonstrate competency. This would assist the transition to vocational training, revalidation and life-long learning. However, there are problems with implementing a number of the Bologna initiatives within dentistry such as portability across the EU area. Due to the varied nature of the dental curriculum and its delivery, it would be too easy for a “mobile” student to miss vital parts of the curriculum as very few dental schools have identical curriculum structures.

26. The BDA would welcome the adoption of the dental degree at Masters level. The QAA already recognises that the current BDS degree is at Masters level, although consideration must be given to the adoption of either a single or a two stage course. In the UK, funding would become an issue as HEFCE has recently reduced finance for Equivalent or Lower Level courses.

## STUDENT DEBT

27. The current system of student support available to dental students is overseen by two Government Departments. The Department for Innovation Universities and Skills oversees student support for the first four years (first year for a graduate entry course) of an undergraduate dental degree by way of Student Loans. The Department of Health oversees the NHS Bursary Scheme in year five onwards (years two to four of a graduate entry course). When students reach either year five of an undergraduate degree or year two of a graduate entry degree, the Department of Health NHS Bursary pays the tuition fees for all medical and dental students and offers a reduced rate loan and a means-tested bursary. As discussed above the 2008 BDA Student Debt Survey<sup>236</sup> demonstrates that a dental student completing a standard five year degree, graduates with debt of approximately £24,860 and with a quarter with over £30,000.

28. Research by Staffordshire University has shown that students from lower income families are more likely to be put off higher education by potential debt. Such high levels of debt for dental students upon graduation may well deter the debt averse. In 2008 82% of dental fifth year students had received financial support from their parents and the average parental contribution was £18,320. In terms of financial profile, this is a worrying development as this does not necessarily reflect parental income levels in relation to parental contribution. If this is considered in terms of the 2004 BDA Student Debt Survey, the results show that parental income to parental contribution is not necessarily in proportion. 73% of fifth-year students questioned in 2004 had a combined parental income of below £60,000 the figure by which the Government set the 2008–09 threshold for financial support eligibility.

29. Within UK dental schools, there is a low rate of attrition however this has a major workforce implication. Dentistry is a vocational course and, unlike many other standardised degree courses, a graduate’s career path extremely likely to be within dentistry. On qualification, UK graduates undertake a year of Vocational Training and all dental practitioners undertake continuing professional development (CPD). The Department of Health must understand the necessity for effective workforce planning to ensure that there are adequate work places available for those graduating and as such the proposals for effective workforce planning under Medical Education England have clear potential. Dental students can only practise dentistry at the end of the course, so projected workforce figures which take five or six years to manifest must be robust and fit for purpose. A shortfall between projected and actual workforce figures would see subsequent implications for the both the population and public finances.

30. In 2009 a review of variable fees will take place<sup>237</sup> and it is vital that all the implications of such a review are considered. Any removal of the upper cap on fees for “home” dental students will have ramifications on the student profile, an impact upon the funding system across the two Government departments and ultimately affect the future dental workforce.

## STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

31. It has been observed that “students tend to be more demanding of their university than 10 years ago”,<sup>238</sup> a view reinforced by the findings of HEFCE, following the 2006–2007<sup>239</sup> introduction of variable tuition fees. Students are now seen as consumers who are more financially aware and demand value for money and high quality educational experience. The National Student Survey conducted by HEFCE across the university population seeks input directly from the student, the consumer. With an average response rate of over 50% of the student population<sup>240</sup> the view of the student is paramount. The student survey has been a success in seeking the opinions of students within the dental school but variable results across dental schools show that time will be needed to adjust to this system.

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<sup>236</sup> BDA Student Debt Survey 2008

<sup>237</sup> Chester, J., Bekhradnia, B. (April 2008) *Funding Higher Fees: Some Implications of a Rise in the Fee Cap*. Higher Education Policy Institute.

<sup>238</sup> Saunders, W.P (2008) *European Journal of Dental Education*. Vol 12, No 3. P180–183

<sup>239</sup> HEFCE (May 2008) *Strategic Plan 2006-11*

<sup>240</sup> HEFCE (2008) *Best ever response rate for National Student Survey*. Available at: <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/news/hefce/2008/nss.htm> (Accessed 11 Sep 2008).

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 CONCLUSION

32. We urge the committee to consider the points we have raised and in particular the key issues of concern for both dental students and clinical academics:

- Widening participation agenda and admission to dental school given the limitations of the small number and geographical spread of the schools.
- The difficulties clinical academics face in maintaining an appropriate balance between teaching, NHS clinical practice and research
- Difficulties in recruitment and retention of clinical academics to the triple threat of research-teaching-clinical provision and the increase in dental students and dental schools
- Student debt and student experience of students undertaking demanding and extended vocational training.

## ORAL EVIDENCE

33. The BDA would be pleased to give oral evidence to the committee if it would be helpful to the inquiry.

*December 2008*

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 Memorandum 72

## Submission from the Chartered Management Institute

## INQUIRY INTO “STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES”

*Executive Summary*

- The Chartered Management Institute (CMI) welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the Innovation, Universities and Skills Committee as part of its inquiry into “Students and Universities”.
- This response is based on the Institute’s extensive relationships with the higher education sector. The CMI works with closely with many higher education institutions (HEIs) to support students in four core areas:
  - the provision of professional development opportunities
  - additional student support services: online learning resources and networking events
  - career guidance and progression pathways through to Chartered Manager
  - access to employers through knowledge transfer programmes and the Institute’s employer engagement activities.
- Current Government policy does not appear to recognise that management and leadership is often a secondary discipline which can both support the employability skills of new graduates and enable experienced employees to take on greater management responsibilities by studying at an equivalent level to their initial specialist subject area. The withdrawal of funding for Equivalent or Lower-level Qualifications (ELQs) is having a particularly negative impact on management courses offered by HEIs. The Institute recommends that the Government considers the development of proposals to offer match funding for an individual’s first management qualification.
- Government must encourage leadership and management skills to be incorporated into university curricula for subjects other than traditional business or management studies. The Darzi report recently called for medical students to study leadership and management as part of their undergraduate course. CMI research found that two thirds of employers do not believe that today’s graduates have the necessary employability skills when they join their organisation.<sup>241</sup> More support for management skills alongside degree courses is urgently needed in order to make graduates more employable, and to improve their performance during the crucial early years of their careers.
- Working with the Learning and Improvement Agency for Further Education the Institute provides professional development opportunities and online management support for managers and teachers across many FE colleges. We would advocate that a similar management support system is implemented in the higher education sector to allow academics, management and support staff to benefit from professional management resources and development.
- The reputation and brand of professional bodies can play a major role in helping HEIs deliver a value-added proposition to attract both employers and students. By working more closely with professional bodies, HEIs can benefit from a highly effective route to employer and learner engagement.

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<sup>241</sup> *Quick Reaction Survey: Higher Level Skills*, Chartered Management Institute, June 2008

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## OVERVIEW

The Institute is the only chartered professional body dedicated to management and leadership and consultancy. We support 81,000 individuals and have a high level of engagement with employers across all sectors throughout the UK. Our members are employed at all levels of management within business, public sector and not-for-profit organisations.

The Institute has many decades of experience of working with higher education institutions, employers and individuals around the UK to improve leadership and management skills. We have over 400 approved centres which offer our qualifications, many of which are HEIs. We wish to respond to the inquiry's questions by following the format of four topic headings, as set out in the press notice.

### 1. STUDENT SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

#### 1.1 *Support and pathways to enable students to gain professional qualifications*

1.1.1 The Institute has strong relationships with 37 HEIs across the UK. Through formal arrangements with each of these “approved centres”, the Institute encourages students to gain professional as well as academic qualifications. The Institute allows students to enrich their learning experience through its Guaranteed Membership Scheme, under which students at participating HEIs are recognised as studying members of the Institute. This allows them to access the largest management resource centre in Europe, both online and via our library lending service, and supports student's progression into the management profession.

1.1.2 In recognition of employers' needs for employability skills, the Institute is helping students gain valuable exposure to the business environment by working with HEIs to embed the Chartered Manager designation in MBA courses. Examples include in London South Bank University, Durham Business School and the University of Greenwich Business School. The designation of Chartered Manager, launched by the Institute in 2003, demonstrates externally validated recognition of their ability to deliver significant change in the workplace. Embedding it into MBA courses also allows universities to offer additional professional recognition which can differentiate their courses from their competitors.

1.1.3 The Institute also offers HEIs a wide range of links to the employer community. For example, its collaborative research model involves academics from many universities who are looking to source employer case studies for their research activities. The Institute also provides promotional opportunities for HEIs to reach a wider employer community.

#### 1.2 *Examples of reasons for, and potential strategies to reduce the non-completion of HE programmes by students*

1.2.1 The Institute carried out research in September 2007 into the value of management qualifications,<sup>242</sup> which revealed some of the main barriers to people studying for a management qualification. Key barriers cited include the content being too theoretical, the impact of studying on an individual's time, and the financial costs. Similar reasons can prevent students from completing HE programmes.

1.2.2 The Committee should therefore consider the suitability of funding policies for degrees and HE programmes, and whether greater flexibility is required for workers who wish to study part-time.

1.2.3 Government policy should also recognise how good quality career guidance for students, both before and during their university careers, can help alleviate financial concerns and pressures. This is an important part of professional bodies' work, and the Institute already works proactively with a number of partner organisations to promote management as a profession to undergraduates. For example, we recently collaborated with Inside Careers to produce a publication, *Guide to General Management*, which explains what being a good manager involves, outlines the management careers path and offers information, advice and guidance on becoming a professional manager.

1.2.4 The Institute also publishes its own booklet for students “Management—A Careers Guide” which is distributed to business faculty and careers guidance centres across UK universities, and is available at: [www.managers.org.uk/careersguide](http://www.managers.org.uk/careersguide).

1.2.5 Increasing access to work placements schemes can also help completion rates as students are better able to see potential employment opportunities. The CMI already plays an important role in facilitating Knowledge Transfer Partnerships. For instance, the Institute currently has a contract with AEA, one of our Approved Centres, under which approximately 300 graduates a year are placed with employers, usually SMEs, for around two years to undertake knowledge transfer projects. Each graduate is paid by the employer and supported by an academic adviser, with personal and faculty support from their HEI, or a mentor within the organisation, and a KTP assessor.

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<sup>242</sup> “*The Value of Management Qualifications: the perspective of UK employers and managers*”. Chartered Management Institute, 2007

1.2.6 The Institute is also involved in Year in Industry, a scheme that places approximately 500 high quality A-level students per annum with employers (usually SMEs) during their gap year. Most students take a Level 3 Certificate in Management while on the programme, helping them to develop their management skills and employability. The Year in Industry would benefit from further support from Government, particularly given the increasing cost of full time higher education.

1.3 *Government must recognise the importance of management and leadership to subject areas other than traditional business and management degrees.*

1.3.1 By embedding these management and leadership skills into undergraduate programmes, new graduates of all disciplines would be better prepared for the workplace than is currently the case.

1.3.2 Some sectors are now addressing the need to base specific skills development on a sound foundation of leadership and management skills. The Darzi report, which looked at how the NHS could add value to its services rather than simply increasing its spending levels, states that the Government will “*explore ways to ensure that the undergraduate curricula for all medical and nursing students reflect the skills and demands of leadership and working in the NHS.*”

1.3.3 This acknowledgement of the importance of leadership and management in the healthcare sector is encouraging, but there are many other subject areas where this does not currently occur. A more proactive and cross-sector approach to the study of leadership and management skills, as part of university curricula, would help graduates to cope better with leadership and management demands in their early careers and throughout their working lives.

1.3.4 Importantly, all the Sector Skills Councils list leadership and management skills as being a top priority for their sectors. For example, the Financial Services Sector Skills Council states that “*...management and leadership is considered the most important issue facing the industry and the first priority for 63% of all UK financial services firms. This was the only priority common to all sectors in the industry, relevant to all occupations and involving all staff.*”<sup>243</sup>

## 2. ADMISSIONS

2.1 *The value of professional management qualifications and the recent ELQ funding changes*

2.1.1 Research conducted by the Institute<sup>244</sup> and by the Consultative Committee for Professional Management Organisations (CCPMO)<sup>245</sup> clearly demonstrated the value of gaining a management or other professional qualification. The CCPMO research, which was launched on 9 December 2008, estimates that the lifetime economic benefit associated with holding professional qualifications and membership of a professional institute is approximately £152,000 in today’s money terms. The figure below shows the present value of additional lifetime earnings for a representative individual associated with different qualification levels.

<sup>243</sup> Sector Skills Agreement for the financial services sector, published by the Financial Services Sector Skills Council. [www.fssc.org.uk](http://www.fssc.org.uk)

<sup>244</sup> “*The Value of Management Qualifications: The perspective of UK employers and managers*” (Chartered Management Institute, 2007)

<sup>245</sup> “*An Economic Impact Assessment of the CCPMO*”, London Economics for CCPMO, December 2008

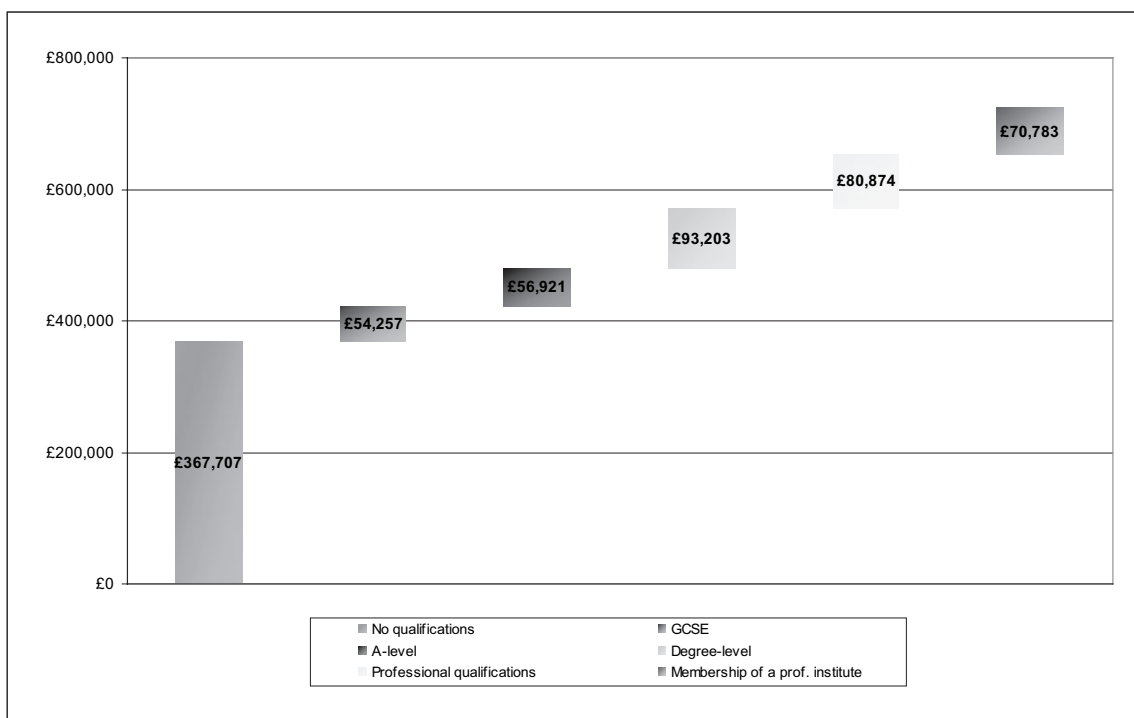


Figure 1. Source: London Economics based on Labour Force Survey.

2.1.2 However, the recent changes to Equivalent or Lower Qualification (ELQ) funding means that many individuals who would wish to take a management qualification (often as a second degree) will not receive funding.

2.1.3 The HEFCE modelling of the withdrawal of funding for ELQs by subject, mode and level clearly demonstrates the impact on management qualifications.<sup>246</sup> Its modelling shows that of the overall 52,504 students to be negatively affected by the proposed changes, 9,776 (19%) will be those studying business and administration. The more detailed breakdown by level indicates that of the 9,776, the majority of those affected will be those studying on a part-time basis (7,211 students). This is a disproportionate number compared to any other subject listed.

## 2.2 The Implementation and success of widening participation initiatives such as Compact Agreements, and the impact of the current funding regime on these objectives

2.2.1 It is important the Committee, and in turn Government policy, considers not just the “traditional student” model, ie a young person who, having completed A-levels at 18 or 19, goes on to university. There are many others who study for degrees, vocational qualifications and who attend training programmes based at universities, on a full- or part-time basis, many of whom are mature students. Indeed, according to the Higher Education Statistics Agency, in 2005 52% of first year undergraduate students in the UK were mature students (ie over the age of 21).<sup>247</sup>

2.2.2 As mentioned above, the recent ELQ changes make it harder for people to take a management qualification, particularly on a part-time basis. The ELQ changes will also, therefore, have a similar effect on anyone who wishes to take an equivalent or lower qualification on a part-time basis. This runs counter to the Government’s policies on increasing the skills base in the UK in order to remain globally competitive.

## 2.3 The role of Government in developing and promoting fair access and admissions policies for the UK higher education sector

2.3.1 Given the demographic trends mentioned in the Leitch report, the Government must give more consideration to encouraging those already in the workforce to enter, or re-enter the higher education sector. It is encouraging to see that, according to recent DIUS research,<sup>248</sup> 56% of adults would consider higher education if they were given encouragement by their employer, and 69% of employees would do so if they were given paid time off to study. Government policy should capitalise on this enthusiasm and incentivise employers to promote adult learning, either by tax breaks or by more financial help for those wishing to study at the post-level 3 stage.

<sup>246</sup> CMI submission to IUS Committee’s consultation on Equivalent or Lower Qualifications—see [www.managers.org.uk/policy](http://www.managers.org.uk/policy)

<sup>247</sup> Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) (2005): Students in Higher Education Institutions 2003/04, tables 1b, 1f

<sup>248</sup> “University is not just for young people: working adults’ perceptions of and orientation to Higher Education”. Institute for Employment Studies (2008)

2.3.2 However, we welcome the extension of Train to Gain to higher learning levels, such as levels 3 and 4, which we hope will enable more individuals to take leadership and management qualifications. We also welcome the Government's proposals on the right to time off for training, which should allow greater numbers of managers to improve their qualifications.

### 3. THE BALANCE BETWEEN TEACHING AND RESEARCH

#### 3.1 *Professional development support for HE academics, teaching fellows and employees*

3.1.1 It is important to recognise the need for academics and university employees to have their own professional development routes. The Institute has developed an online leadership and management support resource, ManagementDirect, which is used by the former Centre for Excellence in Leadership, now the Learning and Skills Improvement Agency, to support FE teachers in their management skills and professional development. We would advocate that a similar system is implemented in the HE sector to allow academics, managers and support staff, as well as their students, to improve their leadership and management skills.

#### 3.2 *The adequacy of financial support for the development of innovative teaching methods and teaching/research integration*

3.2.1 It is vital that higher education institutions keep up with advances in e-learning, while at the same time ensuring that individual contact with students is maintained. Although we cannot comment on the adequacy of financial support for the development of innovative teaching methods, we have carried out some recent research into learning at work, focusing on e-learning.<sup>249</sup>

3.2.2 The research examined the progress made towards integrating e-learning with other learning technologies and interventions, what it termed "blended learning". It found that work-based, experiential learning is the most dominant mode of management and leadership learning, although a growing range of online management and leadership development activities are being offered by organisations. Forty seven per cent of managers reported having access to a virtual learning environment, eg a software system designed to support learning. The Institute has responded to these preferences by devising its own e-learning package for managers, ManagementDirect, which is an online resource on an individual's computer to support leadership and management skills development.

### 4. DEGREE CLASSIFICATION

#### 4.1 The relationship between degree classification and portability

4.1.1 It is important that the Committee's final report highlights the importance of vocational and professional qualifications alongside academic qualifications. The Institute has, as mentioned above, developed relationships with HEIs to allow students to add value to their academic qualification, by gaining professional qualifications and skills, and to continue their learning throughout their careers via our range of continuing professional development resources.

4.1.2 The Committee must consider the need for HEIs to be flexible in their admissions policies and degree classifications, in terms of the portability of vocational and professional qualifications. The current disconnect between the frameworks for vocational and academic qualifications need to be addressed in order to encourage employers to be more engaged with the HE sector.

4.1.3 We welcome the new Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) for vocational qualifications, but it will be important that clear links across the various UK-wide frameworks are developed. Employers and individuals will need to be able to understand the comparative value of qualifications across national boundaries, and HEIs will need to have a uniform approach to recognising vocational qualifications under the QCF system.

4.1.4 The need for clear pathways to progression in a person's chosen career is also vitally important. To address these issues the Management Standards Centre (MSC), part of the Chartered Management Institute, has worked with a number of higher education establishments in the North East to map their leadership and management degrees against the National Occupational Standards for Management and Leadership. Mapping higher education qualifications against National Occupational Standards allows HE qualifications to be directly comparable to vocational qualifications, as well as other HE qualifications mapped to National Occupational Standards. This allows vocational qualifications to count towards the required number of credits for degree courses, in some cases reducing the duration of degree courses by one year or more.

4.1.5 Encouraging the mapping of HE qualifications against National Occupational Standards also prompts HEIs to consider and assess the value of vocational courses against entry requirements for HE, thereby increasing the accessibility of higher education to a large, currently under-represented section of the population who do not have GCSEs and A-levels but who do have vocational qualifications.

<sup>249</sup> "Learning at work: e-learning evolution or revolution?" Chartered Management Institute, 2008.



4.1.6 MSC has also developed a Foundation Degree Framework in management and leadership, which it is hoped will allow students a more accessible pathway from lower levels of learning to university-level study. The foundation degree is also mapped to the National Occupational Standards, enabling students (where allowed by the university) to gain credit against a higher qualification.

## 5. CONCLUSION

5.1 The Institute has been closely involved in DIUS' work on "*Mapping roles and responsibilities of Professional Bodies, Sector Skills Councils and Higher Education*". As such, the Institute is already engaged in exploring the development of models whereby professional bodies can work with HEIs and SSCs on improving cross-sector high skills such as leadership and management, as part of a continuing professional development agenda. This work is in its early stages and can be developed much further, but would deliver benefits to Government in terms of providing ready-made, on the ground contacts in terms of high skills development.

5.2 To conclude, the Institute has developed strong relationships with employers and the higher education sector and has devised some innovative models to promote professional skills within academic learning environments. We would welcome the opportunity of discussing further these activities with the Committee, either at an informal meeting or as part of an oral evidence session.

December 2008

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### Memorandum 73

#### Submission from Dr Janet Collett<sup>250</sup>

*Report to the IUSS Select Committee of the House of Commons with reference to their Inquiry into:*

#### STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

1. *The scope and intent of this inquiry: may it promote thorough examination of the objectives of British education and how more effective provision is needed to deliver the fundamental educational needs in this precarious world of the 21st century!*

While the broadening of intake into HE has undoubtedly expanded opportunity, its rapidity and shortfall in funding has also undoubtedly compromised the capacities of HE institutions to provide the kinds of high quality professional workforce Britain needs when its greatest natural resource is its brainpower. Some of the consequences of the continuing failure to invest in this basic resource following the expansion of 25 years ago are taken up here as they relate to the questions posed in this inquiry,

But the important questions of this inquiry are difficult to answer with substantive quantitative information. Moreover, institutional loyalty and fear of comeback may further limit forthright response from badly stretched academic faculty. So this discursive submission is made in the hope that some quantitative assessment may come from the numbers submitting similar accounts.

I draw this account particularly from years of concern for the diminishing facilities of academic faculty as AUT President at Sussex, as a faculty-elected member of its Senate and Council, a committee member of the organisation *Council for Academic Freedom and Academic Standards*, and now as a research colleague of graduate students and post-doctoral fellows at Harvard University. Although drawn in large part from experience as a faculty member through the period of HEI expansion in the '80s to the present, the experiences recounted here do reflect circumstances at many Universities in the UK (but, for the most part, excluding Scotland).

2. *Admissions: Preparedness of students to choose and to engage in degree courses in science*

It should be no surprise that the declining numbers of students interested in University science degrees corresponds to the shortfall of qualified science teachers in schools throughout the UK. Yet contemporary world problems and their associated public policy demand more, not less, understanding and expertise in science. See the attached account, "*The crisis in science ... is a national crisis*", numbered 2.1A, compiled from documentation supplied by *Save British Science* in 2003. *SBS* estimated then that even if every graduate in mathematics were to teach, there would still be unfilled teaching jobs. Since then, the numbers of qualified science teachers have dropped further.

These shortfalls have undoubtedly had enormous impact not only upon the choices of University courses, but upon the preparedness of students to take up quantitative and analytical approaches to thinking throughout their careers as undergraduates in all of the sciences. Moreover, this dangerous downward trend will only continue unless the government steps in (quickly) to find satisfactory solution.

One solution might be to offer retrospective tuition and maintenance costs to well-qualified graduates (and post-graduates) who undertake science and mathematics teaching in state schools for a certain length of time, say five years.

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<sup>250</sup> Lecturer *Emeritus*, University Research Associate of the Museum of Comparative Zoology, University of Harvard.

### 3. *Admissions: Effective preparation for choosing and engaging in University curricula, —A-levels or other?*

Although well-taught A-level curricula and demanding examination standards do provide solid background for narrowly-defined University courses for students who are also committed to particular interests, A-level teaching does not now serve many well in offering either bases for choice or preparation for University work. Reasons for this include the following:

- (1) The breadth of A-level offering and uptake is too narrow to allow students to explore the opportunities available in University courses. The resulting poor choices must account for substantial numbers of University drop-outs as well as promoting mediocrity in place of real accomplishment for those staying the course in poor choices. This is a waste of both student talent and valuable faculty resources.
- (2) Looking for “good” A-level results as paper qualification rather than as educational accomplishment, students avoid subjects perceived to be difficult. Universities, in their turn, have greatly relaxed their A-level entry requirements in order to fill student quotas.
- (3) Many students struggle in their first two years in University to capture skills (writing, numeracy, etc.) they should have developed in school. Consequently, they waste precious time (and faculty effort) which should be used in establishing an effective knowledge base as crucial background for the critical thinking of their chosen field.

Alternatives to the standard A-level curricula are badly needed. One good solution would be adoption of the International Baccalaureate (IB) as the standard entry qualification. Its breadth and depth provides both basic academic skills (writing, critical reading, basic science and numeracy) and important background in general education and thus a better basis for matching individual interests and talents to subjects and potential careers. Changeover to the IB as standard entry should also make British University courses more readily appealing to European students.

### 4. *Admissions: Adopting alternative admissions assessments.*

It seems likely that many students at present do not find satisfaction in their education in schools. The reasons include the serious shortfall of satisfactory teaching, as in the sciences, large class sizes dominated by loudmouths and foot-draggers, etc. Thus, discerning alternative admissions requirements might well find overlooked talent. But at present it seems that Universities fear losing out in assessment rankings of various league tables should they should dare to strike out in alternative admissions practices.

Thus Government could do a lot to inspire respectability for alternative, non-conventional routes into University courses. Essay-reviews of independently chosen reading, accounts of experience in the world of work, championing OU courses, among other possibilities, could be welcomed as respectable by the government and the press.

### 5. *Teaching Qualifications: Valuing ongoing research experience in teaching.*

There appears to be real danger that HE is regressing towards a reading of textbooks to absorb a body of knowledge while failing to understand the origins and qualities of that knowledge. Emerging from quality-assessment-ridden school curricula, many students now come to University expecting more fill-in-the-blank learning, without appreciating that a professional education is about learning to explore, to question and developing facility in critical appraisal and constructive resolution. These things are learned from engaging in research. Moreover, critical appraisal of current knowledge requires ongoing experience of contemporary methodologies and sources of knowledge. Less than that generates superficial understanding. How else can it be understood that all knowledge is not equal? And how else may the abuses of knowledge be as well understood as the uses of knowledge? It is these critical approaches to knowledge that constitute the essential elements of a first-class education.

### 6. *Degree Classification: UK Degree Classification less useful than transcript?*

A lot of faculty and administrative time is spent in classifying degrees. Yet a great deal of information is lost about student accomplishment in the mean mark defining that represents three years of work in a classification. Transcripts, however, are less vulnerable to error in compilation, track performances through the whole student career and demonstrate special talent in particular areas when that is lost in the compiled degree classification.

Another practical consideration is that at present students do often choose options that they believe to be easier in the hope of a better degree classification. Transcripts could free their anxieties to allow them to explore and expand their horizons without serious compromise if they flounder. In a transcript this could even be seen as a virtue!

7. *University Degrees embody developing character and integrity: Plagiarism and Fraud, together with a lack of work ethic, have no place in Universities as the training ground for a civilized society.*

Integrity is a discipline that is often learned the hard way. It is also a foundation of civilised society. Its values and rules need to be a part of education at every step of the way. For Universities to fail to deal with issues of integrity is an abrogation of one of their many responsibilities.

But many factors militate against dealing with Plagiarism effectively at present.

- (1) Short-term, part-time and untenured faculty have neither time nor confidence to identify plagiarism, to take up the difficult issue with students and to engage in cumbersome University procedures which also often end in negligible punishment.
- (2) The frequent punishment of lowering a grade does not fit the crime.
- (3) Requiring submission of work in a form which allows quick identification of plagiarism requires expensive software and cumbersome on-screen reading. These are not always seen as teaching requisites.
- (4) Universities will do anything to keep students on their tuition-paying lists! Hence, throwing a student out for indisputable plagiarism is not, so it is quietly thought, in its best interests. But it is, because each case is a scary object lesson in learning a fundamental truth about the requirements of professional life.
- (5) In the widespread student concern to fill-in-the-blanks on their route to a qualification instead of engaging in their education, they are happy to resort to any short-cut to avoid the real work of investigative reporting in essay writing! Currently, student ethos generally has it that far less than a 40 hour work week is quite enough to get by in fulfilling the requirements for a degree.
- (6) Shortage of books on library shelves also encourages short-cut uses of quickly found web sources.

In sum, again frightened of publicity, Universities will need formal directive from government to deal with plagiarism effectively.

8. *Students' engagement in their own education (as distinct from qualification)*

Many students, even in their third year, fail to grasp that University education is about exploring and questioning in developing facility as constructive critics in an area of expertise. Increasingly, however, a casual culture among students has brought unfortunate understanding that "getting by" is all that's needed to get their paper qualification. Factors contributing to this casual culture and a reluctance to engage responsibly in the challenges of being a student include:

- (1) The many students who work part-time and even full-time are part-time students enrolled in full-time courses. Feeling acutely conscious of the difficulties of financing their education, faculty tend on the quiet to accommodate by placing less demands on these students. This in turn releases all students, part-time or full-time, from their undertakings in order to avoid discrimination.
- (2) An unanticipated consequence of student tuition fees is that students feel that if they are paying for "customer service", then the choice is theirs to take it or leave it. As a survey of students I made last year indicated, most students spend considerably less than a 40 hour work week on academic work. I understand that this is widespread among Universities.
- (3) A fill-in-the-blank-to-do-the-required-minimum approach appears to be carried over from school where teachers whatever their own educational concerns must be preoccupied (in large classes) with the fill-in-the-blank character of quality assurance ratings?
- (4) Universities do not themselves convey to students essential elements of the pursuit of excellence and the rewards of challenge and accomplishment, nor do they extol the qualities of their faculty and what their faculty offer students on their way into life and careers, etc.
- (5) Moreover, to save salary expenditure, University teaching is increasingly carried out by hourly-paid post-graduate students and others. While some are undoubtedly good in providing defined teaching, they are not the faculty for whom tuition fees are paid and debts accrue. So how seriously should students take this teaching?

Thus, underfunding of various aspects of both school and University education has a lot to do with this problem. But, as things stand, both the government and the press could help Universities re-establishing the concept of Universities as student inclusive academic communities that exist for the purposes of learning and supporting a knowledge-based society.

9. *The standing of UK HEI: "world class",—or not?*

I have often been asked while visiting US Colleges and Universities how higher education has changed since its expansion in the '80s. "Have enough resources been put into expanding faculty and facilities to maintain their strengths?" "Are their perceptions right that teaching sharp critical thinking and fostering independence are no longer the hallmarks of British University education?"

Thus, the word is out that while HEI expansion may have brought benefit to the social circumstances of the UK, the education on offer is not the education that used to be comparable to the upper tier of US Universities.

These changes may be most evident in the large sizes of third year classes. Many are now too large for the interactive debate where the art of thinking together critically is learned. Since graduates with “firsts” also represent the brightest of graduates, it is difficult to assess how these changes have directly affected the quality of their education. This is only likely to be evident in how they fare in post-graduate programmes and in their jobs following graduation.

But serious slippage of standards is undoubtedly evident in the lower degree classes. —Who would want to rubbish three years and a lot of money?

However, it should also be noted that Britain is still appealing for short periods of undergraduate exchange and for courses in specialist UK institutions, but not generally (save the “top ten”) for a hardcore academic experience. More concerning perhaps is that UK first degrees and post-graduate degrees from all HEI in science, at least, are no longer taken to be qualification for post-graduate and post-doctoral work in the top tier of US Universities.

#### *10. Institutional and National Factors limiting the capacities of UK HEIs and their graduates to meet expectations of “World Class” status*

1. Two recent changes in University Governance, in particular, have driven the overriding concerns of institutions from academic aspiration to financial accounting. The first is that the structures and processes which formerly allowed academics and administrators to argue out their cases to find mutual accommodation of priorities in finance and academic needs have largely been replaced or dominated by non-academic administrators. The consequences of this cannot be underestimated:

Academic faculty have effectively lost their Statutory authorities in defining the character of the academic affairs of academic institutions. Yet, as a former Dean of the Faculty of Harvard remarked to me in discussing the plight of British Universities, “Academic innovation almost always comes from the bottom up, and good administrators know that their job is to respond to faculty grassroots interests.”

Core academic needs and interests are too often assigned priorities below expensive administrative and building restructuring without establishing their academic rationale—for enormous expenditure.

The second major change in University governance is in the composition and structure of oversight by the governing bodies, the University Councils. As at Sussex, many are now small groups of accomplished worthy people who cannot spend the time needed to do their homework for the University adequately. Nor are they allowed long enough tenure as members of Councils to develop an overview of their roles and importance in a University. The result is that they largely function at the beck and call of administrators as laid out in their paperwork. Thus, they are no longer able to function as knowledgeable watchdogs concerned about and available to all members of the University community. Tragically, they are no longer the greatly respected local citizens who can more easily respond to whistleblowers and drop in to interview senior administrators about the fine details of accounting or the rationales of policy.

2. Nor do Vice Chancellors apparently any longer see themselves as academic leaders with a mission to promote quality in education because it very greatly affects the social well-being of individuals, their communities and Britain’s economic well-being. They do not see their jobs as being public spokespeople for education, but instead have allowed themselves to engage in the bravado of competitive sports in climbing the rungs of league listings. As a result they resort to whipping their faculties into, they hope, better “performance” when they should have concentrated on understanding what support is needed for their work and extolling their accomplishments. How many Vice Chancellors (appointed by non-academic University Councils) now in fact have no experience of the complexities of academic communities and do not know from personal experience what elements make for the effective creativity communities which Universities should be? These appointments are of CEOs and not first among equals undertaking missions to sustain creative academic communities.

3. Examination of the consequences of debt in limiting student aspirations beyond graduation to pursue academic interests and to use their education in jobs of real interest, including not well-paid public service jobs, teaching and research is badly needed. The current economic and environmental quagmire demands sharp-minded well-educated professionals to find solution, urgently, but probably many feel unable to participate while dragging the baggage of student debt. This is another serious factor in the (unintended) consequences of broadening HE intake without adequate funding. There may now be fewer, not more, well-educated graduates who feel able to participate in Britain as professionals.

In sum, the government, and the press, now need to help Vice Chancellors to grasp their responsibilities, first, in speaking for the central importance of high quality education in sustaining Britain as a knowledge-based civilised society and, second, in ensuring that their own institutions are governed in ways which reflect the best of civilised society. Finance would then follow more easily in the recognition of the truth of the famous statement of a former President of Harvard: “If you think education is expensive, try ignorance.”

I very greatly hope that the IUSS Select Committee will continue to Inquire into the state of health of Universities and into the causes of ill-health, and that the committee will also find many in government sufficiently concerned about the state of ill-health that investment in Britain will be increased to that of nations with “world-class” status.

*December 2008*

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## Memorandum 74

### Submission from GuildHE

#### STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

##### *Summary of Key Points*

This submission is presented on behalf of GuildHE, one of the two representative bodies for higher education with 29 institutions in membership or associate membership. It argues that:

- GuildHE institutions have a proven track record in widening participation (including the recruitment of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and the recruitment of part-time and mature students), in student retention and in providing a good level of student support;
- GuildHE institutions also have excellent experience in working with employers and in the delivery of vocationally based education;
- In the current financial situation it makes sense to build on these strengths—channelling funding into a small number of research intensive institutions and focusing on the relatively small numbers of students able to move to those institutions may not provide the best use of scarce resources;
- Current restrictions on additional student numbers prevent institutions which are well placed to meet the needs of local communities and could recruit more students from doing so—more flexibility is needed;
- Better funding mechanisms are important in meeting the needs of part-time students;
- Funding for capital investment is needed to support teacher training in the STEM subjects as well as to support high level research activity in those areas;
- The strength and value of the UK honours degree is acknowledged but we recognise the need to ensure that the systems by which standards are maintained and quality assured are better understood both in the UK and elsewhere;
- We also support the need to provide more information about the full range of student achievement through the Higher Education Achievement Report.

#### INTRODUCTION

1. GuildHE is one of the two representative bodies for higher education and the key advocate for the importance of institutional diversity. Our member institutions comprise some of the newest and most dynamic Universities in England, well established University Colleges and specialist higher education institutions; and associate members offering higher education in privately funded institutions or specialist further education colleges.

#### THEMES

2. An underlying theme of our evidence is the importance of diversity—both within the student population and within the institutions meeting the needs of those students. We feel that the need for this diversity in the higher education ecology can too easily be honoured in principle in government policies while being overlooked in practice.

3. Our higher education institutions are grounded in areas of key strategic importance for higher education today. Widening participation objectives are critical to all four areas under consideration by the Committee. These are not new initiatives for institutions like the University of Winchester or St Mary’s University College Twickenham. They were established (under earlier names), for that very purpose over a hundred years ago—to provide opportunities for women or for other groups who would not otherwise have had access to higher education at the universities of the time.

4. Likewise “employer engagement” has always been a feature for our members working with professionals and practitioners for example in teacher training or healthcare. Other institutions with particular strengths in vocational areas—for example Writtle College and Harper Adams University College in agriculture and the land-based industries, or Norwich University College of the Arts and The Arts Institute at Bournemouth in the creative industries—have always had a clear focus on the employment sectors which match the needs of their students. Buckinghamshire New University has its origins in an

institution established in the 1890s to provide skilled people for local industry (the furniture industry) while the Royal Agricultural College was founded even earlier to meet the need for education to support the agricultural industry. This viewpoint therefore underpins our evidence.

5. In responding to the breadth of enquiry from the Select Committee, we have concentrated on those areas where GuildHE members have a particular message or distinctive interest. In doing so we are not disregarding the importance of the other issues the Select Committee has raised—we appreciate expertise offered elsewhere. The comments below follow the headings used in the call for evidence. We are also forwarding, as further context for our material, the GuildHE submission to the DIUS Debate on the future of higher education—

see <http://www.guildhe.ac.uk/en/news/index.cfm/nid/DCE3F5D5-7386-459D-BDBD615CCB31CAC8>

#### ADMISSIONS

6. We feel strongly that all those able to benefit from higher education should have the opportunity to do so. We welcome therefore the setting of high aspirations for the number of students participating in higher education. We seek a transparent and effective admissions process and work closely with UCAS and SPA (Supporting Professionalism in Admissions) as well as with the Delivery Partnership Steering Committee in supporting our institutions. But, we have concerns about the extent to which policies on extending access to higher education sometimes appear to translate into, either an aim to extend access to a small number of students in a small number of universities only, or an aim to give access just to those whose employers can afford, and are willing, to pay.

7. GuildHE members' institutions have an excellent track record in recruitment of students across the whole range of backgrounds. They consistently exceed the benchmarks set for the recruitment of students from low socioeconomic groups. In the statistics published in 2007 and 2008 by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), Harper Adams University College and University College Birmingham were shown as being among the very highest performing HEIs for widening participation. In the 2006–07 figures, University College Plymouth St Mark and St John had the highest percentage from among all HEIs based in the South West region of young, full-time, first degree entrants from a lower socio-economic background.

8. Many of our members have a high proportion of part-time and mature students—often coming back into education after going straight into employment from school. York St John University has over 30% of its undergraduate students who are over 21. Others have similarly high numbers. It is in these areas that there is scope for growth in admissions to higher education.

9. Areas of concern for us are:

- (i) the extent to which the current standstill on recruiting additional student numbers, other than those which have been already agreed, for 2009–10 and 2010–11 and the lack of flexibility in the system (which prevents re-distribution of numbers from those that may struggle to recruit to those that would wish to recruit more) impacts more severely on smaller institutions and prevents them from meeting the needs of their local communities. Institutions such as Buckinghamshire New University, which recently achieved university title, University College Birmingham, which recently won the right to university college title, and GuildHE members of the National Arts Learning Network such as Ravensbourne College of Design and Communication, have the potential to attract more applicants but cannot do so because of the limits imposed on additional student numbers.
- (ii) the adequacy of provision for mature and part-time students who are more likely to rely on having good local access to higher education, sometimes gaining entry through further education linkages. Those with jobs, families, or caring responsibilities cannot easily move location to find a course to suit them. Many of those supported by the University of Cumbria in Cumbria Higher Learning, for example, would not be able to access higher education outside their local area. Those aspects of government policy which rely on encouraging students to move may be misplaced.
- (iii) the importance of the higher education role in information, advice and guidance from early stages in schools. In particular, we have reservations about the consequences of the new “adjustment period” which may encourage students to switch institution at the final stage prior to starting university or college.
- (iv) the inadequacy of the financial support packages available to part-time students. It is vital that support for part-time students should be put on a better footing. The distinctions between part-time and full-time students have begun to break down with a rising number of full-time students undertaking the equivalent of full-time paid jobs. A more even balance of funding, with an improved package of support—both for part-time students and for institutions—might enable a more realistic approach. We recognise the current pressures on financial resources—but feel that in these circumstances it is all the more important that resources should be redirected to where they can do most good. Funding decisions which favour the most research intensive institutions particularly those with a more traditional, not very diverse, student population may not make the greatest impact in the larger parts of the population that are most in need and may not provide the best use of limited resources.

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## TEACHING AND RESEARCH

10. The balance between teaching and research is of critical importance for our institutions. They are sometimes characterised as “teaching led” institutions. While they might be proud of this recognition, they would resist strongly any suggestion of being “teaching only” institutions. The link between research and teaching is a key aspect of higher education wherever it is delivered. There would be concern therefore, on the part of our member institutions, at any suggestion that research funding be increasingly channelled, for the future, into an even smaller group of institutions.

11. GuildHE appreciates the protection of the unit of funding for teaching and the increased recognition for good teaching practices. In securing research informed teaching, and achieving a fairer spread of funding to support economic and social prosperity, it is fundamental that a broader view of research is recognised. This must include applied research, research undertaken with employers and commercial interests, and practice based research. The Centre for Sustainable Development, at the University for the Creative Arts, for example, facilitates research on eco-design and broader sustainability considerations in product and service development. Newman University College, Birmingham has undertaken a series of research studies to inform workforce planning and training for key industry sectors as well as research to identify why white working class boys seem to reject higher education as a life choice.

12. The importance nationally of the STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) is well understood and we recognise that these are resource intensive subjects. They make heavy demands in terms of the facilities available and expect high level research. Many of our institutions are expertly engaged in the training of teachers who will be responsible for teaching the STEM subjects within our schools, thus providing for the next generation of undergraduate and research students. There is currently a mismatch of funding in this area. The Training and Development Agency for Schools, which is responsible for the funding of Initial Teaching Training, does not fund capital expenditure, while capital funding for the STEM subjects channelled through the Higher Education Funding Council for England does not connect to the demands made for training the teachers of STEM subjects for the future. We would like to see support for the STEM subjects feed through to funding for capital investment for teaching training facilities and in particular laboratory refurbishment.

13. GuildHE was actively engaged in the development of the Professional Standards Framework for those engaged in teaching and the delivery of learning in higher education. Evidence to date is that there are proportionately more staff within our institutions taking advantage of the opportunity this offers for the accreditation of initial and ongoing professional development for staff in higher education. This matches the emphasis we place on high standards of teaching and our concern that students should gain the best possible benefit from their higher education. The record of our institutions in achieving recognition through the award of National Teaching Fellowships also reinforces this point. The University of Worcester has, for example been awarded four National Teaching Fellowships. We would like to see more emphasis and funding recognition given to academic teaching excellence.

## DEGREE CLASSIFICATION

14. GuildHE has worked closely from the outset with the group chaired by Professor Bob Burgess on measuring and recording student achievement. We strongly support the recommendations of that group in the final report on honours classification that better ways need to be found of presenting the full range of student achievement. Notwithstanding the deservedly high standing of the honours degree itself, a simple classification of the final degree, into first class, second class and so on, does not do justice to the full achievement of the students concerned.

15. In the meantime many stakeholders, including employers, continue to want a simple classification system, which they think will give the answers they need in terms of providing a means of discriminating between students. We hope that in time they will be persuaded of the advantages of looking at a wider range of information.

16. It is critical not to underplay the strength and value of the UK honours degree. We would suggest that one of the difficulties is that the means by which standards are maintained and quality assured are not always well understood by the public at large. Higher education institutions have a responsibility to explain more clearly the systems that apply.

17. The GuildHE higher education institutions are well placed to speak for the robustness of the systems in place. Just like universities, those higher education institutions that do not have their own degree awarding powers, but work in partnership to deliver programmes leading to a degree of the university or awarding body, will undergo institutional audit in their own right. The reports from those institutional audits, be they private or public bodies, are published on the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) website alongside those of other institutions. And, in addition, the arrangements in place for oversight of awards and the assurance of standards by an awarding institution is subject to scrutiny when the awarding body undergoes its own institutional audit or audit of collaborative provision.

18. Although such partnership arrangements between higher education institutions work very well, many of our institutions also aspire to award their own degrees. The criteria for the award of taught and research degree awarding powers are determined by Government—the award of such powers is at the discretion of the Privy Council. Those of our institutions which have successfully applied for and been granted degree

awarding powers under the criteria set in 2003 following the Education White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education*, (Cm 5735) have undergone a period of intensive scrutiny and review that cannot easily be matched elsewhere.

19. Responsibility for advising the Government and the Privy Council on the grant of degree awarding powers rests with the QAA. The latter appoint a team of assessors, who, over the best part of a year, spend time within the institution scrutinising its activities, including direct observation of the operation of examination boards and academic committees. The recommendation that is made by the QAA to Government on whether or not degree awarding powers should be granted is dependent on the reports made by assessors based on direct observation and the evidence collected over an entire academic year. Those institutions, such as Falmouth University College or University College Birmingham, which have gained degree awarding powers in these circumstances, can rightly be proud of what they have achieved.

20. The importance of ensuring that the systems in place are understood applies not only within the UK but beyond. There are some instances where those institutions which do not hold their own degree awarding powers find that their international students encounter difficulties in getting recognition for their degrees on return to their country of origin. An example is China where an earlier memorandum signed by the British Government differentiated between the recognition to be given to degrees awarded after study at the awarding institution and degrees awarded after study elsewhere.

21. Recently students graduating from, for example Leeds Trinity and All Saints College, which awards degrees of the University of Leeds, have found that their degree certificates are not recognised for the purposes of state employment in China. The consequences are very serious for the students concerned and potentially damaging for the reputation of UK higher education as a whole. We are aware that the UK Government is seeking to address the problems of degree recognition in China—we hope that it can be given priority in the interests of the students concerned.

22. GuildHE members take plagiarism seriously and are using many of the more sophisticated software detection facilities. Student experiences before they enter higher education and the ease of access to materials on the internet mean that this is likely to remain a potential problem. But we see it being best addressed through active teaching and learning approaches and varying the assessment methods such as live presentations. For institutions such as Rose Bruford College or Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts live evidence as well as supporting written material has always tested competences as the professional is delivering directly. The educational and social values set in our institutions also support that delivery.

#### STUDENT SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

23. GuildHE institutions have a good record on student retention—once recruited students tend to stay. Transfers in from elsewhere also find their feet. In the HESA statistics for 2006–07 Bishop Grosseteste University College had a drop out rate of just 1% for mature students—as against a national average drop out rate of 14%. For understandable reasons, widening participation and good retention rates do not always go hand in hand in the same way elsewhere. We link our institutions' good record on student retention with their similarly good record on student support, including financial support. The evidence of the National Student Survey is that smaller institutions have levels of student satisfaction to match, or in some cases exceed, those found in larger institutions. Bishop Grosseteste University College also features at the top of the scale in terms of student satisfaction levels (as measured by the National Student Survey for 2008) and in terms of ensuring its students get the financial support to which they are entitled.

24. The good results achieved by our institutions reflects the level of care given in the delivery of teaching and learning and the support offered to students throughout their programmes of study. But we would argue that it also reflects the development of a learning relationship with students that starts before they embark on their programme of study so that they know what they can expect, and what will be expected of them. GuildHE institutions continue to support many initiatives on information, advice and guidance including, in some cases, hosting the regionally based Aim Higher hubs establish to develop widening participation. Students also need to know—when they first start to think about higher education—what the costs are likely to be and what sort of financial support is available to them. Work by our higher education institutions in providing information for schools has been shown to be very valuable in enabling students to take up their full entitlement to financial support.

25. GuildHE backs the current initiatives to support and build on student engagement in areas such as the development of the curriculum within institutions and the assurance of quality and standards. The experience of our institutions has been that successful delivery of teaching and learning relies on good working relationships between students and staff. They have found that informal mechanisms can sometimes be as, or more, important than formal mechanisms to achieve the same end and allow the student voice to be heard. The educational culture within the institution makes all the difference.



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## Memorandum 75

### Submission from the Russell Group of Universities<sup>251</sup>

*Innovation, Universities, Skills and Science Select Committee Inquiry into Students and Universities*<sup>252</sup>

#### SUMMARY

*Sustaining the success of world-class universities*

##### *Sustaining success*

- Russell Group universities continue to perform well against their major global competitors. This success is good news for the UK, as major research-intensive universities are vital to promoting economic prosperity and improving quality of life in this country. UK higher education makes a significant contribution to the UK economy of around £45 billion<sup>252</sup> (more than the pharmaceutical or aircraft industries) and is becoming increasingly important in the UK's knowledge economy.
- Russell Group universities are, however, very concerned about their ability to sustain this level of success in the face of fierce global competition. There is evidence of the growing strength of our major competitors—particularly, but not only, US institutions—who benefit from much higher levels of investment than UK universities.

##### *Funding: autonomy, concentration and access to additional funding*

- Universities play a major role in supporting the UK knowledge economy, and their importance is thrown into even sharper relief during an economic downturn. University research generates new knowledge and ideas, underpinning the capacity of business to innovate and adapt in a turbulent economic climate.
- It is crucial that we continue to invest sustainably in our leading research-intensive universities: they need to be able to continue to perform excellent research, invest in facilities, attract and train the best students and researchers and compete on the global stage for the social and economic benefit of the UK.
- The UK benefits from having a diverse higher education system and this diversity in mission should be encouraged. Not all universities can or should conduct world class research but they make a key contribution to the community in other important ways which should be fully recognised.
- However, recent research into higher education in Europe has shown the importance of supporting our world-class universities if Europe is to be at the forefront of innovation and knowledge. The UK's successful international performance on higher education and research, relative to the rest of Europe, owes much to our track record in supporting our top-performing universities.

##### *Concentration in research funding*

- Research funding must support excellence in research wherever it is found. This key principle has driven the success of UK research and will continue to be key to the UK's success in the future—enabling world-class research to flourish and supporting the UK's leading research base.
  - The current concentration of research funding, based on excellence, is broadly at the right level to sustain the breadth and depth of the UK's research strengths and identify and support pockets of research excellence across the sector.
  - World-class research has a highly significant impact on economic prosperity and social well-being generating significant financial returns; leading to successful partnerships with industry; and supporting international research collaboration.
  - The dual support system plays an essential part in sustaining research of the highest quality and facilitates the health of the UK's research base:
    - Dual support provides a dynamic funding system which combines stable core funding with competitively awarded grants.
    - Dual support ensures the diversity and breadth of research in the UK.
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<sup>251</sup> Russell Group member institutions are: University of Birmingham, University of Bristol, University of Cambridge, Cardiff University, University of Edinburgh, University of Glasgow, Imperial College London, King's College London, University of Leeds, University of Liverpool, London School of Economics and Political Science, University of Manchester, Newcastle University, University of Nottingham, Queen's University Belfast, University of Oxford, University of Sheffield, University of Southampton, University College London and University of Warwick.

<sup>252</sup> The Committee's inquiry asks for information about higher education across the UK, and this submission responds on that basis. However, it should be noted that some aspects of higher education differ between countries within the UK, and are affected by policies of devolved administrations as well as UK government.

*Autonomy*

- International comparisons of universities have shown that the most successful universities are those that are allowed to operate as autonomous institutions—particularly those with autonomy over their budgets.
- With regard to public funding, HEFCE funding for research (QR funding, based on quality) and teaching (T funding, the block grant) provides a stable, core funding base for institutions to manage and invest autonomously. This type of public funding is essential because it underpins a university's ability to undertake world-class research and teaching.

*Access to increased investment*

- While this Government has increased investment in major areas of science, innovation and research, maintained the unit of funding and introduced variable fees, the two major areas of academic activity, namely teaching and research, are still significantly underfunded, particularly in comparison to our main international competitors.
- In the current economic climate there is likely to be increased pressure on public spending on higher education and research including Research Council budgets and QR spending. There are also signs that R&D investment from business will be affected and charities' funding for research may be reduced. This is all at a time when university costs are increasing (people, energy, the cost of borrowing).
- Without access to increased investment there is a real danger that the UK's success will not be sustained.

## ADMISSIONS AND WIDENING PARTICIPATION

- It is essential to analyse the root causes of the low proportion of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds at university to understand how the problem can be solved.
- There is a robust body of evidence which demonstrates that academic attainment at school before the age of 18 is the most important factor in whether a student will go on to higher education, regardless of socio-economic background.
- Compelling evidence demonstrates that the problem of educational inequality begins at a very young age—even while the child is in the womb. The socio-economic gap actually widens as children progress through school and by GCSE and A Level stage, the gap becomes a gulf with students from higher socio-economic backgrounds significantly more likely to do well.
- Moreover, the increase in the number of students receiving 3+ A grades at A-level has come disproportionately from independent schools.
- These problems are compounded by the fact that going to independent and grammar schools confers further benefits, such as the greater likelihood of taking A-level subjects, or equivalent, in key subjects such as sciences, maths and modern languages—often required as necessary preparation for a range of STEM courses at Russell Group universities.
- Moreover, many pupils, particularly those from lower social backgrounds, do not receive adequate advice and guidance at school about higher education nor encouragement to consider applying to Russell Group universities. It is important that young people are given accurate information about the benefits of choosing the best course and institution for them when making choices which will affect their life chances.
- Under-achievement at school caused by complex socio-economic factors is the real root of the problem. Clearly, only governments can attempt to tackle these issues, but Russell group universities recognise they have a key role to play in working assiduously with schools, charities and businesses as well as the government to give everyone a fair chance of fulfilling their potential.
- Our institutions are constantly seeking to develop the most effective ways of identifying real potential. It is in all our interests to ensure we are giving the brightest candidates from all backgrounds the opportunity to flourish on our courses and to go to the best university for them.
- We have developed a range of “special entry routes” for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. For example, the University of Warwick gives students the opportunity to study for their first years at the local further education college and then transfer to the university. Leeds and King's allow students from deprived backgrounds who show great potential but who may have just missed the grade to do an extra year to “catch-up” with the other students.
- Russell Group universities also undertake a raft of initiatives to raise attainment and aspirations through links with local schools and colleges. Often Russell Group universities do not directly benefit from the widening participation activities they undertake as many pupils who receive this help apply to other institutions. But we recognise our role in inspiring and helping all students to fulfil their potential.

*Admissions*

- Our universities are committed to operating fair and transparent admissions processes.
- Our universities make great efforts to provide information for applicants and publicise their admissions policies: on their websites; through UCAS entry profiles; in prospectuses; and, in some cases, through podcasts and videos online. It is particularly important that pupils from families who haven't been to university, or who have less knowledge about higher education than others, are given robust support and guidance on the application process.
- A-level qualifications (or their equivalent) are a key source of information about academic ability but we do not just rely on exam grades. Russell Group universities take a range of factors and information into account (“contextual information”) to ensure that we can identify the candidates with the most potential to excel on our courses—whatever their social or educational background.
- The vast majority of Russell Group universities, for example, use personal statements and references when assessing candidates. Some departments also interview candidates or ask them to sit additional tests particularly for the most competitive courses to give the applicant a further opportunity to demonstrate their strengths or a real interest in the subject. Others take into account any particular barriers the candidate may have faced during his/her education such as spending time in care. The candidate's academic success is therefore considered in a broader context.

*Performance Indicators*

- We consider the performance indicator benchmarks to be unhelpful and inaccurate for a variety of reasons. Three key factors which account for the relatively low proportion of students from “non-traditional backgrounds” at Russell Group universities are not factored into these figures. Our concerns with the calculation are detailed within this document.

## THE BALANCE BETWEEN TEACHING AND RESEARCH

- The combination of teaching and research excellence in Russell Group universities offers students a world-class student experience.
- Now more than ever, employers want graduates who are entrepreneurial, good at problem-solving, able to handle uncertainty and who can work both independently and within a team. Russell Group universities create the optimum environment for students to develop these crucial skills by providing:
  - opportunities to engage in research processes and undertake independent projects;
  - access to leading thinkers, world-class experts in their fields as well as cutting-edge researchers;
  - high-quality libraries and facilities and a curriculum informed by world-class research;
  - interaction with a highly motivated and talented peer group
- Different learners require different levels of input and teaching approaches. Russell Group universities admit high-achieving, well-prepared, self-motivated students and we encourage them to work effectively and efficiently through directed self-learning. There is considerable evidence to demonstrate the benefits this delivers to students as well as the value to employers.
- There is a significant body of research which points to the benefits of learning in a research-intensive environment, such as those provided by Russell Group universities, which suggests that research-led learning offers significant benefits to students' education and personal and professional development. Independent learning through research, in a world-class research environment, remains at the heart of the Russell Group student experience.

## STUDENT SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

*Student support*

- There is a robust body of evidence which demonstrates that academic attainment before the age of 18, not financial considerations, is the most important factor in whether a student will go on to higher education. When A-level grades are taken into account, students from deprived and wealthy backgrounds are equally likely to go to university. So it is not surprising that under the new system of fees, loans and grants, applications to English universities have continued to increase from students of all social backgrounds.
- However, we are concerned about evidence which suggests that some students may be put off applying to a Russell Group university as a result of false preconceptions, misinformation, lack of confidence or misunderstandings about the costs and financial support available. Russell Group universities want to ensure all students have the financial help they need and to try to overcome some of these barriers by offering very generous bursaries.
- Since the introduction of the fees regime, all our institutions have greatly increased the amount of financial support given to students from low income families through bursaries. OFFA data attests

- to the enormous efforts Russell Group universities have made to help less well-off students: on average across The Russell Group, students from the lowest income backgrounds received guaranteed bursarial support of £1,680 in 2006–07 (based on OFFA figures). This is almost six times the minimum bursary of £300 required by OFFA. In some institutions, guaranteed support is as much as £4,000 in the first year of study and £3,000 thereafter.
- Another means of addressing the problem of preconceptions is improving information, advice and guidance:
  - The vast majority of students recognise that attending a Russell Group university is a worthwhile investment in their future. The benefits of attending such a university are considerable. Demand for Russell Group graduates remains high and there is a significant earnings premium gained from attending a Russell Group university.
    - Russell Group universities are working hard to improve the provision of accurate and timely information and guidance to young people about the costs, benefits, and financial support available to students.

#### *The Russell Group student experience*

- The research-led learning environment in Russell Group universities creates an ideal environment for students to develop their full potential, acquire skills that are essential for success in the labour market and achieve maximum value for money.
- Now more than ever, employers want graduates who are entrepreneurial, good at problem-solving, able to handle uncertainty and who can work both independently and within a team. Russell Group universities create the optimum environment for students to develop these crucial skills that are highly valued by employers.
- Russell Group universities admit high-achieving students but we encourage them to work effectively and efficiently through directed self-learning. The benefits to students are clear: Russell Group universities have high levels of student satisfaction, the highest starting salaries and rates of return and the lowest average non-completion rates in the higher education sector.

#### *Engaging students*

- Russell Group universities are fully involved in national and local approaches to engage students as effectively as possible. Some examples are given in the main document. The year-on-year increase in student satisfaction at Russell Group universities highlights the value of our institutions' increasing efforts to put students at the heart of the university experience.

### SECTION I: ADMISSIONS AND WIDENING PARTICIPATION

#### *Root causes of educational disadvantage*

- Compelling evidence demonstrates how early the problem of educational inequality begins.<sup>253</sup> At 22 months, the link between socio-economic background and educational attainment is evident. By the age of six, middle-class children who had low scores in cognitive tests at 22 months have completely overtaken the few poorer children who had done well in those tests.
- The socio-economic gap actually widens as children progress through school and by GCSE, the gap becomes a gulf. Attainment of 5+ good (A\*-C) GCSEs varies by over 40 percentage points between the top and bottom socio-economic backgrounds (77% compared to 31% in 2002), so that children with professional parents are well over twice as likely to gain five or more good GCSEs than children with parents in routine occupations. Young people whose parents have degree qualifications are also disproportionately more likely to study post-16 at A-level—61% of pupils with at least one parent with a degree level qualification as opposed to 27% where neither parent has A-level qualifications.<sup>254</sup>
- Complex socio-economic factors drive this divergence in life chances from a very early age. For examples, middle-class children in general benefit from households with more resources, a nourishing linguistic and intellectually stimulating, stable environment. Not only are they much better equipped to flourish at school but they tend to congregate in the same high-performing schools which in turn fosters a pro-learning, high aspiration culture. The expectations of families, teachers, peer groups and role-models can have a profound effect on the aspirations and attainment of young people.
- These problems are compounded by the fact that pupils who go to independent and grammar schools are far more likely to take key subjects such as sciences, maths and modern languages. Pupils at independent schools are roughly three times more likely to be doing further maths and

<sup>253</sup> Feinstein, L (1999) *Pre-school Educational Inequality? British children in the 1970 cohort*. London: Center for Economic Performance.

<sup>254</sup> DfES (2002). Youth Cohort Study: The Activities and Experiences of 16 Year Olds in England and Wales: <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000382/V5sfr04-2003.pdf>

- 2.5 times more likely to be doing a language A-level than those at comprehensive schools. Only one in 10 students in specialist science and mainstream schools takes at least one single science at A-level, compared to one in three at grammar and independent schools.
- The number of students receiving 3+ A grades at A-level is increasing and the students achieving the top grades are studying disproportionately at independent schools. Last year, nearly 30,000 students received 3 A grades at A-level and 16,000 received 4As. While only 20% of A-level students come from independent and grammar schools, they account for over half of those gaining 3As. Only 7% of candidates in comprehensive schools gain 3As compared to 29% in independent schools and 23% in grammar schools.
  - This divergence in levels of attainment is accelerating instead of diminishing. The independent sector saw a 9.1 percentage point increase in the number of A grades at A-level between 2002 and 2008—from 41.3 per cent to 50.4 per cent. Over the same period, top grades in comprehensives increased by only 3.9 points to 20.4 per cent.<sup>255</sup>
  - Moreover, independent school pupils are also much more likely to apply to Russell Group universities. 50.3% of students from independent schools apply to Russell Group universities while only 29.7% from maintained schools do so. Quite simply, we cannot consider those students that do not apply.
  - Clearly only governments can attempt to tackle these issues but Russell Group universities recognise that they can play an important role in working with schools, charities and businesses as well as government to give everyone a fair chance of fulfilling their potential.

#### *Widening participation*

- Effective information, advice and guidance about the benefits of higher education and attending research-intensive institutions is essential to ensure that young people have the information they require to make decisions that will maximise their life chances. Many pupils, particularly those from lower social backgrounds, do not receive adequate information, advice and guidance at school about higher education. We are alarmed by increasing evidence that some teachers may not be encouraging some of their students to consider Russell Group universities.<sup>256</sup> It is particularly important that pupils from families who haven't been to university, or who have less knowledge about higher education than others are given robust support and guidance at school.<sup>257</sup>
- Often Russell Group universities do not directly benefit from the widening participation activities they undertake because many pupils who receive this help apply to other institutions. However, we recognise our role in helping to raise attainment and aspirations—helping all students to fulfil their potential and inspiring them to consider higher education.
- Our institutions are constantly seeking to develop the most effective ways of identifying real potential. It is in all our interests to ensure we are giving the brightest candidates from all backgrounds the opportunity to flourish on our courses and to go to the best university for them.
- We have also developed a range of “special entry routes” for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. For example, the University of Warwick gives students the opportunity to study for their first years at the local further education college and then transfer to the university. Leeds and King's allow students who show great potential but who may have just missed the grade to do an extra year to “catch-up” with the other students. (More information on special entry routes to Russell Group universities is available in Appendix A)

#### *Admissions*

- The issue of widening participation must be separated from that of fair access. Widening participation refers to increasing the number of students from lower socio-economic groups who can benefit from higher education. Wider participation in higher education will be achieved primarily by raising the levels of attainment of pupils from low income backgrounds at school.
- Fair access to any university means ensuring that all candidates competing for a place on a chosen course are assessed as fairly and as accurately as possible. Often this is a greater concern for selective courses and institutions, where staff members involved in admissions must choose between many highly-qualified applicants in a fair and transparent way. However, our institutions are constantly seeking to refine the information we draw on to help us identify potential and aptitude.
- A-level qualifications (or their equivalent) are a key source of information about academic ability but we do not just rely on exam grades. Russell Group universities take a range of factors and information into account (“contextual information”) to ensure that we can identify the candidates

<sup>255</sup> JCQ (2008): 14 August 2008 press conference.

<sup>256</sup> The Sutton Trust and Institute of Education (2008). “Primed for Success”: <http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/PrimedforSuccess.pdf>

<sup>257</sup> McKenzie, H. (2005). “The Tuition Trap”. Toronto: Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations. September 2005.

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- with the most potential to excel on our courses—whatever their social or educational background. The vast majority of Russell Group universities, for example, use personal statements and references when assessing candidates. Some departments also interview candidates or ask them to sit additional tests particularly for the most competitive courses to give applicants a further opportunity to demonstrate their strengths or a real interest in the subject. Others take into account any particular barriers the candidate may have faced during his/her education such as spending time in care. The candidate's academic success is therefore considered in a broader context.
- It is crucial that pupils are given accurate information, advice and guidance when making choices about their A-level subjects. It is particularly important that pupils from families who haven't been to university, or who have less knowledge about higher education than others are given robust support and guidance at school.
  - Russell Group universities are increasing and improving the information they provide for potential students about the qualifications and skills they need to be successful in pursuing their chosen course. They now offer clear recommendations on the *package* of A-levels (or equivalent) which would give a candidate the best grounding for a particular course and those which would be a less ideal *combination* of A-levels.
  - Our universities make great efforts to publicise their admissions policies: on their websites; through UCAS entry profiles; in prospectuses; and, in some cases, through podcasts and videos online.

Question 1: *The effectiveness of the process for admission to Higher Education Institutions, including A-levels, Advanced Diplomas, apprenticeships and other university entrance tests*

*Key facts: admissions and school qualifications*

- Participation in higher education varies little by social class once prior attainment is factored in. When broken down by A-level scores, the percentage of students that enter HE across different social classes is almost identical.
- A record number of pupils are achieving three A grades at A-level. Nearly 30,000 students received three A grades at A-level last year and 16,000 received 4As.
- Students gaining three A grades come disproportionately from independent and grammar schools. 20% of A-level students come from independent and grammar schools but they account for over half of those gaining 3As.
- The increase in the number of A grades awarded is coming from independent and grammar schools. The independent sector saw a 9.1 percentage point increase in the number of A grades at A-level between 2002 and 2008—from 41.3 per cent to 50.4 per cent. Over the same period, top grades in comprehensives increased by only 3.9 points to 20.4 per cent.<sup>258</sup>
- In addition, independent and grammar school students are far more likely to take key subjects such as sciences, maths and modern languages.
- Independent school pupils are also much more likely to apply to Russell Group universities. 50.3% of independent school applicants apply to Russell Group universities while only 29.7% from maintained schools do so.

1. For reasons outlined above in the summary, A-level qualifications (or equivalent) remain the key source of information about academic ability, but it is difficult for admissions tutors to choose between excellent candidates. Due regard should be given to the different school qualifications that exist between the different nations of the UK. For the purposes of this response, however, we will focus on A-level qualifications.

2. Annex A contains further information and analysis of trends in A-level attainment by school type and subject and examines STEM A-level results in particular across the private and state sector.

3. Annex B describes some best practice examples of the special entry routes for non-traditional students applying to Russell Group universities.

4. A range of additional briefings are available on access courses, school and college links, programmes aimed at particular under-represented groups and more. Please contact Anthony Dursi (anthony.dursi@russellgroup.ac.uk) at The Russell Group for more information.

5. Russell Group universities are constantly examining the most effective ways of ensuring that we identify the candidates with the potential to flourish on our courses and to give them real opportunities to demonstrate that talent and potential.

6. For further details, please see the summary on admissions at the beginning of Section 1.

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<sup>258</sup> JCQ (2008): 14 August 2008 press conference.

Question 2: *The UK's ability to meet government targets for Higher Education participation and the relevance of these targets*

*Key facts: Russell Group widening participation performance indicators*

- Roughly three quarters of young, full-time first degree entrants to Russell Group universities are from state schools or colleges. This year's widening participation performance indicators found that Russell Group universities on average have increased their percentage of entrants from state-schools twice as much as the sector.
- Since the inception of performance indicators, Russell Group universities have continued to improve against their benchmarks in terms of intake from lower participation neighbourhoods

*Widening participation indicators*

7. The widening participation performance indicators only provide a very broad measure of participation by under-represented groups in higher education. They are not targets, nor were they intended to be, as they are not sufficiently accurate or robust.

8. HEFCE's first report on these indicators notes: "the success of an institution's access policies cannot be gauged by looking at the "access" indicators alone ... Institutions need to be able to identify entrants with the potential to benefit from higher education".<sup>259</sup>

9. HEFCE's "*Guide to Widening Participation*" further states that, "it is hard to meaningfully compare two institutions that are very different. For example, an institution where most students enter with very good A-level qualifications should not usually be compared with one whose students come from a wider range of educational backgrounds. [...] If two institutions have very different benchmarks, this is an indication that they are so different that comparing them would not give a helpful answer".<sup>260</sup>

10. Three key factors which account for the relatively low proportion of students from "non-traditional backgrounds" at Russell Group universities are not factored into the benchmark figures provided annually by HESA:

- The use of UCAS tariff points in the performance indicators inflates the potential number of qualified applicants, as many of these pupils may not have the qualifications required to enter their chosen course or university. The UCAS tariff includes points for a broad range of achievements including Higher Sports Leader Award, passing British Horse Society certificates and various music examinations. These types of activities or awards would not always be taken into account in the admissions process at our universities.
- The benchmarks do not take into account whether students have the necessary subject combination for particular areas of study, which is particularly important in STEM-based subjects. Numeracy, for example, is essential for many undergraduate courses at our universities, particularly in engineering, economics and medicine. Again, this has the effect of making it appear that more students have the necessary knowledge and skills to enter a particular course than is the case.
- The number of applications from "non-traditional" pupils is not taken into account. Lack of applications from such groups is one of the main difficulties Russell Group universities face in widening participation. Quite simply, Russell Group universities cannot consider applicants who do not apply.

Question 3: *The implementation and success of widening participation initiatives, and the impact of the current funding regime on these objectives*

*Key facts: widening participation at Russell Group universities*

- Russell Group universities currently employ well over 100 (full-time equivalent) widening participation staff.
- Funding devoted by Russell Group universities to outreach programmes has grown by nearly £5 million since 2006—a commitment of over £100,000 more per institution than the sector average.
- The Russell Group has over 110,000 part-time students and more part-time students on average than the sector as a whole. We have developed a huge array of initiatives to build on the success of our part-time study programmes.
- There are a variety of distance learning opportunities available from Russell Group universities. These include LSE's distance learning "foundation year" and the University of Cambridge's e-learning environment in the Institute of Continuing Education, which was particularly designed for part-time study.

<sup>259</sup> [http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/1999/99\\_11.doc](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/1999/99_11.doc)

<sup>260</sup> <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/PerfInd/2001/guide.htm>

11. An evaluation of *King's College London's Extended Medical Degree Programme* found that students who were accepted with lower offers into the programme did as well or better than their peers on the conventional course. The evaluation was carried out in 2008, six years after the programme began, and after its first cohort had progressed through their full degree. This additional year, often referred to as a "foundation year", is an extra year at the start of a degree that prepares students without the standard required qualifications or attainment to then enter their chosen course. These year-long courses are designed to help students "catch-up" with their peers who have entered through a conventional route. They are extremely rigorous in order to ensure that students will have the necessary skills, experience and knowledge to succeed in their degree. They are specifically designed to provide additional support and tuition to students in their transition to higher education.

- The evaluation notes, "we can safely conclude that medical students can succeed without AAB at A level if these results were obtained from a low achieving school".<sup>261</sup>
- These students now make up over 10% of the medical student population at King's College London and the best of them are consistently in the top 15% of their whole year group in examination results.
- Retention rates for these students are high at 90%. While this is lower than their peers who entered through the traditional route (97%), it is well above the UK average (83%).

12. An evaluation of the *Access to Leeds* programme found similarly high levels of attainment and retention for those "non-traditional students" entering through the alternative route.

- While numbers remain modest, the evaluation shows that over 70% of those students are getting firsts or 2:1s every year, even though they have entered with lower A-level grades. This compares well with those students who enter through traditional routes.
- While retention rates have been slightly lower for two years of the programme, in one year the retention rates surpassed the university average.

13. Evaluations of *Access 2 Birmingham (A2B)* and the *Manchester Access Programme* have shown that these programmes are effective as supported entry routes into the universities.

- Of the 139 participants on the *Manchester Access Programme* in the 2007 cohort, 108 (78%) applied to the University and 92 (85%) received an offer from the University. The University of Manchester is committed to expanding the programme and will provide up to 300 new places on the programme next year.
- Applications to *A2B* have grown from 356 in 2005–06 to 585 in 2007–08. Offers to the University have increased from 213 to 388 (82%) in the same period. This increased conversion is attributable to ongoing support provided through the programme to help participants transition from school to university study.

14. *Pathways to the Professions* was established at the University of Edinburgh in 2001–02 to encourage progression by under-represented school students into professional courses in medicine, veterinary medicine and law, and subsequently into the professions themselves. Working with university colleges and schools, professional bodies, state schools and families, the programme was initiated and developed across all 46 state schools in Edinburgh and the Lothians and has over 600 school students registered. A recent evaluation found:

- Registrations by school students have increased year on year
- An increase in applications to degree courses from the 46 schools:
  - 136% increase in applications to medicine
  - 166% increase in applications to veterinary medicine since it has been involved in the project
  - 38% increase in applications for law
- *Pathways to Law* has been extended to five other Russell Group universities, including the University of Leeds, the London School of Economics & Political Science, University of Manchester, University of Southampton and University of Warwick.

15. However, these programmes are costly and therefore limited in size and scope. The King's College London programme, for example, costs approximately £190,000 a year for academic staff alone, for an intake of fifty students.

<sup>261</sup> Garlick, P and G Brown (2008). "Widening participation in medicine". *British Medical Journal*: 336;1111–1113:



Question 4: *The role of the Government in developing and promoting fair access and admissions policies for the UK Higher Education sector*

16. This question demands more space than is available through this consultation.

17. Inequality in life chances and educational success is the key factor in the lower proportion of students from low income backgrounds at university. This inequality is driven by complex and entrenched socio-economic factors which only governments can begin to address. But our universities are committed to helping the Government to tackle these problems as far as possible.

18. We welcome the Government's acknowledgement that admissions is the responsibility of autonomous higher education institutions.

- Rt. Hon. John Denham MP, Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills recently stated, "Universities are autonomous institutions responsible for their admissions policies."<sup>262</sup>
- On the subject of entry requirements, Rt. Hon. David Lammy MP, Minister for Higher Education, has noted "these are for each university to decide on the basis of the academic and professional needs of each course."<sup>263</sup>

19. Russell Group universities acknowledge the need for admissions policies to be open and transparent. In April, The Russell Group welcomed the speech by the Secretary of State of Innovation, Universities and Skills outlining the need to include information about widening participation in OFFA agreements. Russell Group universities are happy to continue to provide information about our admissions policies.

20. The government's initial guidance letter on the creation of OFFA states: "the law puts the contents of particular courses and the manner in which they are taught, as well as institutions' admissions policies and procedures, outside your remit". QAA's Code of Practice on Admissions, Section 10 sets out the expectation for higher education institutions to have fair, accessible and transparent admissions policies and procedures.

## SECTION 2: THE BALANCE BETWEEN TEACHING AND RESEARCH

### *Research-led learning*

21. The combination of teaching and research excellence in Russell Group universities creates an ideal learning environment. Now more than ever, employers want graduates who are entrepreneurial, good at problem-solving, able to handle uncertainty and who can work both independently and within a team. Russell Group universities create the optimum environment for students to develop these crucial skills by providing:

- opportunities to engage in research processes and undertake independent projects;
- access to leading thinkers, world-class experts in their fields as well as cutting-edge researchers;
- high-quality libraries and facilities and a curriculum informed by world-class research;
- highly motivated and talented peer group to interact with.

22. Russell Group universities offer world-class teaching in an environment that instils independence of thought and learning. It is a model that ensures we continue to produce capable, self-motivated graduates of the highest standard.

23. We would like to emphasise that any consideration of the balance between teaching and research should recognise the importance of research-led learning to the student learning experience.

24. Rather than considering "the balance between teaching and research" as if these are separate entities or processes, The Russell Group believes that it is more accurate to consider how teaching and research interact within the broader context of a research-led learning environment. As institutions which are able to demonstrate excellence in both research and teaching (see Annex C), Russell Group universities provide an environment in which students learn through research, adding value to the student experience. We welcome reports by HEFCE<sup>264</sup> and the Research Forum<sup>265</sup> which have pointed to the benefits or added value of learning in a research-intensive environment.

25. Wage premiums are a clear indicator of value in the graduate labour market and demonstrate that Russell Group graduates are highly esteemed by employers because they benefit from some of the highest returns on their degrees. Studying at a Russell Group university confers a wage premium of approximately 10% compared to modern universities, after accounting for A-level scores, parental background, school

<sup>262</sup> <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/education/article5258339.ece>

<sup>263</sup> <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmhansrd/cm081104/text/81104w0043.htm>

<sup>264</sup> Higher Education Funding Council for England, *Fundamental Review of Research Policy and Funding: Final Report of the sub-group to consider the interaction between teaching, research and other activities of HEIs*, 2000.

<sup>265</sup> Research Forum, "The Relationships Between Research and Teaching in Institutions of Higher Education", June 2004.

attended and other factors affecting wages.<sup>266</sup> It is likely that the education provided by Russell Group universities, with its emphasis on engaging students as independent, critically-minded learners, is a significant factor in producing graduates that are highly valued by employers. As well as achieving higher rates of return, Russell Group graduates continue to meet a crucial high-level skills need in the UK.

26. There is also growing evidence of a specific demand from employers for graduates with skills in STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and maths). The most recent CBI Skills Survey found that 92% of firms want employees with STEM skills. By 2014, it is expected that the UK will need to fill around three-quarters of a million (730,000) extra jobs requiring highly numerate, analytical people with STEM skills, making a net total of 2.4 million of these jobs in six years time.<sup>267</sup> Approximately 30% of STEM graduates in the UK graduate from Russell Group universities. The numeracy and analytical skills acquired from studying STEM subjects, coupled with the wider benefits of research-led learning, makes these graduates highly attractive to employers and key contributors to the economy.

27. Further details on the benefits of research-led learning and the added value of the Russell Group student learning experience can be found at Annex D.

28. Russell Group universities are committed to continuing to develop research-led learning and the academic experience of their students to ensure that the culture of enquiry-based, independent learning in a world-class research environment remains at the heart of the student experience.

29. It can be difficult to define precisely what is meant by research-led learning, particularly given that a “one size fits all” approach to supporting this type of learning environment is unlikely to be successful. Learning through research exists in a variety of modes appropriate to individual institutions, departments and disciplines<sup>268</sup> and can be supported in a number of ways, including through the content and structure of the curriculum, through teaching practice, and through providing student research opportunities.<sup>269</sup>

*Question 5: Levels of funding for, and the balance between, teaching and research in UK HEIs; the sustainability of methods of assessing excellence in teaching and research and the impact of research assessment on these activities*

*Levels of funding for teaching and research*

30. It is crucial that we continue to invest in the sustainability of our leading research-intensive universities: they need to be able to continue to perform excellent research, invest in facilities, attract and train the best students and researchers and compete on the global stage for the social and economic benefit of the UK.

31. We cannot afford for our leading universities to be under-funded:

- they carry out the world-class research that ensures that the UK is globally competitive and the destination of choice for international investment and collaboration in research;
- they make a valuable contribution to the economy, society and global citizenship;
- they conduct high quality teaching in an enquiry-based environment with world class facilities;
- they make significant investments in research infrastructure;
- they attract international staff and students, benefiting the UK’s society, economy and quality of research.

32. In the current economic climate, investing to support universities will be crucial to ensuring the UK’s economic success, both now and in the long-term. University research generates new knowledge and ideas, underpinning the capacity of business to innovate and adapt in a turbulent economic climate:

<sup>266</sup> Chevalier, A. and Conlon, C., “Does it pay to attend a prestigious university?” Centre for the Economics of Education, LSE (table 5 for the 1995 cohort, page 29). 2008 Centre for Economic Performance (CEP) research shows that if a student attends an institution in the highest quartile—as determined by a number of different quality measures (RAE scores, retention rates, and tariff scores)—this leads to a higher wage of between 10 and 16 per cent (depending on the measure) compared to an individual who attends an institution in the lowest quartile. Although the report does not identify individual institutions, Russell Group universities achieve high RAE scores, retention rates and tariff scores so it is very likely they are in the top quartile of institutions in the UK. “University Quality and Graduate Wages in the UK” Hussain, McNally and Telhaj, Centre for Economic Performance, London School of Economics, 2008.

<sup>267</sup> “CBI/Edexcel Education & Skills Survey 2008”

<sup>268</sup> The importance of supporting links in ways appropriate to different disciplines is noted in, for example: Brew, A. “Research and teaching: changing relationships in a changing context.” *Studies in Higher Education*, 24:3, 291–301, 1999; Robertson, J. and Bond, C., “Experiences of the Relation between Teaching and Research: what do academics think?” in *Higher Education Research and Development*, 20:1, 5–19 (2001).

<sup>269</sup> Griffiths, R., “Knowledge production and the research-teaching nexus: the case of the built environment disciplines”, *Studies in Higher Education*, 29:5, 709–727, 2004. Griffiths developed a typology drawn from the findings of Oxford Brookes University’s LINK project on enhancing teaching-research links in the Built Environment disciplines (now the Reinvention Centre for Undergraduate Research at Oxford Brookes and Warwick Universities). Jenkins and Healey (*Institutional strategies to link teaching and research*, The Higher Education Academy, 2005) note that these definitions were amended in 2003 by the then Pro Vice-Chancellor of the University of Manchester, Michael Bradford, to: learning about others’ research; learning to do research; learning in research mode; pedagogic research.

- Through training and developing a highly skilled workforce, universities ensure that UK business can draw on the skills it will need to grow and develop; and universities will meet demand from individuals who look to higher education as a means of improving their chances of entry—or re-entry—into an increasingly competitive job market;
- As major national and regional industries in their own right, universities draw significant investment to a region through international and domestic students, research funding, and the major programmes of capital investment and infrastructure they support.

33. While this Government has increased investment in major areas of science, innovation and research, maintained the unit of funding and introduced variable fees, teaching and research are still significantly underfunded, particularly relative to our main international competitors. In terms of GDP, the US invests over twice as much as the UK on higher education. Likewise funding for higher education is increasing rapidly in countries such as China, India, Brazil and Australia.

34. The proportion of their income Russell Group universities receive from the public purse has significantly decreased while the revenue derived from private investment from business as well as through tuition fees and charitable giving has increased.

35. In the current economic climate there is likely to be increased pressure on public spending on higher education and research including Research Council budgets and QR spending. There are also signs that R&D investment from business will be affected and charities' funding for research—which is a very significant source of income for most Russell Group universities—may be seriously affected. This is all at a time when university costs are increasing (people, energy, the cost of borrowing).

36. Without access to increased investment there is a real danger that the UK's success will not be sustained.

#### *The importance of investing in world-class research-intensive universities*

37. The role played by world-class research-intensive universities is crucial for the success of UK higher education. It is the UK's reputation for, and commitment to, world-class universities that enables us to be internationally competitive and to attract international investment to the UK. Our leading research-intensive universities are key to the sustainability of UK higher education in a global context.

38. The UK is second only to the US in research excellence,<sup>270</sup> and is number one in the G8 of advanced industrial nations for research productivity<sup>271</sup>.<sup>272</sup> With 78% of staff in 5\* departments working in Russell Group universities,<sup>273</sup> it is the leading research-intensive universities that deliver the UK's world-class research.

39. Recent research into higher education in Europe has noted the importance of promoting world-class universities if Europe is to be at the forefront of innovation and knowledge, suggesting that whilst it is desirable to maintain a “good average higher education level”, it is also vital that world-class universities and peaks of research excellence are fostered. This necessarily means supporting a small number of institutions to be first-rate:

“there is no denying that the high peaks cannot make up a significant proportion of the whole...and Europe needs these peaks.”<sup>274</sup>

40. The UK's successful international performance in higher education and research, relative to the rest of Europe, owes much to our track record in supporting our world-class universities.<sup>275</sup> It is vital that we continue to support those leading universities that secure the UK's global reputation for high-quality higher education and that drive the UK's position as an international leader in research.

41. The UK must also respond to increasing international competition, both from established and emerging science nations.<sup>276</sup> Many of our major international competitors are making unprecedented investments in their universities, including increasingly targeting resources towards developing or sustaining leading universities (realising the benefits of co-locating education and research in universities and the important contribution of universities to top-level research):

- The French government, as well as recently granting autonomy to twenty universities for the first time, has established “Operation Campus” which will target funding to alliances of leading universities forming “super-campuses” in an effort to make France's universities more internationally competitive;

<sup>270</sup> *International comparative performance of the UK research base*, Evidence Ltd/Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, July 2008.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>272</sup> <http://www.berr.gov.uk/files/file11959.pdf> “The scientific impact of Nations”, 2004, David King, published in *Nature*

<sup>273</sup> Results from the 2001 RAE.

<sup>274</sup> Aghion, P., Dewatripont, M., Hoxby, C., Mas-Coleil, A., and Sapir, A., *Higher Aspirations: an agenda for reforming European universities* (Bruegel Blueprint Series, Volume V, 2008), p.24.

<sup>275</sup> This is noted in Aghion, P. et al. 2008.

<sup>276</sup> In addition to continued competition from countries such as the US, Japan and Germany, the UK faces increasing competition from India, China, Korea and other emerging strengths such as South America and the Gulf States.

- Germany’s “Excellence Initiative” targets additional funding at clusters of excellence to support leading research and strengthen these higher education institutions;
- Due to the high levels of targeted central government investment, China’s ten historic universities have been increasingly climbing the top 500 international rankings of universities over the past five years, whilst UK universities have remained steady;
- Data from the National Science Foundation in the United States shows that 50 universities (comprising just under 8% of the 650 institutions that spent over \$150,000 USD on science and engineering R&D) accounted for 59% of federal research funding in 2006, with the top 20 universities accounting for about a third of funding.<sup>277</sup>

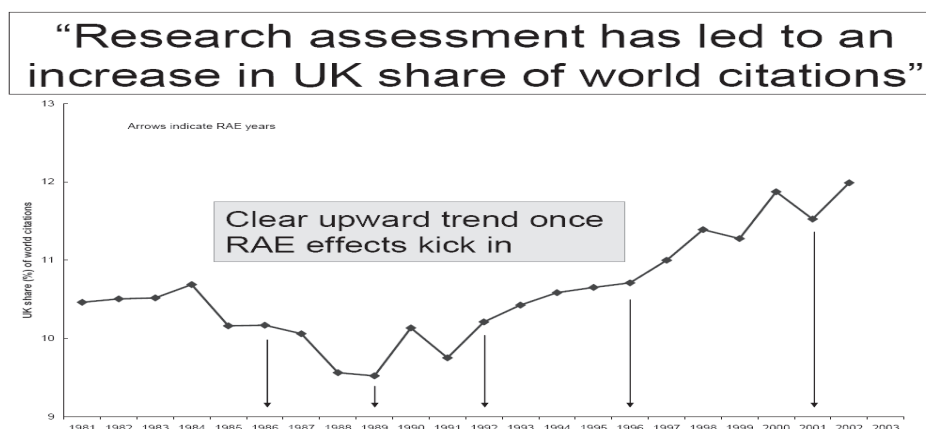
### *Research funding—driving excellence*

42. Research funding must support excellence in research wherever it is found. This key principle has driven the success of UK research and will continue to be key to the UK’s success in the future—enabling world-class research to flourish and supporting the UK’s leading research base.

- It is excellent research that has the greatest impact, generating significant financial returns, as well as broader social and economic benefits; leading to successful partnerships with industry; and supporting international research collaboration.
- The dual support system plays an essential part in sustaining research of the highest quality and facilitating the health of the UK’s research base:
  - Dual support provides a dynamic funding system which combines stable core funding with competitively awarded grants.
  - Dual support ensures the diversity and breadth of research in the UK.

43. The Russell Group believes that the current concentration of research funding is broadly at the right level to sustain the breadth and depth of the UK’s research strengths and identify and support pockets of research excellence across the sector.

44. The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), the results of which determine QR funding, has driven up the quality of UK research since its introduction in the 1980s. Research shows that successive RAE cycles have driven improvements not only in the performance of research-intensive institutions but also “at all grades and across subject areas”.<sup>278</sup> The graph below illustrates the increase in the UK’s share of world citations as the RAE takes effect.<sup>279</sup>



<sup>277</sup> National Science Foundation, Academic Research and Development Expenditures: Fiscal Year 2006 (2007). NSF data shows that the concentration of research funding in the US has remained relatively stable since 1999, paralleling the trend in research funding in the UK.

<sup>278</sup> Evidence Ltd, Impact of selective funding of research in England, and the specific outcomes of HEFCE research funding (Report to HEFCE and the Department for Education and Skills), 2005.

<sup>279</sup> Source: Higher Education Funding Council for England.

Question 6: *the adequacy of financial support for the development of innovative teaching methods and teaching/research integration*

45. It is important that both research and teaching are funded on a sustainable basis and in particular that the interactions between research and teaching are recognised. Investment in one activity can enhance the other—for example, investment in pedagogical research can lead to improvements in teaching methods; improved research facilities can support learning; innovative learning spaces can benefit research activity. It is important that costing of and funding for teaching and research take account of these mutually beneficial relationships.

46. It will be important that HEFCE's proposals to roll the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund into the new Teaching Enhancement and Student Success fund continue to support research-informed teaching and learning in our leading research-intensive universities, which are well-placed to develop pioneering best practice in this area.

Question 7: *the quality of teaching provision and learning facilities in UK and the extent to which they vary between HEIs*

47. The many indicators of the high level of teaching quality at Russell Group universities—from QAA results to student feedback—are given in Annex C. The 2008 NUS Student Experience Report<sup>280</sup> showed that Russell Group students indicated the highest levels of satisfaction with the quality of teaching and learning at their institutions and a much higher proportion—indeed, the vast majority—cited academic reputation as a key factor in their choice of university:

- 89% of students at Russell Group universities rated the quality of teaching and learning as good or excellent; higher than other pre-1992 universities, post-1992 universities and the sector-wide average.
- 81% of Russell Group students cited “academic reputation” as a main reason for choosing their institution compared to 47% of students across the sector.

48. The NUS Student Experience Report also found that Russell Group students, on average, received more contact hours, undertook more private study hours, and rated the quality of interaction with staff much more highly than the rest of the sector. Russell Group universities also have, on average, the lowest drop-out rates, which is further testament to the quality of teaching and learning students currently receive.

49. The size and success of the research endeavour in Russell Group universities enables them to offer breadth and depth of research expertise (including in educational and pedagogical research<sup>281</sup>); an institutional focus on promoting independent learning through research; world-class research, library and teaching facilities; and a student experience where teaching and learning are enriched and informed by leading-edge, world-class research.

Question 8: *the availability and adequacy of training in teaching methods for UK academics and the importance of teaching excellence for the academic career path*

50. Understanding and promoting the relationship between teaching and research will encourage parity of esteem between these related fields. Universities have an important role in affirming the value of teaching and in producing the next generation of university teachers who will inspire our students. All Russell Group universities are continuing to manage and promote the relationship between research, teaching and learning to ensure that teaching and learning are informed and enriched by research across the institution, as evidenced in their strategic plans.<sup>282</sup>

51. It is important to provide high-quality training and support to maintain high standards among teaching staff, including through teaching accreditation. Russell Group universities emphasise training and staff development in their teaching and learning strategies and provide a number of training opportunities, including teaching awards for staff, as well as encouraging the dissemination of best practice through online resources, learning and teaching units and staff networks. Training and staff development are also emphasised in institutional teaching and learning strategies (Further details of Russell Group universities' support for teaching staff development are at Annex E)

52. Many Russell Group universities are increasing their investment in university teaching to ensure that it remains attractive as a career path—such as the London School of Economics and Political Sciences' recent announcement of an extra £2 million in funding to improve teaching standards and reward good teaching. Ensuring that teaching has parity with research in promotion criteria is an important area of development.

<sup>280</sup> NUS Student Experience Report 2008

<sup>281</sup> The importance of such research in improving methods of teaching and learning is noted in Gordon et al., *Building capacity for change: research on the scholarship of teaching*, Report to HEFCE, 2003.

<sup>282</sup> All publicly available Russell Group learning and teaching strategies discuss the ways in which the research-teaching relationship can be supported and strengthened.

## SECTION 3: DEGREE CLASSIFICATION

Question 9: *the actions universities, Government and others have taken, or should take, to maintain confidence in the value of degrees awarded by universities in the UK*

53. The world-class reputation of Russell Group universities depends on maintaining excellence in academic standards and robust methods of quality assurance. Our universities keep a strict watch on standards, for both home and overseas students, with rigorous checks including the use of independent external examiners and audits from the Quality Assurance Agency. The higher education sector is addressing the need to update the degree awarding system with plans to improve the information on a student's transcript alongside their degree classification. From the Russell Group, the University of Manchester, Newcastle University and University College London are all piloting the Higher Education Achievement Report which was proposed in the Burgess Report on measuring student achievement, published in 2007.

54. There is no evidence of "degree inflation" at the expense of standards at Russell Group universities. Previous research from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has demonstrated a strong correlation between entry qualifications and degree results that continues to exist. The increase in the percentage of Russell Group students gaining firsts and 2:1s from 1994–2002 correlates with a rise in the entrants' qualifications and an increase in standards at the time the Russell Group was established. This continued correlation is acknowledged in the analysis of data in the annex of the Higher Education Policy Institute's (HEPI) 2007 report, "The academic experience of students in English universities". This is not the case across the HE sector. Whilst we do everything to encourage students to excel on their degree course—irrespective of their previous educational success—one would expect a broad correlation between entry qualifications and degree results if standards are consistent over time.

55. We have seen no evidence beyond anecdotal, often anonymous, reports that entry standards are being lowered for overseas students. In fact the highest performing students at Russell Group universities are just as likely to be international students as they are UK students. In 2006–07, according to HESA data, 16% of overseas (non-EU) students at Russell Group institutions obtained a first class honours degree, compared to 15% of UK students. This is a clear indication of the high standard of overseas students that achieve a place at our universities and the commitment they have to their studies. Russell Group universities continue to attract the best minds from around the world to study, research and teach in our universities—bringing considerable economic and social benefit to the UK as a whole.

## SECTION 4: STUDENT SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

Question 10: *the effectiveness of initiatives to support student engagement in the formulation of HE policy, and how the success or otherwise of these initiatives is being assessed*

56. Russell Group universities are fully involved in national and local approaches to engage students as effectively as possible. Some examples from our institutions include:

- KCL's King's Graduate Project involves both staff and students to develop a flexible framework for learning across the College, including the possibility of an optional core curriculum focusing on independent and enquiry-based learning skills. King's trans-disciplinary and generalist undergraduate degrees incorporate courses in globalisation and diversity and engagement in voluntary work.
- The University of Leeds' Learning and Teaching Partnership Agreement was written in collaboration with students and staff and sets out what students can expect when studying at Leeds and what the university can expect from them. The Leeds for Life Project also offers support and resources to enable students to make the most of their university experience.
- The Reinvention Centre for Undergraduate Research at the University of Warwick is discussing with QAA and others how the concept of the student as producer informs and supports student involvement in the formulation of HE policy. The President of the Students' Union at Warwick is a full member of the governing Council, the Senate and the weekly Steering Committee (University "cabinet").

*National Student Survey and NUS Student Experience Report*

57. It is important that students have a say in their education to help ensure that the university experience is tailored to their individual needs. The National Student Survey is therefore a useful tool to help our universities continue to target improvements in the quality of education.

58. Providing a first-class teaching and learning experience is vitally important to the Russell Group, so we were delighted to see a positive response to the 2008 National Student Survey. The year-on-year increase in student satisfaction at Russell Group universities helps highlight the value of our institutions' increasing efforts to put students at the heart of the university experience.

In the National Student Survey 2008, 86 % of Russell Group students agreed with the statement "Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course," an increase from 2007. This compares with an 82% average "overall" satisfaction rate for all undergraduate students registered at FE and HE institutions.

59. The 2008 NUS Student Experience Report<sup>283</sup> showed that Russell Group students indicated the highest levels of satisfaction with the quality of teaching and learning at their institutions and a much higher proportion—indeed, the vast majority—cited academic reputation as a key factor in their choice of university:

- 89% of students at Russell Group universities rated the quality of teaching and learning as good or excellent; higher than other pre-1992 universities, post-1992 universities and the sector-wide average.
- 81% of Russell Group students cited “academic reputation” as a main reason for choosing their institution compared to 47% of students across the sector.

60. The NUS Student Experience Report also found that Russell Group students, on average, received more contact hours, undertook more private study hours, and rated the quality of interaction with staff much more highly than the rest of the sector. Russell Group universities also have, on average, the lowest drop-out rates, which is further testament to the quality of teaching and learning students receive.

*Question 11: how the student experience differs in public and private universities*

The Russell Group is not in a position to comment on the development of private institutions. However we believe it is vital that we continue to emphasise the excellent student experience that can be expected from the UK’s leading world-class research intensive universities.

*Student Experience*

61. The combination of teaching and research excellence in Russell Group universities creates an ideal learning environment. Now more than ever, employers want graduates who are entrepreneurial, good at problem-solving, able to handle uncertainty and who can work both independently and within a team. Russell Group universities create the optimum environment for students to develop these crucial skills by providing:

- opportunities to engage in research processes and undertake independent projects;
- access to leading thinkers, world-class experts in their fields as well as cutting-edge researchers
- high-quality libraries and facilities and a curriculum informed by world-class research;
- highly motivated and talented peer group to interact with.

62. Different learners require different levels of input and teaching approaches. Russell Group universities admit high-achieving, well-prepared, self-motivated students and we encourage them to work effectively and efficiently through directed self-learning. The benefits to students are clear: we have high rates of student satisfaction, the highest starting salaries and rates of return<sup>284</sup> and the lowest average non-completion rates in the higher education sector.

63. Russell Group universities offer world class teaching in an environment that instils independence of thought and learning. It is a model that ensures we continue to produce capable, self-motivated graduates of the highest standard.

*Contact Hours*

64. Contact hours will obviously vary according to the subject studied. Different disciplines have developed ways of teaching which are best suited to the subject material, the skills and knowledge of generations of students and the requirements of employers and the labour market. Some subjects like science and engineering rely on structured learning and practical, laboratory-based teaching and require more contact hours. Indeed Russell Group institutions are providing significantly more contact hours than the sector average in these subjects. Students of other subjects such as arts and humanities courses require fewer contact hours in order to develop the skills of independent inquiry, original and creative thinking and rigorous analysis.

<sup>283</sup> NUS Student Experience Report 2008

<sup>284</sup> 2008 CEP research shows that if a student attends an institution in the highest quartile—as determined by a number of different quality measures (RAE scores, retention rates, and tariff scores)—this leads to a higher wage of between 10 and 16 per cent (depending on the measure) compared to an individual who attends an institution in the lowest quartile. Although the report does not identify individual institutions, Russell Group universities achieve high RAE score, retention rates and tariff scores so it is very likely they are in the top quartile of institutions in the UK. “University Quality and Graduate Wages in the UK” Hussain, McNally and Telhaj, Centre for Economic Performance, London School of Economics, 2008.

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**Mean scheduled hours of teaching by institution type** <sup>285</sup>


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	<i>All Institutions</i>	<i>Russell Group</i>
Medicine and dentistry	21.3	21.3
Subjects allied to medicine	18.8	19.3
Biological Sciences	14.8	16.3
Veterinary agriculture and related	22.2	26.4
Physical Sciences	17.2	18.9
Mathematical & Computer Sciences	15.9	17.1
Engineering & technology	19.3	20.4

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65. The 2007 HEPI report, “The academic experience of students in English universities” found that the average amount of teaching received by those studying at Russell Group universities was higher than the sector average (weighted data shows a Russell Group average of 14.4 compared to a sector wide average of 14.2). In addition, students in Russell Group universities spent more time on average on their studies than those at other universities (26.7 hours of study per week compared to 26 hour average...though variation within institutional group is greater than variation between groups)

66. However, the diversity of the learning experience offered to students at Russell Group universities is not easily measured through contact teaching hours alone. The UK rightly operates an outcome-based model of higher education where qualifications are awarded based on achieving a certain standard or level of achievement. In such a system, measuring the number of hours studied—a measure of input not output—is not a particularly effective indicator of the health of the UK higher education system. As the 2007 HEPI report accepts, there is no necessary connection between these two measurements.

#### *Postgraduate Student Experience*

67. Russell Group universities are the major providers of postgraduate education: representing 11% of the UK higher education sector, we produce 56% of all doctorates. Around a third of all students in Russell Group universities are postgraduate students. <sup>286</sup>

68. Russell Group universities provide a world-class research environment and are committed to enabling their research students to develop the highest-quality research skills as well as providing transferable skills training. Further details of training programmes for postgraduate students in Russell Group universities are given in Annex E).

Finish Up, Move On is a two-day Imperial College London skills training programme which focuses in particular on post-PhD transition for late-stage doctorate students. Topics covered included: writing a thesis, preparing for a viva voce, self-awareness, career options, networking skills, leadership and entrepreneurship. The programme aims to develop the subset of the UK Research Councils’ Joint Skills Statement relating to personal effectiveness, career management and skills associated with communicating, networking and team working. It won the 2008 Times Higher Education award for outstanding support for early career researchers.

69. Russell Group universities are continuing to improve the postgraduate student experience and meet research students’ expectations. The Russell Group was pleased that 81% of research students in the 2007 Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) indicated that overall their degree programme met or exceeded their expectations. The high numbers of international postgraduate students who attend Russell Group universities (52% of overseas research students in the UK) also indicate the high quality of the postgraduate student experience in Russell Group universities.

70. For Postgraduate students the interplay between teaching and research is absolutely fundamental. The Post Graduate Research Experience Survey shows that the “intellectual climate” is regarded by PGR students as one of the most important factors in successful completion of their research degree. This includes opportunities to become involved in the wider research culture, and whether the research ambience is stimulating to the student’s work. This research-led learning environment is likely to be a key factor in the high numbers of Russell Group university undergraduate students that proceed to further study;<sup>287</sup> the recent Thrift review<sup>288</sup> noted the importance of research experiences at undergraduate level in promoting research careers.

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<sup>285</sup> 2007 HEPI “The academic experience of students in English universities”.

<sup>286</sup> Based on HESA data. 30% of all RG students are postgraduate students (headcount data, all levels and modes, including all UK, EU and overseas students).

<sup>287</sup> In 2001–02, of the 10 higher education institutions with the highest percentage of first degree graduates progressing to research postgraduate study within 6 months, 6 were Russell Group universities (Cambridge (13.9%); Imperial (11%); Oxford (10.1%); Birmingham (6%); UCL (5.3%) and Newcastle (5%.) (HESA data for 2001–02.) This trend has been maintained in recent years; in 2006–07 over half of students progressing to postgraduate research degrees were from Russell Group universities (3,365 of 7,725); nine Russell Group universities were in the top ten institutions with the highest number of students progressing to postgraduate research study (all Russell Group universities are in the top thirty). HESA, Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education 2006–07, 2008; data for leavers progressing to a higher degree mainly by research.

<sup>288</sup> Thrift, N. Research Careers in the UK: A Review, published by DIUS, 2008, p.15.



### International Student Experience

71. International student experience and satisfaction of teaching and learning at Russell Group universities can be seen from recent studies by i-graduate's International Student Barometer (ISB). ISB is the largest study of the international student experience, the latest results based on feedback from nearly 25,000 students at Russell Group universities. The results for the 2007 wave from Russell Group international students found that:

- International students had a higher rate of overall satisfaction at Russell Group universities than the average overall benchmark.
- In selecting a university, 97% of students noted teaching quality and 90% noted research quality as important determining factors in choosing a Russell Group university.
- 95% of students believe their lecturers are experts in their subject area
- 89% were satisfied with the academic content of their course
- 87% noted their satisfaction with the ability to study with a range of multicultural peers
- 84% were satisfied with their ability to get personal support and time from academic staff when it was needed
- 82% of students noted that research at the university was an important learning element of their course
- Over three quarters of students were satisfied that their learning would help them secure a career

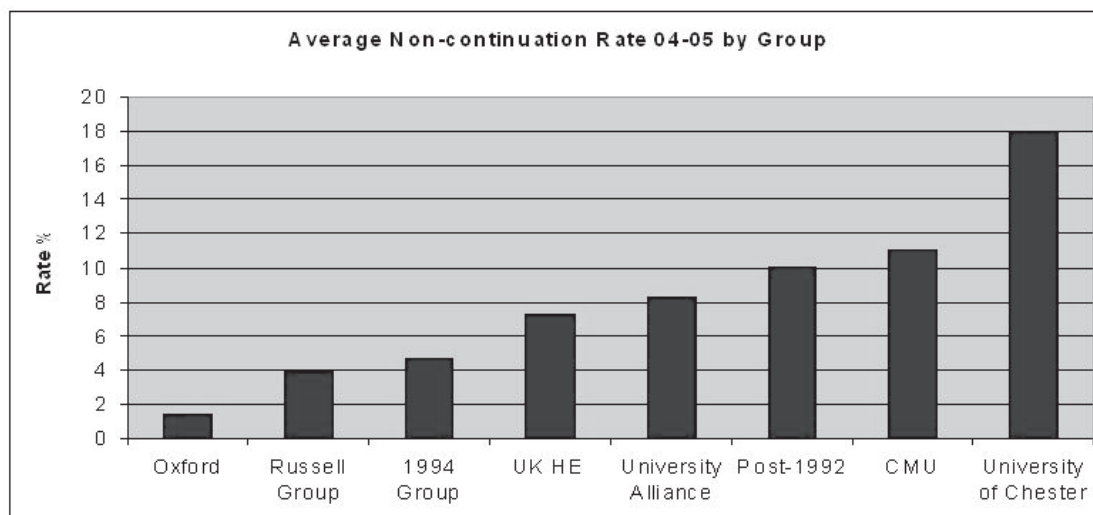
Question 12: examples of reasons for, and potential strategies to reduce, the non-completion of higher education programmes by students

### Retention

72. Prior attainment and university student experience, including student support, are two of the key factors affecting retention rates in the UK. Despite some of the most rigorous academic courses, the average Russell Group non-completion rate in 2005–06 for young, first degree students was just 4.3%—below the Government's benchmarks. For the Russell Group institutions in England, the non-completion rate is as low as 3.8%. In comparison, some non-Russell Group institutions in the UK have non-completion rates as high as 30%. The 2006–07 HESA widening participation performance indicators demonstrate that students from low participation neighbourhoods are about half as likely to drop out of a Russell Group university as other UK universities.

73. The chart below, from the 2007 National Audit Office report, shows that for the Russell Group institutions in England the non-completion rate is as low as 3.8%. This is the lowest non-continuation rates of any university group.

#### National Audit Office report, 2007: "Staying the course: the retention of students in higher education"



Source: NAO, 2007.

74. A large body of evidence (including the 2007 National Audit Office report "Staying the course: the retention of students in higher education") also points to student experience as being one of the most important reasons for students' non-completion.

Question 13: *the adequacy of UK higher education (HE) funding and student support packages, and implications for current and future levels of student debt*

*Russell Group Bursaries*

75. First, it is important to re-state that there is a robust body of evidence which demonstrates that academic attainment before the age of 18 is the most important factor in whether a student will go on to higher education, not financial considerations. When A-level grades are taken into account, students from deprived and wealthy backgrounds are equally likely to go to university. So it is not surprising that under the new system of fees, loans and grants, applications to English universities have continued to increase from students of all social backgrounds.

76. However, we are concerned about evidence which suggests that some students may be put off applying to a Russell Group university as a result of false preconceptions, misinformation, lack of confidence or misunderstandings about the costs and financial support available. For example, evidence from Canada shows that students from working-class backgrounds overestimate the costs of going to university and underestimate the returns.

77. Russell Group universities want to ensure all students have the financial help they need and to try to overcome some of these barriers by offering very generous bursaries. Since the introduction of the fees regime, all our institutions have greatly increased the amount of financial support given to students from low income families through bursaries. OFFA data attests to the enormous efforts Russell Group universities have made to help less well-off students: in 2006–07 the Group spent well over £20 million of additional fee income (AFI) on support for low income students—a greater share of Additional Fee Income than the sector as a whole and nearly £500,000 more than the sector average per institution.

- The value of bursaries and scholarships that the Russell Group universities in England will provide is steadily increasing, rising to an average of over £5 million per institution by 2010–2011.
- On average, each Russell Group university spent £1,265,000 on bursaries (22% of AFI) in 2006–07, compared to a sector average of £779,000 (21% of AFI).<sup>289</sup>
- On average across the Russell Group, students from the lowest income backgrounds received guaranteed bursarial support of £1,680 in 2006–07 (based on OFFA figures). This is almost six times the minimum bursary of £300 required by OFFA. In some institutions, guaranteed support is as much as £4,000 in the first year of study and £3,000 thereafter.
- This guaranteed support is supplemented by a large number of schemes targeted at high-achieving students as well as under-represented groups.
- Several of our institutions significantly exceeded their estimated spends on outreach and/or bursarial support.<sup>290</sup>

*Outreach Spend*

78. The average amount of additional fee income spent on outreach in a Russell Group institution is £286,000 compared to a sector average of £168,000. This is over £100,000 additional expenditure per institution on average. The proportion of AFI spend on outreach is also higher than the sector average (5.7% compared to 5.3%). However, this figure does not capture the very large sums already being spent on outreach from existing budgets that is not from additional fee income.

79. Funding devoted by Russell Group universities to outreach has grown by nearly £5 million. This is in addition to the very large sums already committed to outreach from existing budgets.

*National Bursary Scheme*

80. Several organisations have recently advocated a national bursary scheme. Calls for such a scheme would be understandable if there were no financial assistance available for students in need. But this is not the case. The current system of student support in England is one of the most generous in the world. We already have a “national bursary scheme” in the form of a guaranteed level of support for disadvantaged students through government grants, subsidised loans and no upfront fees. To suggest that it is somehow wrong for universities to then choose to top up this support with bursaries that far exceed the amount originally required by OFFA seems misguided. On average, Russell Group universities have spent more on bursaries than any other part of the sector, with over £20 million invested in 2006–07.

81. There is no evidence that a national bursary system would widen participation, and it is likely to hamper the efforts of Russell Group universities to encourage students from non-traditional backgrounds to apply. Potential students should be encouraged not only to progress to higher education but also to choose the university and course that best suits their aptitude and maximises their life-chances. Research from the Sutton Trust has shown that some state school students are put off applying to leading universities because

<sup>289</sup> National Audit Office report, “Widening Participation in Higher Education”, Appendix- page 53 (based on OFFA figures)

<sup>290</sup> These include: LSE, Imperial, Liverpool, Oxford, Sheffield and Manchester [0]

of lack of information (particularly about the costs and benefits of going to a top university); and low expectations and aspirations. Bursaries are one tool to help overcome these barriers and persuade students from non-traditional backgrounds to consider the best university and course for them.

82. Research at one Russell Group university found that 80% of lower-income entrants in 2006 said the bursary scheme influenced their decision to choose that institution. In the same year the proportion of low-income students rose.<sup>291</sup>

A survey from the Sutton Trust found 51% of those educated in state schools believed there is no difference in earnings between higher education institutions, compared with 35% from independent schools. The Sutton Trust report “Primed for Success” called for university candidates to be told that they will enjoy higher salaries if they graduate from “prestigious universities”, citing the wage premium outlined in the 2008 London School of Economics’ Centre for Economic Performance (CEP) report *University Quality and Graduate Wages in the UK*. <http://www.suttontrust.com/annualreports.asp>

83. A national bursary system would create many losers and few winners as there would be relatively small increases to a standard bursary but many high-achieving, low income students would lose out on substantial support currently available. They and their institutions would effectively be “taxed” and their bursaries given to other universities. This is not only unfair but also threatens to undermine many of the efforts institutions are making to improve the student experience and to widen participation.

84. It is important to keep the link between students’ fees and the institution they attend as one way of ensuring that the learning experience continues to improve. Similarly, being forced to pool income from fees is likely to damage institutions’ efforts to encourage philanthropic giving because donors usually want their contribution to benefit students in their chosen university. Any forced pooling of funds would also restrict a university’s ability to invest in its own projects to widen participation.

85. Bursaries are important in encouraging applicants to applying to leading universities but financial support alone does little to help those who have neither the qualifications nor the aspirations to go to university.

86. Finally, the complexities of trying to manage a national bursary system centrally make any such scheme impractical and expensive.

#### *Implications for current and future student debt*

87. It is important to put discussions about student “debt” in the context of the factual information available.

88. There is a robust body of evidence which demonstrates that academic attainment before the age of 18 is the most important factor in whether a student will go on to higher education, not financial considerations. When A-level grades are taken into account, students from deprived and wealthy backgrounds are equally likely to go to university. So it is not surprising that under the new system of fees, loans and grants, applications to English universities have continued to increase from students of all social backgrounds.

89. More people than ever, including students from low-income households, are entering higher education and making use of support arrangements. That in itself is highly encouraging. The system of student support in England remains one of the most generous—and expensive—in the world. Students pay no up-front fees; grants and bursaries are given to students from poor backgrounds, and there is no real interest rate on loans. Tax-payers pay a relatively high subsidy to provide interest-free loans for all students no matter what they or their parents earn.

90. The vast majority of students recognise that attending a Russell Group university is a worthwhile investment in their future. However, because of the importance of widening participation to higher education, it is important to tackle any false preconceptions.

91. One route to doing so is for the Government and universities to ensure that all those who can benefit from going to university receive accurate advice and guidance about the cost and benefits of attending university and the financial support available. Russell Group universities continue to work hard to raise awareness of the support available and Russell Group bursaries are higher, on average, than any other part of the sector—around 6 times the required OFFA minimum bursary.

92. The benefits of attending a Russell Group university are considerable. Demand for Russell Group graduates remains high and there is a significant earnings premium associated with attending a Russell Group university:

— Studying at a Russell Group university confers a wage premium of around 10%<sup>292</sup>

<sup>291</sup> (Nottingham <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/wideningparticipation/students/support.htm> )

<sup>292</sup> <http://cee.lse.ac.uk/cee/%20dps/ceedp33.pdf>

Research undertaken by the Centre for Economics of Education has identified an average wage premium of 9.4% for a graduate from a Russell Group university compared to a graduate from a modern university. This statistic comes from an OLS linear estimation technique, which controls for individual characteristics including A-level scores, parental background, and the school the individual attended among other factors affecting wages. “Does it pay to attend a prestigious university?” Arnaud Chevalier and Gavan Conlon, March 2003, Centre for the Economics of Education, LSE (table 5 for the 1995 cohort, page 29).

- Research from the LSE shows that attending a “higher quality” institution leads to higher wages of between 10 and 16 per cent<sup>293</sup>
- Russell Group starting salaries are, on average, £3,000 higher than for other graduates<sup>294</sup>

93. These figures are averages of course and, therefore, it important that any low-earners continue to be protected through the repayment system—through a minimum earnings threshold for starting repayment, income contingent repayments and debt being written off after 25 years. This means that low-earners are subsidised so that those who do not receive an economic benefit from their degree are not burdened with repayments. Discussions about future student debt need to be informed by the repayment conditions of that debt.

94. In the public debate regarding debt-aversion, this is often confused or conflated with risk-aversion. Whilst there is considerable evidence to demonstrate that those in low-earning households hold significant levels of private debt (sometimes used to demonstrate that this group are generally not debt-averse) it is rational economic behaviour for individuals from low-income backgrounds to be risk-averse. This is exactly why the current system was set up so that almost all of the risk is held by the Government—not the individual.

95. The protection in place for low-earners and the zero rate of real interest means that this “debt” is unlike any private credit-card or mortgage-style debt. This is highly expensive to sustain but it means that—with proper information and guidance—even the most risk-averse student should not be put off attending university and receiving the benefits of doing so.

96. Unpublished research undertaken by the University of Nottingham would suggest that this awareness regarding different types of debt is filtering down to potential university applicants. The continuing growth in applications across all social class groups would support this. This does not mean that anyone can afford to be complacent, however, and improving the provision of accurate and timely information and guidance for young people about the costs, benefits, and financial support available to students remains a priority.

*Question 14: any further action required by the Government and/or HEFCE to ensure that UK HEIs offer students a world-class educational experience*

97. Russell Group universities continue to perform well against their major global competitors. This success is good news for the UK, as major research-intensive universities are vital to promoting economic prosperity and improving quality of life in this country. UK higher education makes a significant contribution to the UK economy of around £45 billion<sup>295</sup> (more than the pharmaceutical or aircraft industries) and is becoming increasingly important in the UK’s high-value-added, knowledge economy.

98. Russell Group universities are, however, very concerned about their ability to sustain this level of success in the face of fierce global competition. International league tables reflect the growing strength of our major competitors—particularly the US institutions—who benefit from much higher levels of investment than UK universities. On core educational services alone the US spends more than double per student and as a proportion of GDP, the US invests over twice as much as the UK on higher education.<sup>296</sup> Their major research-intensive universities are amongst the largest beneficiaries. For example, the endowment fund of the University of Harvard alone is greater than the total public funding for all universities in England in any given year.<sup>297</sup>

99. But increased competition doesn’t come solely from the US. As a result of huge investment in higher education and science in recent years, China already looks set to overtake the UK very soon in terms of total research publications, and its universities have been steadily climbing up international league tables. Funding for higher education is also increasing rapidly in India, the Middle East, Brazil and Australia. Closer to home, France and Germany are both undertaking major programmes to invest millions of Euros into their leading research universities, with the aim of improving their international standing.

100. While this Government has increased investment in major areas of science, innovation and research, maintained the unit of funding and introduced variable fees, the two major areas of academic activity, namely teaching and research, are still significantly underfunded, particularly in comparison to our main international competitors.

<sup>293</sup> 276 2008 CEP research shows that if a student attends an institution in the highest quartile—as determined by a number of different quality measures (RAE scores, retention rates, and tariff scores)—this leads to a higher wage of between 10 and 16 per cent (depending on the measure) compared to an individual who attends an institution in the lowest quartile. Although the report does not identify individual institutions, Russell Group universities achieve high RAE score, retention rates and tariff scores so it is very likely they are in the top quartile of institutions in the UK. “University Quality and Graduate Wages in the UK” Hussain, McNally and Telhaj, Centre for Economic Performance, London School of Economics, 2008.

<sup>294</sup> HESA, 2005–06

<sup>295</sup> UUK The Economic Impact of UK Higher Education Institutions (2006)

<sup>296</sup> OECD, Education at a Glance, 2007

<sup>297</sup> Harvard’s endowment was \$36.9 billion in 2008 <http://www.news.harvard.edu/glance/>

101. In the current economic climate there is likely to be increased pressure on public spending on higher education and research including Research Council budgets and QR spending. There are also signs that R&D investment from business will be affected and charities funding for research may be reduced. This is all at a time when university costs are increasing (people, energy, the cost of borrowing).

102. Without access to increased investment there is a real danger that the UK's success will not be sustained.

*UK investment in HE—international comparisons*

- Based on OECD data from Education at a Glance 2008, the UK's annual expenditure on HE is lower than many other OECD countries in terms of expenditure per student, proportion of GDP and share of public spending on education.
- Annual expenditure on higher education (for all services including research activity) per student shows that the UK is spending less than many of its main competitors—US, Australia, Switzerland, the Netherlands and most Nordic countries.
- The UK spends approximately \$13,506 (USD) per student while the US spends almost double that at \$24,370 (Australia spends \$14,579). Relative to GDP per capita, the US spends 35% more per student.
- The UK spends below the OECD average on higher education as a percentage of GDP. The US spends 2.9%, Canada 2.6%, Korea 2.4%, while the UK spends 1.3%. This is below the percentage spending by Greece and Poland on HE.
- Taking public spending alone, the UK's expenditure on HE institutions is 0.9% of GDP—the same in percentage terms as Portugal, Hungary and Mexico.
- When all public expenditure is factored in, including public subsidies for living costs, the UK spends 1.2% on HE, close to the US (and the OECD average) at 1.3% and Australia at 1.1%. However, Nordic countries typically spend over 2%.
- The UK's public expenditure on HE is 23% of total educational spending. This is close to the OECD average, but below the proportion of spending on HE in Germany (25%), the US (26%) and Canada (34%).

*International investment in research-intensive universities:*

- According to DIUS report “International comparative performance of the UK research base” (2008) China's total publications have increased fourfold in the past decade and look set to overtake the UK in 2008.
- In 2007, the Indian government announced £7 billion investment over five years for higher education. The Prime Minister plans to create 40 new Institutes of Technology and Management.
- The new King Abdullah University of Science and Technology in Saudi Arabia is likely to be the richest university in the world outside USA.
- In Brazil, 10,000 PhDs and 30,000 Masters students will graduate in 2009—a 10 fold increase in 20 years
- In 2007, it was announced that the Australian government will provide £2.5 billion one-time payoff for universities.
- The recent higher education bill in France will pump billions into HE, increasing operating budgets by 50% over the next five years.
- In Germany, the “Excellence Initiative” has designated nine universities as “elite”, and will provide them with a total of €1.9 billion in extra research funding over the next five years. In addition, 39 graduate schools are receiving €5 million over five years to support PhD training.

*December 2008*

**Annex A**

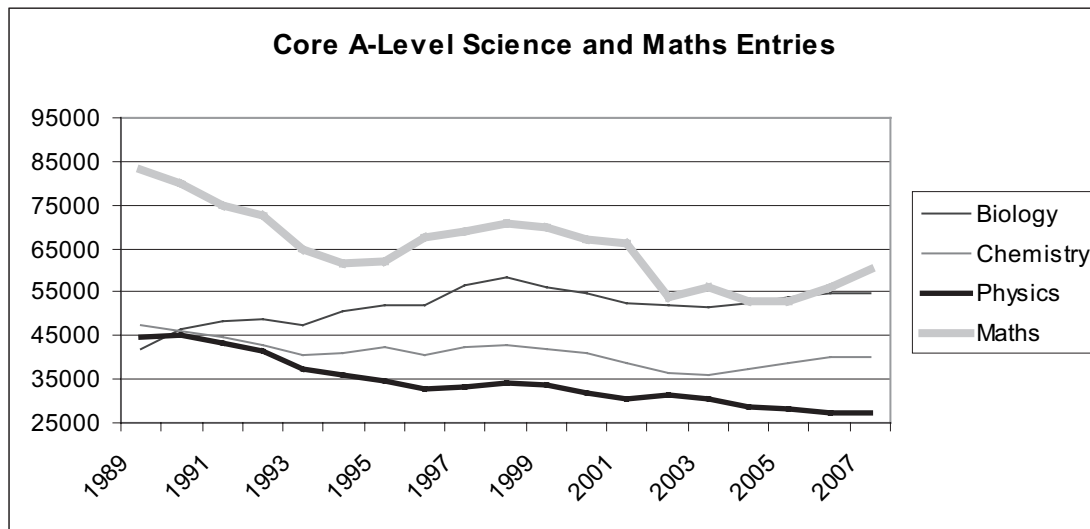
**A-LEVELS AND STEM SUBJECTS (FROM SECTION 1)**

The Russell Group remains concerned by the long-term decline in pupils taking science and mathematics (STEM subjects) at GCSE and A-level. Numeracy is essential for many undergraduate courses at our universities, particularly in engineering, economics and medicine.

In order to improve science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) teaching in schools, Russell Group universities are building strong relationships with local schools and colleges as well as engaging with curriculum reform.

*Declining numbers of pupils in “subjects of strategic importance”*

- Students taking “traditional” subjects (physical sciences, maths, languages) at A-level have become worryingly low despite a few recent trend-bucking increases.



- As the graph shows, although there have been some recent improvements, from 1989–2007 entries have fallen by 28% (maths), 39% (physics) and 15% (chemistry) despite total entries soaring 25%.
- From 1989–2004, maths entries fell by 40%. Following curriculum changes from 2006–7, the number of candidates taking maths has started to increase.
- In 2007–8, the number of candidates taking maths rose by 7.5% while science subjects saw increases in chemistry (3.5%), biology (2.7%) and physics (2.3%).
- However, these numbers remain significantly below their previous levels after almost two decades of decline.

*Sector Variation in subject choices*

- Non-selective state school students are far less likely to take key subjects like Chemistry and Physics at A-level.
- Only 2.6% of media studies A-level entries are from independent schools compared to 15% of entries on average across subjects.

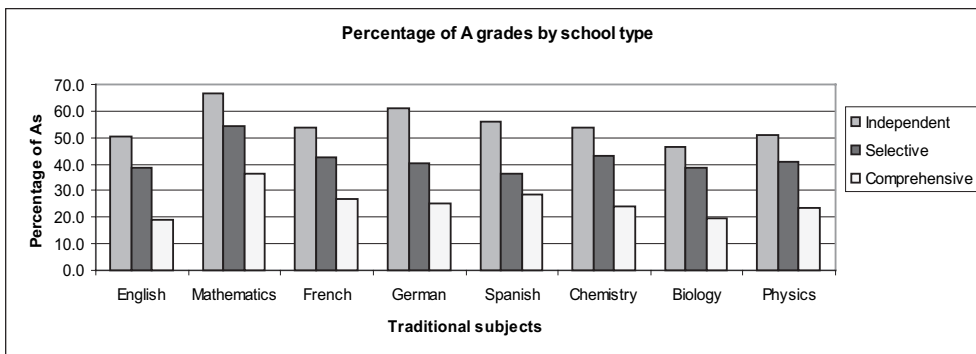
<i>Subject</i>	<i>Non-selective state entries (2006)</i>	<i>% non-selective state</i>	<i>Independent entries (2006)</i>	<i>% Independent</i>
Law	12,991	96%	188	1.4%
Media Studies	21,289	93%	603	2.6%
Psychology	41,816	86%	2799	5.7%
PE	17,699	82%	2,336	10.8%
All (England)	532,318	74%	109,870	15%

- It is overwhelmingly state school students dropping sciences and languages.
- Independent and grammar school students are far more likely to take traditional subjects, such as STEM, and more likely to get the top grades in those subjects.
- 60% of modern language A grades come from in independent schools.

*Sector variation in STEM subjects*

- A 2006 survey by electronics firm Siemens of 500 students found that 70% of 6th-form pupils believed it was harder to get an A grade in science subjects. For two thirds of those surveyed, the perceived level of difficulty was a key factor in deciding whether to choose these subjects.
- While independent schools represent only 7–8% of the total school population, just under half of all science A grades are from those schools.

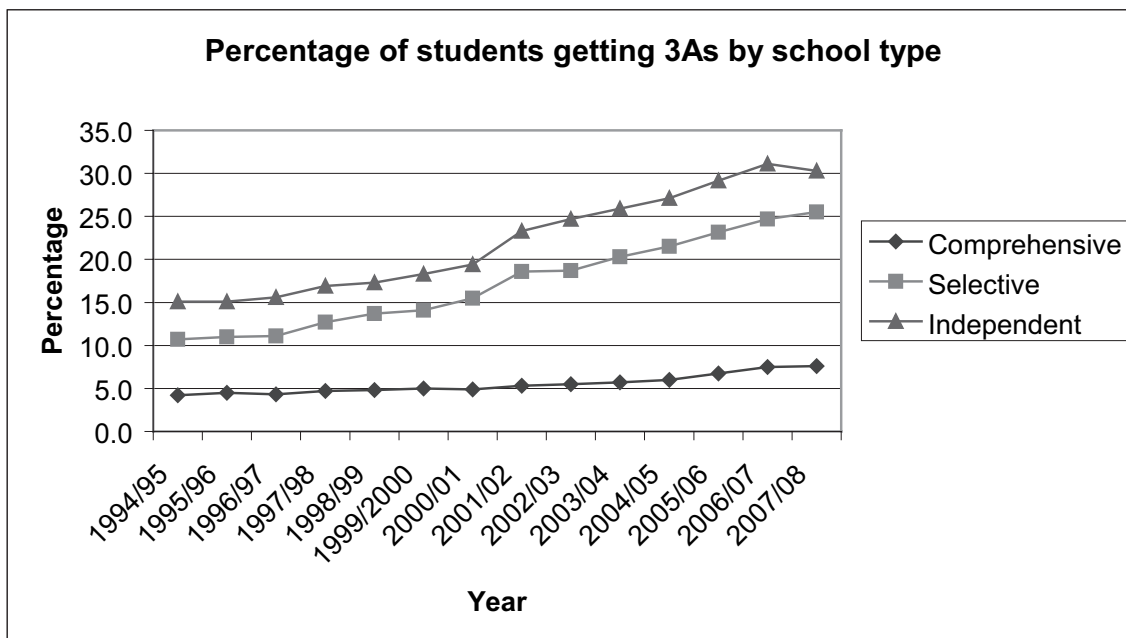
A-level Attainment in STEM subjects



Reference: Achievement and Attainment Tables for 2006–07, Department for Children, Schools and Families.

- The percentage of candidates passing A-level qualifications rose this year by 0.3% to 97.2% while the proportion achieving A grades rose by 0.6% to 25.9%.<sup>298</sup>
- Between 2002 and 2008, the independent sector saw an increase of 9.1% in the number of A grades awarded—from 41.3% to 50.4%. Over the same period, top grades at comprehensive schools rose by only 3.9 points to 20.4%.<sup>299</sup>
- 2008 results have shown that some of the biggest increases in A grades awarded were in science subjects—notably Chemistry (up by 1.3% to 33.7% of the total) and Physics (up by 1% to 31.8%). In addition, there were also slight increases in those receiving A grades in both maths (up 0.3% to 44%) and further maths (up 0.7% to 57.5%).<sup>300</sup>

Straight A grades



Reference: Proportion of 16–18 year old A-level candidates achieving at least three A grades at A-level

- Nearly 12% of candidates achieved 3 A grades at A-level in 2007–08; 6% achieving 4As.
- 22% of A-level students come from independent (14%) and grammar schools (8%). These students account for over half (55.8%) of those gaining 3As.
- This compares to the 45% (or roughly 117,000) of A-level applicants that go to comprehensive schools, of which only 7.6% (9,000) gain 3As.<sup>301</sup>

<sup>298</sup> JCQ (2008). “Results 2008”: <http://www.jcq.org.uk/attachments/published/984/JCQ%20A-Level%20Results%202008.pdf>

<sup>299</sup> Achievement and Attainment Tables, Data Services Group, Department for Children, Schools and Families

<sup>300</sup> JCQ (2008). “Results 2008”: <http://www.jcq.org.uk/attachments/published/984/JCQ%20A-Level%20Results%202008.pdf>

<sup>301</sup> Department for Children, Schools and Families (2008). “TABLES FOR GCE/VCE A/AS AND EQUIVALENT EXAMINATION RESULTS 2008”, Table 1.

- Independent school students are around three times more likely to gain straight A grades than those at maintained schools.

### *School education and STEM*

- The quality of STEM education in schools can often have a profound impact on retention of students in university. According to a 2007 NAO report “science, technology, engineering and mathematics students are ...less likely to continue to a second year of study than students following other subjects.”<sup>302</sup>
- This attainment at A-levels relates closely to prior achievement at GCSE. The percentage of pupils gaining at least one science GCSE grade C is 47% for mainstream schools, 59% for specialist science schools, 86% for independent schools and 95% for grammar schools.
- Those studying separate science subjects at GCSE in maintained schools are less likely to gain an A grade than those in independent schools. Independent schools account for a third of triple science entries and gain over 50% of the A\* grades, similarly, they account for around 7% of mathematics entries, but over 30% of A\* grades.
- In international studies of school attainment, the UK ranks 13th among 30 countries in reading, 18th amongst 30 countries in maths, and 9th out of 30 in science.<sup>303</sup> Attainment in English, sciences and maths has shown a leveling off since the late 1990s, particularly in Key Stages 2 and 3.<sup>304</sup>
- In 2007, close to 47% of pupils did not achieve the benchmark of five GCSEs at grades A\*-C.
- In 2005 roughly 80% of physics teachers in independent schools had a degree in physics, compared to only 30% of those in state schools.<sup>305</sup> Almost one in four secondary schools in England no longer has any specialist physics teachers.<sup>306</sup>
- In 2001, only 6–7% of the cohort entered each of the separate sciences (“triple science”) at GCSE. As of 2005 only 27% of maintained schools even offered triple science at GCSE. While this has increased to 32% in 2007, this means that less than one third of state school provided the opportunity to take all three separate science subjects.
- Science A-level candidates are concentrated in a small proportion of schools, as the Royal Society noted, “science take-up is strongly skewed at present, with half of all A-level entries in science coming from just 18 per cent of schools.”<sup>307</sup>

## **Annex B**

### **SPECIAL ENTRY ROUTES FOR NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS AT RUSSELL GROUP UNIVERSITIES (FROM SECTION 1)**

A foundation course is an additional year at the beginning of a degree which prepares students without the standard required qualifications for their chosen course. Foundation courses are designed to help these students “catch-up” with the students who have entered a course through a conventional route. These rigorous programmes ensure that they will have the necessary skills, experience and knowledge to succeed in their degree. They are specifically designed to provide additional support and tuition to students in their transition to higher education.

#### *University of Birmingham*

Birmingham offers foundation years in various science & engineering disciplines. Successful completion of the course guarantees students a place on their chosen degree programme. Foundation year courses are suitable for those whose qualifications are not recognised for direct entry to a degree programme, including mature students.

<sup>302</sup> NAO Report, “Staying the course: The retention of students in higher education”, July 2007

<sup>303</sup> OECD (2006). PISA project: <http://www.pisa.oecd.org/redirect/>

<sup>304</sup> Sodha, S. and J. Margo (2008). “Thursday’s Child”. London: IPPR.

<sup>305</sup> Smithers, A and P. Robinson (2005). “Physics in Schools and Colleges: Teacher Deployment and Student Outcomes”. Centre for Education and Employment Research, University of Buckingham.

<sup>306</sup> IBID

<sup>307</sup> <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200506/ldselect/ldsctech/257/25705.htm>



*Cardiff University*

Engineering, Medicine & Dentistry Preliminary Years are designed to give students the necessary basic knowledge to enable them to cope on an engineering or dentistry degree at the University. Students who successfully complete the year will then be able to move on to the degree programmes.

*University of Edinburgh and University of Glasgow*

SWAP (Scottish Wider Access Partnership) is a partnership of further and higher education institutions, which creates opportunities for mature students with no qualifications to access university. The SWAP programme prepares students for entry into higher education and guarantees them a place at a college or university if they complete the programme successfully.

*King's College London*

Extended Medical Degree Programme (EMDP) is a six year degree programme launched in 2001 to encourage students from disadvantaged backgrounds to become doctors. Places on the programme are offered to talented pupils from targeted inner London boroughs that have the potential to succeed in medicine but not the predicted A-Level grades required for the standard medical programme. These places are additional to those previously allocated to King's for entry by conventional routes.

*University of Leeds*

Interdisciplinary Science Foundation Year (for science, engineering and math courses) enables students without standard entry qualifications to progress on to a wide range of science, computing, engineering and healthcare degrees at the University. The foundation year provides students with a solid academic base in science and mathematics.

*University of Liverpool*

Liverpool runs various 1+3 and 2+2 foundation courses with local FE colleges as progression opportunities into university degrees. These include degree programmes in medicine and dentistry, science and engineering, computer science and information systems, earth sciences, geography, mathematics and physical sciences.

*University of Manchester*

Manchester's runs three foundation year programmes in life sciences, sciences and engineering, which consist of a one year programme designed to improve students' scientific knowledge and understanding to a level that is suitable for a degree in those fields. This programme is geared towards students with non-traditional qualification and those who have slightly underachieved in their science A levels.

*University of Newcastle*

Foundation Year provides an introductory year to a number of engineering, science and mathematics degree courses, designed for those who have shown that they have the ability to succeed but lack the necessary qualifications to enter the degree directly.

*University of Nottingham*

Science & Engineering Foundation Years are designed for students whose school qualifications do not meet the current admissions' requirements for entry to undergraduate programmes. The programme provides grounding in the fundamentals of science and mathematics. In addition to classroom and laboratory activities, all foundation students are allocated a personal tutor to provide advice and guidance.

*Queen's University Belfast*

The Highway to Science and Engineering Programme is a one year programme designed to provide those from disadvantaged backgrounds who have just failed to meet their required grades a supported route into Science or Engineering degree courses. Available for students from Discovering Queen's schools, successful completion of this foundation programme leads to the awarding of a Foundation Certificate and entry to certain Science & Engineering courses.

*University of Sheffield*

Engineering and science foundation years are designed for those who have not studied the courses in school that would prepare them to move directly into the degree programme. They are aimed at students who, for whatever reason, need additional preparation or additional science subjects before going on to an engineering or science degree.

*University of Southampton*

Foundation year is the first year of a four or five-year programme leading to a degree in engineering, computer science, physics or geophysics disciplines. Successful completion of the year guarantees progression to degree programmes.

BM6 (Bachelor of Medicine in 6 Years) is a programme developed to widen access into the medical profession from those from disadvantaged backgrounds. It involves studying for an extra year on a specially designed foundation course before joining the students on the conventional “BM5” programme.

*University College London*

Foundation Year in Engineering is part of a four-year degree programme in engineering, specifically designed for applicants who have not studied suitable subjects prior to entry but have attained the required academic level. The first year is an introduction to mathematics, physics and engineering principles.

*University of Warwick*

The 2 + 2 Degree Programme provides a path for students to gain a degree through two years of study at a local college and a further two years at the University. This programme is specifically designed for adults who lack formal qualifications and who wish to return to education.

**Annex C**

## EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING AND RESEARCH IN RUSSELL GROUP UNIVERSITIES (FROM SECTION 2)

All Russell Group universities are clear that their aims are to deliver excellence in both research and teaching.<sup>308</sup>

*Research excellence*

- Russell Group universities’ strengths in research are clear from the results of the 2001 RAE, in which 78% of academic staff in Grade 5\* departments and 57% of staff in Grade 5 departments were based in Russell Group universities. This shows that much of the UK’s highest-quality research is carried out by academics employed in Russell Group universities, meaning that students at a Russell Group university will have the opportunity to be taught by and learn from academics performing internationally-recognised research at the leading edge of their fields.
- The research excellence in Russell Group universities helps to drive the UK’s position as an international leader in research.<sup>309</sup> Evidence shows that the UK is number one in the G8 of advanced industrial nations for research productivity:<sup>310</sup> UK researchers produce 16 research papers per \$1 million of research funding—compared to 9.9 in the US and 3.6 in Japan.<sup>311</sup> The UK’s high level of productivity is a particularly good return given that the UK is ranked seventh in the G8 for public funding for research.<sup>312</sup> Furthermore, the UK is second only to the US in research excellence—with 1% of the world’s population we produce 9% of publications and account for 12% of citations. On average, UK scientists receive about 10% of internationally recognised science prizes. Most of these are conferred on academic staff at Russell Group universities.
- Russell Group universities are among the UK’s leading research-intensive institutions and produce a significant proportion of the UK’s high quality research, demonstrated through their share of research income—both in terms of QR funding from the Funding Councils, and competitively awarded grant income from the Research Councils:
  - in 2007–08 Russell Group universities were allocated 65.6 per cent of QR funding from HEFCE,<sup>313</sup>
  - in terms of income from Research Council grants, Russell Group universities accounted for 68.5 per cent of research income from the Research Councils in 2006–07 (increasing from 67.6 per cent in 2005–06);<sup>314</sup>
  - additionally, Russell Group universities gained 66% of total grant income<sup>315</sup> in 2006–07.<sup>316</sup>

<sup>308</sup> This is highlighted on websites and in strategic plans.

<sup>309</sup> For example, all of the UK universities in the top 100 of the 2008 Shanghai Jiao Tong Academic Rankings of World Universities are Russell Group universities.

<sup>310</sup> International comparative performance of the UK research base, Evidence Ltd/Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, July 2008.

<sup>311</sup> Universities UK, Spending Review 2007: Securing the Future. <http://bookshop.universitiesuk.ac.uk/downloads/SR2007.pdf>

<sup>312</sup> The UK spent 1.82% of GDP on R&D compared to an average of 2.24% according to a study of 21 comparator nations (PSA target metrics for the UK research base, Evidence Ltd/Office of Science and Innovation, 2007).

<sup>313</sup> HEFCE, “Recurrent Grants for 2007–08: final allocations” (October 2007/32).

<sup>314</sup> HESA data for 2006–07.

<sup>315</sup> This includes income from Research Councils, Funding Councils, charities and industry.

<sup>316</sup> HESA data for 2006–07.

*Teaching excellence*

- The teaching excellence at Russell Group universities is reflected in the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) institutional audits (which include a consideration of the management of academic standards). Of the nineteen Russell Group universities that have received QAA institutional review reports to assess teaching quality, all have been awarded "broad confidence" (the highest level). Russell Group university staff have also been individually recognised through the Higher Education Academy's National Teaching Fellowship—as of 2008, fifty-five academics at Russell Group universities have been awarded Fellowships.<sup>317</sup> Additionally, sixteen of the seventy-four HEFCE-funded Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning are based in Russell Group universities,<sup>318</sup> a number of which specifically focus on research and enquiry-based learning, and fourteen of the twenty-four HEA Subject Centres, showing that much of the subject-specific support to improve learning experiences is based at Russell Group universities.<sup>319</sup>
- National Student Survey (NSS) results show that student satisfaction of teaching quality across The Russell Group is very high at 86% above the sector average (83%)—according to the 2008 survey. Some of our universities rate as highly as 92%.<sup>320</sup>
- Student experience and students' satisfaction with teaching and learning at Russell Group universities can also be found from recent studies of international student experience. The i-graduate's International Student Barometer (ISB)<sup>321</sup> is the largest study of the international student experience, the latest results based on feedback from nearly 25,000 students at Russell Group universities. These results from Russell Group international students found that:
  - In selecting a university, 97% of students noted teaching quality and 90% noted research quality as important determining factors in choosing a Russell Group university.
  - 95% of students believe their lectures are experts in their subject area
  - 82% of students noted that research at the university was an important learning element of their course
  - International students had a higher rate of overall satisfaction at Russell Group universities than the average overall benchmark.

*The added value of research and teaching excellence*

- It is clear from the evidence above that students benefit from receiving excellent teaching at Russell Group universities. It is also clear that an environment of research excellence offers students first hand exposure to leading edge research, scholarship and innovation.
- Furthermore, research shows that Russell Group universities' commitment to research excellence helps them to attract the very best minds and the best teachers. In recognition of the advantages of an environment of research excellence, which helps to attract and retain high calibre staff HEFCE has noted: "the opportunity to engage in research remains one of the most important factors in motivating individuals to enter and remain in the academic profession. This is one of the most important ways in which research benefits teaching".<sup>322</sup>
- Research conducted in the UK exploring students' attitudes has found that students felt that they benefited from staff engagement in research because staff were more up to date and learning was more scholarly.<sup>323</sup> Additionally, a number of studies surveying the views of academic staff in universities have found that a majority of staff believed there was a beneficial link between teaching and research.<sup>324</sup>
- These benefits, however, are just one part of a much wider and richer picture of what it means to be learning in a research-intensive environment.

<sup>317</sup> This is out of a total of 235 awards since the scheme's inception in 2000—staff at Russell Group universities have received a disproportionate number of awards (18 per cent of the total) compared to Russell Group universities' share of the UK higher education sector (11 per cent)

<sup>318</sup> This number (22 per cent of all CETLs) is disproportionate to Russell Group universities' share of the English higher education sector (13 per cent).

<sup>319</sup> Again, Russell Group universities account for a disproportionate number of Subject Centres (58 per cent) compared to their share of the sector (11 per cent).

<sup>320</sup> Overall satisfaction rates with the student experience across The Russell Group are also high at 86% on average—this is also above the sector average and a further increase from 2007. Some institutions have rates as high as 93%. Source: unistats.

<sup>321</sup> [http://www.i-graduate.org/services/student\\_insight--student\\_barometer.html](http://www.i-graduate.org/services/student_insight--student_barometer.html)

<sup>322</sup> Higher Education Funding Council for England, *Fundamental Review of Research Policy and Funding: Final Report of the sub-group to consider the interaction between teaching, research and other activities of HEIs*, 2000, p.6.

<sup>323</sup> Jenkins, A. et al. "Teaching and research: student perspectives and policy implications" *Studies in Higher Education*, Volume 23, No.2 (1998) 127–141. The authors note, however, that students sometimes felt that staff focused on their research to the detriment of teaching; this suggests the importance of ensuring that teaching has parity with research.

<sup>324</sup> Halsey, A.H. *Decline of donnish dominion: The British academic profession in the twentieth century*, Clarendon Press, 1992; Kremer, J., "Identifying faculty types using peer ratings of teaching, research and service" *Research In Higher Education*, Volume 32 (1990) 351–361; Neumann, R., "Perceptions of the teaching research nexus: a framework for analysis", *Higher Education*, Vol. 23 No.2, (1992) 159–71; Neumann, "The teaching-research nexus: applying a framework to university students' learning experiences, *European Journal of Education*, Volume 29, No. 3 (1994) 323–339.

## BENEFITS OF RESEARCH-LED LEARNING (FOM SECTION 2)

1. On balance, the weight of evidence suggests that research-led learning offers significant benefits to students' academic, personal and professional development. (Three broad advantages arising from learning through research can be ascertained):

- the motivation and development of students as a consequence of exposure to expert subject matter;
- promoting the value of enquiry and “deep” approaches to learning;
- helping to develop transferable skills through engagement in research processes.<sup>325</sup>

The Russell Group believes that research-led learning encourages students to develop independence of thought, entrepreneurial skills and ability to handle uncertainty and new problems—personal and professional skills that are integral to the graduate-level jobs that are so important to our knowledge economy.

2. A substantial and growing body of evidence points to the benefits of fostering a research-led learning environment in higher education institutions, and the value of learning through research. These include:

- access to high quality research-informed teaching—recognising the potential for students to be enthused and motivated by leading experts in their field, many Russell Group universities are taking steps to ensure that all students have access to eminent academics early in their university careers;<sup>326</sup>
- developing entrepreneurialism and independent learning skills through enquiry-based learning—students are able to develop an analytical, critical thinking and problem solving skills, including approaching new challenges from different perspectives and in new and innovative ways, all of which are key skills in a rapidly evolving workplace;<sup>327</sup>
- access to a wide range of career options, including leading professions;<sup>328</sup>
- promotion of a research ethos and access to research opportunities;<sup>329</sup>
- positive impacts on students, including improved confidence and motivation.<sup>330</sup>

*Added-value: the Russell Group student learning experience*

- The Russell Group believes that the academic experience in Russell Group universities offers significant advantages to students, not least in terms of the emphasis on the culture of research and enquiry-based learning which encourages the development of independence of thought, critical thinking and analytical skills.
- While no causal relationship can be established, a clear cumulative added-value factor can be identified for students and graduates of Russell Group universities:
  - The high competition for places (an average of around eight applications per place across Russell Group universities, and up to 20 applications per place for some courses),
  - student satisfaction (85% across Russell Group universities, compared to 81% for the sector),
  - completion rates (non-completion is 4.3% on average across Russell Group universities, compared to 7.7% for the sector as a whole),
  - employer satisfaction (as discussed above),
  - external rating of teaching (shown by positive QAA institutional reviews)

<sup>325</sup> Blackmore, P. and Fraser, M., “Research and teaching: making the link” in Richard Blackwell and Paul Blackmore (eds.) *Towards Strategic Staff Development in Higher Education*, Open University Press, 2003.

<sup>326</sup> The various benefits of being taught by research-active academics are summarized in Coate, K., Barnett, R., and Williams, G., “Relationships Between Teaching and Research in Higher Education in England” in *Higher Education Quarterly*, Volume 55, No.2, 158–74, 2001.

<sup>327</sup> A recent CIHE report looked at the importance of an approach to learning that has problem-solving at its core and the benefits that were identified by employers: CIHE, *Influence through collaboration: Employer Demand for Higher Learning and Engagement with Higher Education*, 2008; <http://www.cihe-uk.com/docs/0809CollabReport.pdf>

<sup>328</sup> Research by the Sutton Trust into the legal and journalism professions has shown that the majority of barristers, judges and partners in the City's five “magic circle” law firms attended a leading university, as did the majority of leading journalists. In addition, nearly half of MPs and over half of peers attended a leading university. (Source: Sutton Trust Briefing Note: *The Educational Backgrounds of the UK's Top Solicitors, Barristers and Judges*, 2005; The Sutton Trust, *The Educational Backgrounds of Members of the House of Commons and the House of Lords*, 2005; The Sutton Trust, *The Educational Backgrounds of Leading Journalists*, 2006.)

<sup>329</sup> Studies in the US exploring the benefits of undergraduate research experiences have found that undergraduates across all disciplines benefited significantly from these opportunities cognitively, professionally and personally. See Lopatto, D., “What Research on Learning Can Tell Us about Undergraduate Research”, presented at the 10th National Conference of the Council on Undergraduate Research, La Crosses, WI, 2004; Seymour, E., et al “Establishing the benefits of research experiences for undergraduates in the sciences: first findings from a three-year study” in *Science Education*, Volume 88, 493–534, 2004; Russell, S., *Evaluation of National Science Foundation Support for Undergraduate Research Opportunities*, 2006.

<sup>330</sup> Russell (2006) found that research-led learning both attracts students with the highest degree expectations and helps to encourage high academic and professional expectations among students.

- high satisfaction ratings for teaching quality in the National Student Survey and, previously, high TQA scores,
  - attainment rates and
  - progression to further study (Russell Group universities have some of the highest percentages of undergraduates proceeding to postgraduate study)
- Wage premiums—a clear indicator of value in the graduate labour market—demonstrate that Russell Group graduates are highly esteemed by employers because they benefit from some of the highest returns on their degrees. Studying at a Russell Group university confers a wage premium of approximately 10% compared to modern universities, after accounting for A level scores, parental background, school attended and other factors affecting wages.<sup>331</sup> It is likely that the education provided by Russell Group universities, with its emphasis on enquiry-based learning and engaging students as independent, critically-minded learners, is a significant factor in producing graduates that are highly valued by employers.
- This is further evidenced by the world-class rating given to Russell Group graduates in international employer recruitment surveys: five Russell Group institutions featured in the top ten in the THES *World University Rankings 2007* Employer Review,<sup>332</sup> and 70% of Russell Group universities were in the top 50, with an average employer review score for Russell Group universities of 94.6 (compared to an average of 74.7 for the 13 non-Russell Group UK universities in the top 200 universities). Additionally, Russell Group universities' average career prospects score in the *Guardian* university league table for 2009 was 74%, compared to an average of 60% for the rest of the sector.<sup>333</sup>

## Annex E

### SUPPORTING

#### TEACHING STAFF DEVELOPMENT IN RUSSELL GROUP UNIVERSITIES (FROM SECTION 2)

##### *Accreditation*

A number of Russell Group universities offer accredited teaching awards for their staff, including:

- the University of Liverpool's Certificate in Professional Studies, Postgraduate Certificate and Postgraduate Diploma in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education;
- the Newcastle University Teaching Award and Certificate in Advance Studies in Academic Practice;
- the University of Oxford's Postgraduate Diplomas in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education;
- the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Teaching at Queen's University Belfast

##### *Staff Development*

A variety of development opportunities for staff with teaching responsibilities exist in Russell Group universities. General training courses for staff include:

- the University of Bristol's "Teaching and Learning in Higher Education" course;
- the University of Newcastle Upon Tyne's introductory course to teaching and learning in higher education;
- the University of Oxford's "Preparing for Learning and Teaching" and "Developing Learning and Teaching courses";

Several Russell Group universities have dedicated staff support programmes or units to support development, including:

- the University of Cambridge's Staff Development Programme;
- the University of Glasgow's Learning and Teaching Centre;
- the University of Nottingham's Institute for Research into Learning and Teaching in Higher Education and the Staff and Educational Development Unit;
- University College London's Centre for Advancement of Learning and Teaching.

<sup>331</sup> Chevalier, A. and Conlon, C., "Does it pay to attend a prestigious university?" Centre for the Economics of Education, LSE (table 5 for the 1995 cohort, page 29). Further Centre for Economic Performance (CEP) research shows that if a student attends an institution in the highest quartile—as determined by a number of different quality measures (RAE scores, retention rates, and tariff scores)—this leads to a higher wage of between 10 and 16 per cent (depending on the measure) compared to an individual who attends an institution in the lowest quartile. Although the report does not identify individual institutions, Russell Group universities achieve high RAE scores, retention rates and tariff scores so it is very likely they are in the top quartile of institutions in the UK. "University Quality and Graduate Wages in the UK" Hussain, McNally and Telhaj, Centre for Economic Performance, London School of Economics, 2008.

<sup>332</sup> <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/hybrid.asp?typeCode=144>. This features 19 Russell Group universities in the top 200 universities world-wide (17 in the top 100).

<sup>333</sup> This represents the percentage of recent graduates in graduate-level employment.

Some Russell Group universities also offer awards for excellence in teaching. For example, the Warwick Awards for Teaching Excellence (WATE) are awarded at the university's degree congregation to excellent teachers, with a special award for early career teachers. The awards are judged by a joint staff-student panel, and student nominations are specifically invited.

#### *Postgraduate/Postdoctoral research staff*

Additionally, a number of Russell Group universities have developed specific development or training programmes for their postgraduate or postdoctoral research staff. These include:

- The University of Birmingham's module in learning and teaching for postgraduate students or in teaching skills for research staff;
- Imperial College London's research skills development course or scheme to provide teaching opportunities for postdoctoral research staff;
- specific training provided by the University of Liverpool for postgraduate research students who have teaching responsibilities;
- the University of Warwick's introduction to academic practice specifically for pre- and post-doctoral students.

#### *Academic Practice*

- Russell Group universities are keen to ensure the dissemination of good academic practice and offer courses such as the University of Birmingham's "Mentoring for Academics" course or the University of Oxford's "Developing Academic Practice" course.
- Reflecting the importance placed on enquiry-based learning in Russell Group universities, a number of institutions offer specific staff training courses on this issue, including the University of Birmingham's "Independent Learning in a Research-intensive Environment" and "Problem and Enquiry-based Learning" courses
- The University of Oxford Learning Institute hosts the HEFCE-funded Centre for Excellence in Preparing for Academic Practice, which supports postgraduate research students and postdoctoral researchers who wish to develop academic careers, focusing on three essential elements of academic practice: inquiry through research and scholarship; teaching (in particular developing support for postgraduate research students and contract research staff who wish to teach); and service to the profession, institution and academic community. The Centre conducts and promotes research into academic practice and disseminates best practice throughout the University and the broader higher education community. The University has also convened a Preparation for Academic Practice Network with six other research-intensive institutions: the University of Cambridge, the London School of Economics, Imperial College London, King's College London, the University of Edinburgh and the University of Warwick.

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### **Memorandum 76**

#### **Submission from the University of Edinburgh**

#### STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

##### 1. Summary and background

1.0 The University is pleased to have the opportunity to submit evidence to the Committee's Inquiry into Students and Universities. In summary, this submission:

- Supplements the Russell Group submission to the Inquiry
- Highlights relevant activity at the University of Edinburgh
- Identifies some areas of policy differentiation in Scotland

As Committee members will be aware, the University of Edinburgh is a research-led university and amongst the largest in the UK. Like all UK Universities, the University is an autonomous legal entity, separate from government. The University's current student population is 26,000, the University employs just under 9,000 people and it's turnover in 2008–09 was in excess of £500 million .

1.1 In addition to producing high-quality graduates and undertaking cutting-edge basic research, the University makes a significant contribution to the UK and Scottish economies. In the last five years students at the University have formed a total of 33 companies in the course of their studies and, in the last year alone, staff and students formed 26 companies. A recent piece of work<sup>334</sup> on the University's wider economic impact indicates that the total impacts of the University are:

- In Edinburgh—£585 million Gross Value Added (GVA) and 14,034 fte jobs supported;

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<sup>334</sup> University of Edinburgh—*Economic Impact 2008 -Baseline Report*.

- In Midlothian—£63 million GVA and 1,743 fte jobs supported; and
- In Scotland—£826 million GVA and 19,580 fte jobs supported.

1.2 The University also contributes to the economy by raising the productivity and skills of individuals through teaching. It is estimated that the lifetime impact from students graduating in one year is over £311 million in the Edinburgh economy and £406 million in the Scottish economy.

1.3 This submission should be regarded as supplementary to the Russell Group evidence to the Inquiry. It focuses on highlighting specific University of Edinburgh initiatives and on areas where there are differing arrangements or a different context within Scotland. These areas are highlighted for the Committee's information as changes to policy and arrangements in any of the four home nations have implications in each of the others.

## 2. Admissions

2.0 It is important to understand the Scottish context in relation to admissions. Of particular relevance here are the higher rates of higher education participation in Scotland and the fact that the Highers qualification system means that many Scottish domiciled students are already made offers on the basis of known grades (circa 60% of Scottish-domiciled entrants to the University of Edinburgh).

*The effectiveness of the process for admission to Higher education Institutions, including A-levels, Advanced Diplomas, apprenticeships and other university entrance tests.*

2.1 The University is of the view that it offers a transparent, effective and efficient service in relation to admissions, however, it is continually seeking to further professionalise and streamline its processes. The institution's admission's policy is funded on a belief that diversity is educationally and socially desirable in society and a recognition that not all students will have had an equal opportunity to demonstrate their full academic potential. All applications are therefore considered individually and a holistic decision is made with regard to the individual's academic grades, taking into account the context in which these were achieved.

2.2 The University's challenge in relation to admissions is therefore to identify the educational and social context in which an applicant's academic qualifications have been achieved and thereby determine their potential to succeed in the intensive, research-led educational environment Edinburgh offers. Full details of the University's admissions policy is made publicly available to be viewed by applicants and for wider scrutiny at <http://www.ed.ac.uk/studying/undergraduate/applications-admissions/principles>

2.3 The University of Edinburgh uses the UKCAT entrance test in relation to admittance into its undergraduate MBChB medicine programme. As part of the culture of ongoing review of admissions processes and the context of a high applications-places ratio the University is constantly looking to identify reliable and appropriate means by which to differentiate between well qualified students. The use of UKCAT is one example of this

*The implementation and success of widening participation initiatives, and the impact of the current funding regime on these objectives.*

2.4 The Committee's attention is drawn to the various national and regional agreements in place in Scotland. The Scottish Widening Access Partnership (SWAP) is a partnership between the HEIs and colleges in Scotland focused on promoting access to higher education amongst mature students. Supported by the Scottish Funding Council, the programme has now been running for 21 years. Similarly access programmes aimed at school leavers, such as the Lothian Equal Access Programmes for Schools (LEAPS) in which the University of Edinburgh participates, has been running for some 17 years.

2.5 Unlike compact agreements, these partnership schemes provide multiple exit routes for students to pursue higher education study at any of the participating institution.

2.6 The University of Edinburgh *Pathways to the Professions* scheme is outlined briefly in the Russell Group submission. This scheme is intended to encourage progression by under-represented school students into professional courses in Medicine, Vet Medicine, Law and Architecture and subsequently into the professions themselves.

2.7 Through the project the University works with professional bodies, state schools and families. The programme of activity was initiated and developed from 2001–02 across all 46 state schools in Edinburgh and the Lothians and over 600 school students have registered to date. The project was evaluated at the end of its first two years of operation and was judged to be successful (see Russell Group submission for further details), attracting continuation funding. It has recently been selected by Universities UK as a case study of best practice for their publication *From the Margins to the Mainstream*. Initially funded by the Sutton Trust, the project is now embedded and funded by the University and the Law strand of the project has recently been rolled out to five universities in England through a 1.25 million project funded by the Sutton Trust and the College of Law.

2.8 Pathways to the Professions was selected as an international example of best practice by the European Access Network and the Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation and showcased at their joint conference in Toronto in April 2008.

*The role of the Government in developing and promoting fair access and admissions policies for the UK Higher Education Sector.*

2.9 The University of Edinburgh shares the position outlined in the Russell Group submission to the Inquiry. As autonomous institutions, admissions policies remain a matter for individual HEI's. The University believes that transparency and openness are prerequisites to such policies functioning effectively under these arrangements.

### 3. *The balance between teaching and research*

3.0 The University supports the Russell Group evidence to the effect that there is a positive correlation between research excellence and student experience in contrast to any tension which might be inferred from the phrasing used in the call for evidence. In the period since the initial Research Assessment Exercise, the University of Edinburgh has undertaken a number of actions which reflect the institution's ongoing commitment to the highest standards in learning and teaching alongside excellence in research.

#### 3.1 Selected examples of such initiatives include:

- The creation of personal chairs in student learning in recognition of an individual's
  - contribution to the advancement of knowledge and understanding or its creative or professional application in the field of learning at the highest level;
  - outstanding achievement in contribution to student learning as evidenced in peer-reviewable outputs including excellence in practice in the field;
  - capacity for academic leadership, including the ability to influence, stimulate and inspire others.
- Staff awards in recognition of contribution to learning and teaching, including the prestigious Chancellor's Award, awarded to an individual who has enhanced the teaching reputation of the University, through a significant contribution to improving or invigorating of student learning at any level.
- Funded initiatives in support of teaching innovation, including funding for e-learning initiatives.
- Voluntary participation in the National Student Survey (not compulsory for Scottish HEIs).

*December 2008*

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## Memorandum 77

### Submission from the Institute of Materials, Minerals and Mining

STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

#### *Summary*

**Admissions:** By and large the system works well but universities which require a minimum of three "A" grades find it increasingly difficult to identify the best students on this basis. Admission tutors need more dedicated support and there is a need to share best practice. More guidance is needed on admission criteria for wider participation.

- **Teaching vs Research:** High quality research is a prerequisite for an inspirational and creative teaching environment. The need to maintain a high rating for research and thereby an elevated research income means that equal effort cannot be devoted to research and teaching without working long hours. Current workloads are such that striking the right balance is increasingly difficult.
- **Degree Classification:** Degree quality across the UK is not as diverse as it may be supposed. Degree classification is not always reflected in subsequent postgraduate performance. Plagiarism in examinations assisted by access to electronically based sources of information is a growing problem.
- **Student Support and Engagement:** Effective student support and engagement is a demanding activity and further increases time pressures on academics. New models of teaching may need to be considered.



## 1. *Admissions*

1.1 The UK has a well honed A-level based admission route into higher education institutions (HEIs) and this is well calibrated and well tried. It is sometimes difficult to differentiate at the high end of A-level grades, and some HEIs which set a minimum of three “A” grades are considering setting their own entrance exam. Interviews and open days are a good added dimension. It is difficult to be prescriptive, but clearing for residual remaining places is a tough time for tutors and applicants alike, and something of a lottery in comparison with UCAS based applications. It may be difficult to change this, but it is not the best way to channel our young talent across the UK. Possibly admission tutors need more dedicated support and more best-practice could be shared.

1.2 Some HEIs are doing well at widening access, but delivery is variable and depends on local motivation as well as the effectiveness of the Government’s financial model. Widening participation also requires follow-through with greater student support, as for overseas students with, for example, language. It is especially important to focus resources to support such students in their first year when behaviour and learning patterns are established.

1.3 More guidance on admission criteria for wider participation would help calibrate our approach and make the system fairer.

## 2. *Teaching vs Research*

2.1 Research sets the backdrop to teaching quality, since a motivating research environment often defines an inspirational and creative teaching environment. Clearly methodology and technical tools need to be provided, but we are in danger of losing the enthusiasm of charismatic teachers by boxing them into norms of structured teaching. Student and staff feedback is now well developed, and is an excellent way of maintaining standards.

2.2 A spectrum of resources exists across HEIs for teaching *vs* research, but this does not always reflect on teaching quality which is more people driven. However, it will not help that the high pressure on research excellence will continue with simultaneous greater demand on teaching quality and productivity. The inevitable consequence of long working hours and immediacy of expectation will have a damaging long-term effect, on strategy, with adverse effects on the culture in which students are brought up. This is regardless of how “correct” the paper chase of documentation and teaching governance might appear.

2.3 Training in teaching, particularly for new staff, is well organised and usually obligatory, so is a powerful influence on personal priority setting as regards teaching *vs* research.

2.4 Government influence on the teaching to research balance and learning opportunities is good at the macro-level, but cannot readily impact on coalface activity any more than it can influence local research quality. The latter must come through teaching leadership at local level, and the application of local levers.

2.5 Formally, equal regard is paid to teaching as to research, including for promotion, however the self-image of a HEI is hugely dependent on its research and much less so on its teaching. Indeed the death of research in a HEI is likely to mean the death of vibrant teaching programmes so research should be seen as an aid to a world class student experience. Government should recognise that teaching quality monitoring has been a blunt tool and cannot measure the value to a young person of motivated, charismatic teachers. A handful of such teachers is more valuable than the accumulated evidence of quality by a teaching Governance Committee. Motivated teachers will not emerge in an era when academics do not have time to achieve a 100% satisfying effort in teaching. This is not the best way of generating a virtuous circle of good teaching, satisfactory student progress and high teaching reputation.

## 3. *Degree Classification*

3.1 The guardians of degree standards are rightly the external examiners. They do not achieve perfect standardisation, however, because of the huge change to curricula with new advanced knowledge entering the arena and the diversity of courses that fuse two or more subjects. Degree quality is not as diverse across the UK as may be supposed; what is different are the skills and aptitude that is passed on, for example, applied and practical *vs* intellectually focussed. Employers make their own calculations regarding these differences when they compare HEIs. Whatever the degree classification, factual recall decays exponentially, and so the significance of a degree classification is not as long lived as many would have us believe; it does not always translate to differences in postgraduate performance, except perhaps at the extremes.

3.2 Plagiarism is a growing problem and is facilitated by easy access to relevant information on the worldwide web. The potential acceptability of this approach to new generations of students is a serious concern. Strict counter-measures do not resolve this aberrant attitude to learning.

## 4. *Student Support and Engagement*

4.1 Student support is discharged reasonably well through the tutorial system. However, this is a demanding activity and does not necessarily eliminate problems, notably of non-completion. If general standards are to be maintained, as long as student support is constrained by lack of additional resources, it is difficult to see how failures will not increase with wider participation.

4.2 A world class experience for students has its roots in the vibrant research that teaching staff are pursuing. The Government may expect productivity but this, and quality, lie in enthusiastic academics. Exceptional pressures on academics beyond critical levels do not sit well with their role-model responsibilities. Students are very sensitive to the realities on the ground facing their teachers.

4.3 Government needs to quantify pressures on academic time, make a judgement on what is required for good teaching preparation, delivery and assessment, and then offer mechanisms to enable staff to achieve this, recognising that quality as well as quantitative teaching productivity with more students cannot both be achieved without new models of teaching.

January 2009

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## Memorandum 78

### Submission from Birmingham City University

#### INQUIRY INTO STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

##### 1. *Executive Summary*

- A national admissions system for part-time entry is unlikely to be beneficial
- Participation must be considered from a broader perspective than has traditionally been the case
- Any cap on participation is both unhelpful and potentially damaging
- The Higher Education Academic Record is a useful addition which augments existing robust processes for maintaining standards and quality
- Current arrangements for part-time financial student support are inequitable
- Co-funded provision is a high risk approach with some inappropriate funding mechanisms

##### 2. *Introduction to the Submitter*

2.1 Birmingham City University is one of the largest Higher Education Institutions in the UK. We have a strong track record of high academic standards, vocational, relevant provision and of working with regional agencies and employers to promote economic regeneration. We are a forward-looking university, with innovation and creativity at the heart of everything we do. In addition, we retain our commitment to widening access to higher education. Our mission sets us as a powerful force for learning, creativity and enterprise, promoting economic, social and cultural well-being.

##### 3. *Body of Evidence*

###### 3.1 *Introduction*

3.1.1 The University is pleased to have the opportunity to respond to the Select Committee. The current economic climate will affect education as well as the private sector. Nevertheless, we believe that universities are critical component to delivering regeneration, promoting sustainability and meeting the need for knowledge in the economy.

3.1.2 UUK has recently published a paper which outlines how universities can assist employers and thereby further the economy. As an example, the success of the initiative led by Advantage West Midlands following the closure of the car plant at Longbridge, shows how close collaboration between regional authorities, further education colleges and higher education institutions can help workers made redundant find alternative and fulfilling employment.

###### 3.2 *Admissions—Effectiveness of the Process for Admissions*

3.2.1 The recently published Schwartz Review Report confirms that universities are committed to recruiting students from a wide range of backgrounds and with a variety of entry qualifications and to ensuring the equity and transparency of their admissions processes. The changes made since 2004, as a consequence of the Schwartz Report and the publication of the QAA Code of Practice, have ensured that applicants can have confidence in HE admissions processes. The quality of information and guidance provided to applicants has also improved significantly. Institutions are aware of the need for further improvements, including options for flexible/part-time study and solutions for workforce development applicable to a wide variety of employers. As with many universities, we are implementing these changes within a framework of planned continuous improvement and quality enhancement.

3.2.2 Whilst we support much that has been said during the HE debate initiated by DIUS about the need for courses to be delivered flexibly to meet the needs of employers and students who cannot or do not wish to study full-time, we feel that a national admissions system for part-time entry is unlikely to be beneficial. By their very nature, the vast majority of part-time students are local to their university. Therefore the introduction of a national system would merely distance potential applicants from that local university

whilst adding an additional level of complexity and bureaucracy. We suggest that the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions group is best placed to assist HEIs in ensuring that their processes accommodate fully the needs of all applicants including those with non A level qualifications.

3.2.3 Equally, we would not support the proposal to charge HEFCE with developing a credit accumulation and transfer system which builds on current practices for the accreditation of prior and experiential learning in light of the need for increasing flexibility. Whilst we would support the need for flexibility, lifelong learning and continued professional development to enhance workforce competitiveness, we do not believe that it should be within the scope of a funding council to propose an academic credit accumulation processes. If it were felt that such a system were required, we would propose that Universities UK would be a more appropriate body to undertake its development.

### 3.3 *Admissions—Implementation and Success of Widening Participation*

3.3.1 Widening access is a much broader topic than purely working with schools and colleges to attract full-time 18 year old students from disadvantaged areas. This has often been seen as the primary means of delivering widening participation, reinforced by funding methodologies. Current proposals will increase the funding for widening access from this group further at the expense of allocations for improving retention. Students from such backgrounds typically require greater levels of support and still have a greater preponderance to withdraw. Therefore, such allocations should support and explicitly recognise the additional costs of supporting to success students from WP backgrounds, as there is little point in attracting new entrants if they merely withdraw.

3.3.2 A major priority for widening access needs to be on increasing participation of adults already in the workforce to up-skill those who currently do not hold a level 4 qualification. This is going to take significant effort to develop, but is critical to achieving regional and national priorities for both HE participation and the broader knowledge economy.

3.3.3 Part-time mature students are fundamental to delivering this priority. The knowledge economy is reliant upon up-skilling of the workforce and on a commitment to lifelong learning. Employees must become more flexible to adapt to changing economic circumstances and workforce needs. However, some current policies actively discourage lifelong learning and re-skilling, including the current Equivalent and Lower-level Qualifications (ELQ) policy. Particularly in times of change, such as current economic difficulties, any cap on participation is unhelpful and potentially detrimental to the longer-term economy. This may not only be due to ELQ but to any other mechanisms such as restricting natural growth which responds to economic needs by capping additional student numbers.

### 3.4 *Degree Classification—Higher Education Academic Record*

3.4.1 We remain convinced that the current system of degree classification should be retained but agree that it should be supplemented with a transcript. Therefore, we welcomed the project to develop the Higher Education Academic Record (HEAR) and expect to implement it when it is finalised. We believe the HEAR will assist portability and, because it will show how the student has performed in each component of the course, give employers a better understanding of the student's capabilities. This University has used standard assessment regulations across the whole institution for many years and they are well embedded and understood. The method of classification is clearly explained within the regulations and a description of the honours classification is recorded on our transcripts. We would also expect the HEAR to record this information.

### 3.5 *Degree Classification—Effectiveness of Quality Monitoring*

3.5.1 The QAA was assessed recently by the ENQA Board and found to be fit for purpose. QAA reports of institutional audits demonstrate to the government, funding councils, students, employers, professional bodies and the general public the robustness of its processes and its effectiveness in reviewing institutional arrangements for maintaining standards and quality.

3.5.2 Academic staff are very alert to the problem of plagiarism and more sophisticated detection methods (such as software) are now routinely used by institutions. At this institution, induction and learning and teaching strategies have been adapted to ensure that students understand what is required of them. When allegations of plagiarism are upheld the penalties imposed are severe.

### 3.6 *Student support and engagement—Adequacy of Student Support Packages*

3.6.1 There is now an increasingly blurred distinction between full-time and part-time students, with more and more full-time students undertaking sometimes significant levels of part-time employment. Development of provision is becoming more flexible to respond to these competing demands. The student body is becoming less and less homogeneous, and certainly should not be simply regarded as traditional 18 + students. Yet the financial student support arrangements offered vary substantially between full and part-time, with part-time students being significantly disadvantaged. Bursary support for part-time is very limited compared to full-time and there is no support at all for students studying for less than half the full-time load in any one year. The assumption that they can afford to pay upfront or that their employers would be willing to sponsor them is fundamentally flawed.

### 3.7 Student support and engagement—Adequacy of HE Funding

3.7.1 The current intent to improve workforce skills through employer co-funded provision is inherently risky. SMEs, who are a key component of the economy, are often unwilling or cannot afford to undertake co-funding. Since closed courses (ie those restricted to a particular employer) are not eligible for public funding, justification to employers on grounds of competitiveness become far weaker. Employees who undertake development without direct sponsorship from their employer, even if they later reclaim some or all of those expenses, will cost the employer far less than co-funded sponsored students. Funding Council planning assumptions which expect steady growth of co-funded provision, agreed in advance with no mechanism to divert funds between institutions in response to market needs, are in direct contrast to the very nature of such contracts that tend to be more volatile and dynamic.

3.7.2 It is not generally possible to achieve pro-rata part-time undergraduate fees to full-time, certainly under current support arrangements, with achievable part-time fees generally being significantly lower than the full-time equivalent. Nevertheless, it is broadly recognised that the cost of delivering part-time provision is higher, as two students studying 50% will require proportionately higher administration and student support costs, and for subjects such as art & design, increased storage/workspace. The sector could not suffer any erosion of funding for part-time students, such as increasing the assumed fee used within funding calculations towards the £3,000 level. This would put even greater strain upon institutions' abilities to deliver this important aspect of provision which is essential to realising economic success. Additionally, any such assumption applied to part-time co-funded provision would merely depress the market for such provision further.

January 2009

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## Memorandum 79

### Submission from Universities UK

#### “STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES”

1. Universities UK is delighted to contribute to the Select Committee enquiry into “Students and Universities”. As the major representative body for the higher education sector, Universities UK has 133 members who are the executive heads of the universities in the UK. Universities UK works closely with policy makers and key stakeholders to advance the interests of universities and higher education.

#### SUMMARY

2. This submission indicates the considerable work universities are undertaking in three key areas affecting students: admissions; ensuring quality and standards; and student support. It also acknowledges the challenges in these areas and offers solutions. It recognises the impact on students as well as institutions of the recent economic downturn and argues that universities are ideally placed to support the Government's efforts to ensure a speedy recovery, providing they are adequately supported.

#### ADMISSIONS

3. Universities are actively engaged in reviewing, modernising and professionalising the applications and admissions process, and developing good practice guidance. They are keen to ensure that admissions policies and procedures are professionally administered, transparent, fair, accountable and offer a good service to the applicant. In this, universities work with bodies such as Universities UK, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme (SPA), the Delivery Partnership and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA).<sup>335</sup>

4. The admissions landscape has changed significantly as a result of the strong growth in student numbers in higher education over the last decade (from 1.8 million to 2.4 million between 1997 and 2007), the rapid internationalisation of UK universities (with 14.9% of students now from overseas, compared to 11.3% in 1997), and through developments in new technologies which can enhance the admissions process. In 2008, 99.9% of applications through UCAS were electronic.

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<sup>335</sup> The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) supports institutions through the provision of continuing professional development and training for those involved in admissions decision-making, both academic and administrators. The Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme (SPA) leads on the development of fair admissions. It provides an evidence base and guidelines for good practice and helps higher education institutions maintain and enhance excellence and professionalism in admissions, student recruitment and widening participation.

The Delivery Partnership is a sector-led project to improve the higher education applications process to increase the transparency, effectiveness and efficiency of the current system for both the applicant and institutions. This includes improvements to the system such as the information available for applicants as well as providing the opportunity for those applicants who have achieved better results than required for their firm offer to apply for a new course, if they wish, which best suits their needs and circumstances.

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) has developed, and recently revised, a detailed code of practice for the admissions process. It sets out what institutions are expected to do to ensure their admissions procedures are fair, transparent, readily accessible to all those involved in the admissions process and properly implemented. The QAA, is also revising the code of practice on Careers Education, pre-entry Information and Advice and Guidance.

5. The higher level of qualifications held by applicants and the accelerating pace of change of qualifications and curriculum reform across the UK is also significant. In England, the development of the Advanced Diplomas will mean that from 2010 some applicants will offer new or revised qualifications and bring new skill sets and experience of different learning styles. To ensure that admissions processes reflect these reforms, universities are looking in more depth at the relevance to students of their entry requirements and course Entry Profiles. Universities have actively engaged with the development of Diplomas to ensure that they meet universities' requirements and are fit for progression to higher education. Over 250 institutions now have supporting statements on Diplomas on the UCAS website.

6. To keep the admissions process fit for purpose institutions use a range of admissions and selection approaches. These reflect both the diversity in institutional missions and the diversity of applicants from different countries and backgrounds who will demonstrate their potential to succeed in a range of ways. Universities use a variety of measures to assess an applicant's merit, achievement and potential. This is key to addressing issues of fairness and widening participation, such as the need to identify the potential of applicants whose ability might not be reflected in their grades, encourage applicants from under-represented groups, and differentiate between apparently equally qualified applicants for courses with competitive entry requirements.

7. For the majority of HE courses, little or no selection is required. Students applying with the required entry requirements secure an offer of a place. For the small proportion of courses which are highly selective, universities may seek to expand the range of information available to help them identify students with the greatest potential and ability. This is achieved through a holistic assessment of the applicant through interviews, portfolios and auditions, taking into account school performance and other relevant factors in the applicant's background, and the use of admissions tests. However, admissions tests only form *part* of the process as they provide only one piece of information about an applicant. They apply to only 0.7% of the 49,000 courses in the UCAS scheme for 2009 entry. Transparency in the use of these tests is important and the SPA programme has circulated a briefing for universities (December 2008) on the good practice issues associated with the introduction, or continued use, of a test. A similar briefing has gone to schools and colleges. This briefing provides information on the financial support available for applicants from widening access backgrounds.

8. There is a legitimate public interest in securing confidence in admissions. Universities have supported the introduction of the Widening Participation Strategic Assessments. Universities' admissions policies and procedures are open and transparent and are available on many institutions' websites. This will help to ensure that applicants are well informed and minimise misconceptions about admissions policies and processes. We also welcome the role DCSF and DIUS are taking in improving information, advice and guidance for young people, which is critical to raising aspirations and attainment.

#### WIDENING PARTICIPATION

9. It is now widely recognised that the principal barrier to widening participation in higher education is prior attainment. Research shows that there is no evidence of bias in admissions procedures against students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds or from particular schools and colleges (Schwartz Report, Section C1, page 8). Rather, evidence provided by the National Audit Office Report on *Widening Participation in Higher Education*, shows that prior attainment is the root cause in explaining the under-representation in higher education by certain groups. (NAO Report HC616, 2007, p 7).

10. Universities' commitment to widening participation is not in doubt. As Universities UK's submission to the National Council for Educational Excellence (NCEE) demonstrates, all universities work to widen participation, using a wide variety of means, including extensive efforts to support attainment in schools and colleges through mentoring, classroom support, curriculum materials, providing access to specialist facilities, and supporting teachers through programmes of continuing professional development and opportunities to work alongside subject specialists in universities. Many universities are involved in partnering schools, including through sponsorship of academies and trusts. These initiatives to raise attainment in schools complement long-standing work to raise aspirations and encourage applications to higher education through, for example, summer schools, compact arrangements and student ambassadors. Increasingly, universities approach widening participation as a long-term activity, many starting with primary school pupils. Achieving change may take several years and requires strong partnership with schools and colleges to raise levels of attainment.

11. Government initiative funding has undoubtedly brought benefits particularly in supporting universities to widen participation through initiatives such as Aimhigher, Aimhigher Associates, the widening participation allocation, and financial support for students. The funding provided by DIUS for higher education sector-led initiatives such as SPA and the Delivery Partnership is also valued. However, the total funding of £364 million for universities to support widening participation activities for widening participation (including access, retention, and for students with disabilities) is insufficient. The additional costs to institutions of such targeted initiatives are 31% above the cost to institutions of recruiting and retaining traditional students. However, it remains a pressing challenge to ensure the right balance is struck by freeing universities to set their own agendas through block grant funding and providing the right policy incentives to help the sector develop.

12. Widening participation forms a key part of Government policy but it still appears that in public debate the focus is on the issue of fair access, ie the percentage of pupils from lower socio-economic groups who enter institutions with a large number of selective courses. We would urge Government to focus on the wider context. Research by the Sutton Trust for the NCEE shows that each year 360,000 16-year-olds do not achieve the standards to stay on to do A-levels, and of these around 60,000 were in the top 20% at some point whilst in school.

13. It is also important to note that, although higher education policy continues to focus to a large extent on the full-time 18-year-old undergraduate, universities have considerably diversified the range of students they attract and support. Between 1997 and 2007 the number of students in higher education grew from 1.8 million to 2.4 million. In the same period the number of part-time students grew from 618,000 to 911,000, and the number of students aged over 21 from 1.2 million to 1.6 million. Despite this, completion and post-graduation employment rates for UK students remain well above the average for other countries in the OECD. In Universities UK's recent submission to the DIUS HE Debate, we have urged the Government to do more to recognise the range of ages and modes of study which characterise UK higher education, and to give consideration to moving towards a mode-blind system of fee and financial support. A copy of our submission to the DIUS HE Review debate is enclosed.

#### THE BALANCE BETWEEN TEACHING AND RESEARCH

##### *University-based research*

14. Universities UK welcomes the substantial additional investment, both recurrent and capital, that has been provided for research over the last 10 years. The Government's ongoing commitment to research and innovation is a good news story. However, as we stated in our submission to the 2007 Spending Review, there remains a continuing need for funding in support of high quality teaching, including infrastructure, and at the very least maintenance of the unit of public funding.

15. In the UK funding for research is selective in the way it is allocated, based on the criteria of excellence, and highly concentrated. It is critically important that we continue to support high quality research wherever it is found, so that we can remain internationally competitive. However, research funding is currently concentrated to an extent where if it goes any further we could risk endangering the system as a whole. Any further concentration could, for example, lead to a significant loss of high quality provision, reduce the capability to develop future capacity and substantially limit the flexibility needed to respond to new demands. Moreover, success in the RAE is only one part of the picture: other centres of excellence exist beyond those for research, and a suite of appropriate measures that can recognise and reward excellence in all its forms are therefore required. In relation to the Committee's concerns for this enquiry, further concentration of funding could also jeopardise the vital link between research and teaching in universities.

16. Universities UK also recognises the importance of the relationship between teaching and research. This issue was explored in depth by a Research Forum, set up following the 2003 White Paper, chaired by Sir Graeme Davies. We would suggest the Committee revisit this report as part of their inquiry, as many of the issues raised are still relevant.

#### QUALITY AND STANDARDS

17. The UK's international reputation for high quality teaching is of key strategic importance. Universities themselves have the responsibility for maintaining the standards of their awards and the quality of the learning opportunities which support students to achieve against those standards, and they work hard, both collectively and individually, to fulfil those responsibilities. The processes by which they do this are described in detail in Universities UK's recently published document *Quality and standards in UK universities: A guide to how the system works*. A copy of this publication is enclosed.

##### *Quality assurance*

18. All UK universities have systems in place to ensure that new courses meet the right standards, and that courses are regularly reviewed, by looking at evidence from students, graduates, employers and external examiners. The QAA conducts regular visits to universities to scrutinise how they do this. QAA reports are publicly available and include judgements about the confidence that can be placed in universities' management of quality and standards. All universities subscribe to a set of common tools called the "Academic Infrastructure". This includes: *Frameworks for higher education qualifications*, describing standards represented by each qualification; *Subject Benchmark Statements*, setting out how those standards apply in particular subject areas; and *the Code of Practice for the Assurance of Quality and Standards in Higher Education*, which gives detailed guidance on the management of quality under ten sections, covering everything from external examining and assessment practice to careers education and guidance.

19. While universities have the primary responsibility for the quality of the education they offer, Government and taxpayers clearly have a legitimate interest in how public funding for teaching in higher education is used. HEFCE has a statutory responsibility to "secure that provision is made for assessing the quality of education" it funds. Since 1997, it has fulfilled that responsibility by contracting with the QAA to carry out assessments on its behalf. Universities UK believes that the involvement of an independent, expert agency to advise on quality and standards is a significant strength of the UK system, which is one of

the most comprehensive and sophisticated in the world. Indeed, the UK quality assurance system has provided the model for the development of quality assurance arrangements in many other countries, including, for example, Australia.

### *Standards*

20. There is no national curriculum in UK higher education and universities have developed a range of subjects and learning approaches to reflect the expertise of their academic staff and the priorities of students and employers. Degrees are different and more diverse with far more choices available to students and employers than in the past, but all courses are subject to the same processes to ensure a minimum “threshold standard” is maintained.

21. Degree standards have been developed by universities and described by the QAA so that, while the content of courses may differ, the level of understanding required in each case across different universities will be broadly equivalent. Each level of award is defined in one of the two *Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications*.

22. The frameworks for qualifications are underpinned by Subject Benchmark Statements which describe what gives a discipline its coherence and identity. The statements also define what can be expected of a graduate in terms of the abilities and skills needed to develop understanding or competence in the subject. Benchmark Statements for some subjects, such as Chemistry, include core content. Others, such as History, allow for a more varied curriculum. Where appropriate, benchmark statements combine or refer to professional standards required by external professional or regulatory bodies in the discipline.

23. All universities assess students against the intended “learning outcomes” of a programme of study (what students know, understand and can do) and the way they do this is also underpinned by the QAA Code of Practice. This ensures that universities have mechanisms in place to ensure that student performance is properly judged against appropriate standards. Assessment mechanisms and regulations will vary, by necessity, between disciplines. However, many of the QAA’s Institutional Audit reports record efforts made by universities to improve the consistency of assessment arrangements, while identifying this as an area where further work is needed.

24. Universities in the UK have a long history of cross-checking the quality and standards of their own provision with that of other institutions through a system of external examiners. The involvement of external examiners is recognised internationally as a key mechanism for ensuring comparability across the UK higher education system.

25. One of the principal barriers institutions face in adapting to meet the changing needs of students and maintaining the quality of the student experience is the huge cost of modernising the teaching infrastructure, including providing learning spaces that accommodate advances in learning technology and parallel changes in pedagogical approach. While research infrastructure has received a relatively large injection of public capital investment over recent years, the teaching infrastructure has lagged behind. This is particularly acute in the post-92 universities which have poor quality inherited infrastructure, and where the pressures on resources are compounded by the fact that many institutions in this part of the sector have pioneered new forms of pedagogy and flexible modes of delivery in order to support the education of a more diverse student body. In 2007, Universities UK’s Spending Review submission calculated that the investment backlog amounts to about £5 billion.

### THE DEGREE CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM

26. It is important to distinguish between “standards” themselves and “how student performance against standards is described”. There is no compelling evidence of declining standards in higher education. Indeed, the relatively recent efforts to define the standards expected at each qualification level, and to describe how they apply in different subject areas, constitute a step forward in terms of both safeguarding standards over time and ensuring some minimum level of comparability.

27. The proportion of first and upper—second class degrees has increased, but only by 6% over the past 14 years. This could be explained by a number of factors. Assessment practices have changed (as they have in schools) towards more coursework and continuous assessment, which may lead to students performing better. The shift towards the use of “learning outcomes” to define what students are intended to achieve has been accompanied by a shift in marking away from “norm referencing”—ie comparing one student with another— to “criterion referencing” which measures students performance against the intended learning outcomes. *In theory*, under this approach, all students could achieve the highest grades, rather than a set proportion of the cohort. Universities have also been working hard to improve the quality of teaching and support. At the same time, there is a widespread perception amongst students that they need “the essential 2:1” to be even considered by employers. That has undoubtedly driven students to work hard towards reaching that threshold.

28. Any system which attempts to summarise the achievement of students on a wide variety of programmes in a large number of institutions to a single, common, summative judgement will be a blunt instrument. We agree with the finding of the Burgess Group (led by the Vice Chancellor of the University of Leicester, Professor Bob Burgess), established by Universities UK and GuildHE in 2004, that the current

undergraduate degree classification system does not adequately represent the achievement of students in a modern, diverse higher education system. However, as the Burgess Group found, it is easier to identify the problems with the current system than it is to reach consensus on what should replace it.

29. Our quality assurance system is not static. It evolves in the light of experience. Annex A of *Quality and standards in UK universities* describes its evolution over the last two decades. More recently, Universities UK, GuildHE and HEFCE have worked together to improve the quality assurance system through the Quality Assurance Framework Review Group, which looked at different aspects of the system and made recommendations about how they could be improved.

30. The QAA also supports improvements in HEIs by collecting together the information gathered through Institutional Audit and publishing papers in a series called *Outcomes from Institutional Audit*, drawing attention to common lessons which can be learned from their experience of reviewing quality management in HEIs across the sector. Universities UK and GuildHE are working with the QAA to improve the usefulness of this aspect of the QAA's work by creating a forum in which key findings can be discussed with the heads of institutions, in addition to the range of other ways in which the QAA already communicates with the sector and its representative bodies.

31. This focus on working continuously to improve academic quality includes work to support excellence in teaching. The Higher Education Academy (of which Universities UK is one of the "owners") works to support professionalism in teaching in a range of ways and has made a separate submission to this inquiry.

#### STUDENT SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

32. Universities UK is working in partnership with the National Union of Students on student engagement issues. Central to this is the establishment of the Cross-Sector Student Engagement Forum which includes representation from UUK, Guild HE, NUS, DIUS, HEFCE, the National Postgraduate Committee, the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA), the QAA and the Higher Education Academy. A project commissioned by HEFCE is mapping student engagement in institutions. The outcomes of the project will be launched at a conference in February 2009. We expect the project to highlight existing good practice in institutions and to act as a catalyst for future practical support for the development of student engagement across the HE sector.

33. A recent OECD report<sup>336</sup> states that the UK charges amongst the highest student tuition fees (averaging USD 1,860) amongst the EU-19 countries, but these are "far below the highest tuition fees charged among the OECD countries, such as in Australia (USD 3,855), Japan (USD 3,920), South Korea (USD 3,883) and the United States (USD 5,027)". The OECD considers the UK to have well-developed student support measures including a public loans system to national students. The report states that in such systems, there are fewer financial barriers for entry to higher education, and concludes that given the shared public and private returns that higher education brings, costs and responsibilities for its provision should be shared between those who directly benefit, and society at large.

34. Although admission rates to UK HEIs increased by 10% to 57% between 2000–2006, the rate was only slightly higher than the OECD average of 56%, and was well below that for Australia (82%). UK growth in enrolments over 1995–2005 has levelled off at 33%, well below the OECD average of 40%.

35. A Universities UK report to be published in early 2009 will explore the financial impact on universities, students and Government of a possible increase in the tuition fee cap. The report assesses the impact on these stakeholders across a limited range of future scenarios for variable fees, funding and student support that might be adopted in England following the Government's independent review of fees in 2009.

36. Investment in high-level Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) is a key component of a world-class educational student experience. A lack of sufficient investment in technologically-based learning could make existing universities less attractive to home students and significantly limit universities' ability to engage with the borderless market as part of their proactive flexible response to demographic change. Maintenance and development of a high-quality estate, particularly teaching infrastructure as well as student accommodation, is essential to the quality of the student experience.

37. HEFCE considers that the HE sector needs a 3–5% surplus to invest in its future, and to continue to offer students a world-class educational experience. New income, most significantly from home and international student fees and recurrent and capital investment in research, has reversed the sustained erosion of university funding in the previous decade, but increasing cost pressures, including pensions and other staff costs, mean that overall the sector is in deficit by around 7.8% of reported expenditure, or £1.4 billion. The sector also has to cope with the rising domestic and international expectations of students as consumers of teaching, research and other university services. The UK invests 1.3% of its GDP in higher education, compared to 2.9% in the US and below the EU's 2% goal. Thus rising international standards in higher education increasingly challenge UK universities.

<sup>336</sup> OECD Briefing Note for the UK, (Education at a Glance 2008), [www.oecd.org/edu/eag/2008](http://www.oecd.org/edu/eag/2008)



38. Despite the current global economic downturn, only by sustaining or increasing public investment in higher education as a key wealth creator can the long-term economic strength and competitiveness of the UK be assured.

January 2009

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## Memorandum 80

### Submission from The Royal Society

#### STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

The Royal Society welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation. Our response is based on the Royal Society's reports entitled *A Degree of Concern?* and *A higher degree of concern* (provided in hard copy as background material) and other relevant policy documents. This submission has been approved by Professor Martin Taylor, Physical Secretary and Vice-President on behalf of the Council of the Society. This response is arranged under the headings of the enquiry's terms of reference, and clear signposts are given to the relevant document which deals with the issues more fully.

The Higher Education system underpins the UK's ability to do well as a nation. In the context of an increasingly competitive and inter-connected global economy, this means that HE must equip students individually with the knowledge, skills and aptitudes to hold their own with the best in the world. At the same time HE must provide the basis for a skilled workforce that meets the UK's needs quantitatively and qualitatively. We emphasise:

- the need to place UK developments in an European and global context, including the contributions that both students and staff from overseas make to UK HE;
- the importance of a high degree of flexibility throughout the education system;
- the importance of looking in detail at individual disciplines, not just broader subject groupings;
- the lack of fluency in basic mathematical skills shown by many entrants to undergraduate courses;
- the significant premium placed on STM graduate skills by employers.

For further details of our position on this issues, please see *A degree of concern?* (2006) and *A higher degree of concern* (2008)

#### ADMISSIONS

*The effectiveness of the process for admission to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), including A-levels, Advanced Diplomas, apprenticeships and university entrance tests*

Research commissioned this year by the Royal Society and the Institute of Physics (Relative difficulty of examinations in different subjects, 2008) showed that some subjects at A-level were more difficult than others and that it was easier to achieve top grades in subjects like Media Studies and Psychology than it was when taking subjects like Maths, Physics and Chemistry. The research from Durham University's Curriculum, Evaluation and Management (CEM) Centre ran contrary to a report released by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) in February this year, the "Inter-Subject Comparability Study", which stated that there are "no substantial or consistent differences in standards between any subjects at any level".

With UCAS points, derived from A level grades earned, being the clearest determinant of where a student will attend university, there is concern that students are influenced towards taking "softer" subjects to obtain the highest points score and hence the best university places. High grades also assist a school's position in annual, exam results-based, league tables.

A system that collects and publishes annual data on the relative difficulty of subjects should be introduced by Ofqual to allow open but informed discussion on the topic. The introduction of an annual report that exposes the relative difficulties of A-levels would encourage a transparent, market-led approach, helping universities to choose between the brightest candidates. Honesty about the level of assessment in different subjects will also encourage the brightest students to tackle the more challenging subjects, in the knowledge that their achievement will be recognised and will result in the greatest rewards.

The worry is that some good students are put off taking Maths and Science A-levels because it is harder to get a good grade in them. Anything that discourages students from taking these subjects, which are so important for the future prosperity of the UK, is to be deplored.

For further details on this issue, please see *Relative difficulty of examinations in different subjects*.

*The UK's ability to meet government targets for Higher Education participation and the relevance of these targets*

We support the Government's efforts to increase the percentage of 18 to 30 year-olds in the UK who have had some experience of higher education to 50% in the UK and believe that there should be no barrier to able students, regardless of socio-economic background, ethnic group or other factors, entering HE. Inevitably, the greater proportion of the UK population now entering HE has meant that a wider range of individuals are studying at UK universities than in the past. Universities therefore have to cope with the challenges involved in teaching a more diverse student body. There have also been large increases in the number of students who pursue postgraduate study.

We believe the UK should also move towards a system of "credits" whereby someone who leaves university after two years isn't regarded as "wastage", but can claim credit for having had two years of college, and feel free to return at a later date. There is concordance, not conflict, between sustaining excellence and widening access.

For further details of our position on this issue, please see *A higher degree of concern*, 2008; and the 2008 *Anniversary Address*.

#### THE BALANCE BETWEEN TEACHING AND RESEARCH

*Levels of funding for, and the balance between, teaching and research in UK HEIs, and the adequacy of financial support for the development of innovative teaching methods and teaching/research integration*

The Society would like to see a diverse HE sector, in which independent universities draw upon their individual strengths to undertake teaching, research, community & business engagement and maintaining international links. These universities should be funded in part by Government, through mechanisms that meet the requirements of accountability but also allow institutions and researchers the freedom and authority to undertake excellent teaching and research of all kinds, on a sustainable basis. The dual support system should be retained, augmented by third stream funding from businesses and charities. Teaching must be fully funded.

More emphasis must be given to a collaborative approach to learning between universities and industry, including employer engagement with curriculum development, matching the emphasis that has already been placed on knowledge transfer and commercialising research.

Scholarship is necessary as a background to any professional activity in the universities and might include undertaking research, reviewing existing knowledge, understanding the needs of students and the potential users of research outcomes and funding colleagues to attend and participate in seminars here and overseas. It is fundamental to the concept of HE that students, particularly those on honours first-degree courses, are both exposed to at least some frontiers within their subjects of study, and enabled to continue to keep abreast of developments into the future. It is also important to recognise that "research" means differing things even within a discipline and certainly across disciplines. It includes the generation of new knowledge, and the novel analysis of, and synthesis from, existing knowledge. There is a wide range of costs associated with these.

For further details of our position on this issue, please see *A higher degree of concern*, 2008.

*The quality of teaching provision and learning facilities in UK and the extent to which they vary between HEIs*

It is important to recognise the diversity of education provision that is covered by the terms "higher education" and "undergraduate education". Within the UK the usual major distinction is between "first degree" and "other undergraduate" courses, but the latter cover a wide range (eg HND, DipHE and some Open University courses). When developing policies to widen participation and to broaden access to existing courses, it is important to consider what component of HE is being looked at.

The Society maintains that the Government's emphasis should be on achieving the highest quality learning environment, which includes not only teaching but also "a culture of intellectual enquiry, sustained by continuing familiarity with original research". Teaching standards will also be improved in turn by a better understanding of the needs of the learner and enabling these needs to be fulfilled. This requires a better appreciation of the different skills of research and teaching and the need for initial training to be available to new lecturers. It is also important that the overall work of the department—undergraduate and postgraduate teaching, curriculum development, research, and outreach to the community—is distributed appropriately. Needless to say, the ability to recruit and retain staff of the highest calibre requires salaries that are commensurate and competitive.

For further details of our position on this issue, please see our *response to the White Paper on the future of higher education*, 2004.

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*The suitability of methods of assessing excellence in teaching and research and the impact of research assessment on these activities*

The Society responded to HEFCE's consultation on research assessment earlier in 2008. In our response we strongly endorsed the current dual support system of financing research in UK higher education, and stated our belief that this should continue post-2008. The Society believes that dual support is an effective mechanism to sustain excellent research.

“The future success and sustainability of the research base involves a number of broader research-related activities such as public engagement, innovation and engagement with user communities, and contributions to policy. The Society believes that an overall research funding system, that includes the Research Excellence Framework (REF), must properly recognise these activities. We expressed concern that the consultation was not offering an integrated perspective that considered how the REF will link with a consideration of these other aspects. There will be a need for peer review regarding the recognition and rewarding of these activities. Our response stated that we believe that existing and proposed metrics should be used as indicators only, and that to fully assess the quality of research peer judgement is a necessary part of assessment for all science subjects.”

For further details of our position on this issue, please see the *Society's response to HEFCE consultation on research assessment, 2008*.

#### STUDENT SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

*The adequacy of UK higher education (HE) funding and student support packages, and implications for current and future levels of student debt*

The funding available to students, in the shape of grants, loans or bursaries, can be used to influence student choice, and therefore encourage (or discourage) the study of particular courses or subject areas. The Government is able to encourage more students to study a subject where there is an undersupply of graduates, or encourage particular career paths through providing greater financial assistance to students who choose these options rather than other paths of study. This is already happening for teacher training courses.

UK-domiciled undergraduate students now pay a contribution towards their tuition fees (although the situation varies between the component parts of the UK). The result of this, alongside the shift from student grants to student loans, is that many UK students graduate with sizeable debts. There are many implications arising from this changing financial situation including how students view themselves, how well they achieve, the courses they choose to take and the career pathways open to them.

We also believe that the appropriate advice, preparation and support should be available to students at all educational stages, allowing individuals to make choices about subjects and study options based on a full understanding of their implications in the medium and long term.

For further details of our position on this issue, please see our *response to the White Paper on the future of higher education, 2004*.

*December 2008*

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## Memorandum 81

### Submission from the University of Oxford

#### *Inquiry into Students and Universities*

#### INTRODUCTION

1. The University of Oxford is pleased to make a submission to the Select Committee's *Inquiry into Students and Universities*. It would wish to support the input made by the Russell Group of Universities (of which it is a founding member) on the importance of sustaining and investing in a group of research-intensive and globally competitive universities within the UK. The few British universities that compare well against the best international institutions attract significant levels of research funding, and the most talented home and international students.

2. Although the current Government has done much to rectify deficits in publicly-funded research contracts and has increased capital funding, UK universities continue to be severely under-funded in terms of total national funding available for research, and in the block grant for teaching activities.

3. This memorandum to the Select Committee is necessarily brief, and does not seek to address all of the questions posed by the Select Committee. Further information can be provided to the committee on areas of particular interest.

#### SUMMARY

4. Key points within this submission:

- The University of Oxford supports the aims of the Government's widening participation programme and the collegiate University is involved in a large number—over 1,000 per year—of widening participation and outreach activities. The Oxford Opportunity Bursary Scheme is the most uniformly generous in the UK, providing more than £13,000 over the course of a four-year degree for students from lower income households.
- The method of undergraduate teaching at Oxford, which makes particularly strong use of tutorials, provides students with intensive individual attention and feedback. Its major benefits include the development of powers of critical analysis and argumentation. The high level of engagement of senior research-active academics both in undergraduate tutorial teaching and in the teaching and supervision of graduates is a key feature.
- Whilst there has been considerable government investment in science and innovation in recent years, overall levels of funding for the sector are still inadequate, particularly for Oxford's methods of tutorial teaching. Student engagement, retention and the overall student experience are closely linked to the quality of teaching and learning experience, which must be well funded.
- No clear case has been made for changing the current system of degree classification, and no alternative has been proposed that does not create more problems than it solves.

#### ADMISSIONS PROCESSES

5. The University is engaged fully in the development and assessment of new qualifications. Oxford academics have been advising the Department for Children, Schools and Families on the development of the Phase 4 diplomas in Humanities, Science and Modern Languages. The Department of Engineering Science will now accept the Advanced Diploma in Engineering (Level 3) for entry, provided candidates have also obtained an A Level in Physics, and the new Level 3 Certificate in Mathematics for Engineering.

6. Oxford seeks to interview as many as possible of its applicants for undergraduate places. It currently receives around 15,000 applications each year, for approximately 3,200 undergraduate places. It tries to ensure interviews for a minimum of three applicants for every available place for subjects that are over-subscribed. This allows those who are selected for interview to have multiple interviews, each with a minimum of two trained staff from the subject discipline conducting each interview. All those selected for interview have at least two interviews, with most science disciplines offering three interviews, and Medicine offering four interviews, for each candidate. In total the collegiate University conducts more than 24,000 interviews for around 10,000 applicants over the two-week interview period in December.

7. Undergraduate interviews are carried out within Oxford's colleges. The collegiate University continues to review and assess its admissions procedures and practices, against the background of internal, national, and international policy developments. Oxford has recently adopted a Common Framework for Undergraduate Admissions across the collegiate University; incorporated applicant contextual data into the selection process; ended the separate Oxford application form and application fee; developed a policy on providing feedback to applicants, and provided an on-line interview training course for staff conducting admissions interviews. The collegiate University is clear that this method of assessing candidates is the optimal way (together with its comprehensive range of widening participation activities, and the provisions of its bursary scheme) of identifying potential and recruiting the most able students, regardless of their educational or social background.

8. Entrance tests are used to assess around 80% of the current applicant pool to Oxford. They are used either for subjects that have high levels of demand (such as History, Law, English, Mathematics, Physics), or where there are elements of the subject that mean that existing school or college qualifications do not provide a full picture of aptitude for the degree (Psychology, Classics, Modern Languages), or where both of these issues apply (in subjects such as Politics, Philosophy and Economics (PPE), Medicine, Economics and Management). The tests are an important element of the admissions process because they help the University to differentiate between applicants who, on the basis of UCAS application alone, all have strong, if not outstanding, credentials. At present, the tests are mainly used to short-list students for interview, and always in conjunction with other applicant evidence. All tests are approved and monitored by the University Admissions Executive and Education Committee, and are subject to an annual validation report. Applicants are supported with a range of information and other material, including past papers, that are available free on the University website.

9. The University attaches value to structured interviews by trained multiple interviewers, the aim of which is to identify appropriate candidates for an academically intensive tutorial education system. We feel it would be contrary to our commitment to widen participation if we were to depend entirely on examination grades. We believe this would tend to favour those students from schools and colleges where there was substantial additional support available, particularly those in the independent sector. Interviews, like tests, are one of several tools at the interviewers' disposal to assess potential.

#### WIDENING PARTICIPATION INITIATIVES

10. The University supports strongly the Government's aim to widen participation in higher education. It is engaged in a wide range of outreach activities. Some, such as the regional conferences held for teachers, are designed to attract applications specifically to Oxford. Oxford collaborates with Cambridge University on regional student conferences, undertakes subject-specific initiatives such as Classics outreach, and organize residential summer schools. Other activities such as AimHigher projects in Milton Keynes, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire, and the Looked After Children initiative in Oxfordshire, are designed to raise regional awareness of, and aspiration to participate in, higher education. There is no expectation that these will result in increased applications to Oxford specifically.

11. The University's use of contextual data within the admissions process takes into account applicants' educational background at age 16 and 18, social and economic deprivation indices based upon the applicant's residential postcode, any time spent in care, and participation in Compact or other higher education preparation schemes designed to encourage sustained contact with higher education. Oxford is working with other universities to include in our admissions process participants in their access programmes.

12. In the course of the last academic year, representatives from Oxford conducted more than 1,000 activities designed to engage with potential applicants and their teachers, advisers, parents and guardians. These activities are with children in primary, secondary and tertiary education sectors. In doing this, the University has embraced new technology: developing podcasts, blogs, web and video content to provide free information, advice and guidance on all elements of the admissions process.

13. On the introduction in 2006 of higher variable tuition fees for home undergraduates, the University revised its bursary provision and launched the Oxford Opportunity Bursary Scheme. These are the most uniformly generous bursaries available within the UK, worth up to £13,450 over the duration of a four year degree. They are structured to ensure that students from lower income households should have little or no need to take up maintenance loans. Students qualifying for Government grants (ie those whose family incomes are lower than £25,000 per annum) are qualified for a maximum bursary of £3,150 per year, together with a start-up payment in the first year of up to £850. In conjunction with the Government grant, this should cover all reasonable costs of living in college-provided accommodation in Oxford. Partial bursaries are made available to students from within other family income brackets. Other financial provision such as scholarships, study and travel grants, and hardship funding is made widely available by colleges. The collegiate University is determined that financial considerations should not be a deterrent in a candidate's decision to apply to Oxford. The University commits around 25% of its additional fee income from tuition fees to the funding of bursaries and outreach activity.

The balance between teaching and research

14. The University is internationally renowned for the quality and diversity of its research. Total research income in 2007–08, including the HEFCE block grant for research, totalled almost £400 million. Of this sum, funding won in open competition through externally sponsored grants and contracts amounted to £285 million, up by 15% on the previous year.

15. Oxford is also a world-leader in commercialising the results of its research. Through its wholly owned technology transfer company, Isis Innovation Ltd, it has spun out 62 companies since 1997, files on average one patent application each week, and manages over 400 patent application families and 200 licence agreements. In 2008 Isis received 202 invention disclosures, entered into 74 new deals to license technologies to business and managed a total of 978 projects. The exploitation of Oxford intellectual property for national benefit also involves other organisations and institutions, under the terms of research agreements or specific licenses. These include universities, the UK Research Councils, Cancer Research UK and the Wellcome Trust.

16. Whilst there has been substantial government investment in science and innovation in recent years, the economic downturn is a matter of concern, as the Government's own fiscal settlements are likely to become tighter. Research Council budgets will undoubtedly face closer scrutiny, and the number of projects they can support will be affected by the Full Economic Costing (FEC) model and higher costs in the HEI sector. In addition, Charities' funding for research may be seriously affected by the fall in investment income. The Association of Medical Research Charities (AMRC) in the UK is responsible for approximately one-third of all public expenditure on medical and health research. At Oxford, support from UK based charities is the single largest source of direct research funding. The Government's Charity Research Support Fund (CSRF) is an important supplementary component of the UK research funding system. There are signs that business expenditure on R&D will be affected by the state of the economy.

17. It is vital that government continues to invest significantly in research, research infrastructure and research training. The Government's dual funding model has been, and continues to be, a core component of the success of UK research. The continued educational development of staff and postgraduate students and researchers will require continued financial commitment from Government.

18. The *Sunday Times* University Guide (September 2008) remarked that "Oxford offers an outstanding education... no other university can boast the sheer breadth of excellence evident at our two oldest universities [Oxford and Cambridge]." Its article on Oxford commented "Aside from the world-class teaching and research and the tutorial system that often gives students one-on-one attention from some of the world's leading minds, Oxford offers sporting, musical, cultural and social opportunities that are equally all-encompassing".

19. The method of undergraduate teaching at Oxford is world renowned, making particularly strong use of tutorials. These involve small numbers of students (usually between one and three) meeting with tutors to discuss work, which has been prepared specifically for that tutorial. Tutorials foster a close relationship between the tutor and the student, and are also particularly beneficial for developing skills of critical analysis. Rather than being occasions to demonstrate that students can repeat what they have read or been taught, tutorials often require students to critique primary and secondary literature and to be able to defend an argument. A great advantage of the tutorial system is the individual attention that students receive, particularly in terms of tutor feedback on work. Students have the opportunity to explore their own ideas directly with experts in particular subjects. While tutorials often form the backbone of teaching in Oxford, they are supported also by lectures, seminars, college classes (often in groups of perhaps 10 students), and (in the sciences) laboratory work.

20. Oxford's student experience demonstrates the considerable benefits to students of learning in a research environment, from active researchers. It deepens students' understanding of the knowledge bases of disciplines and professions, including their research methods and contemporary research challenges and issues; builds students' higher-order intellectual capabilities and enhances their skills for employment and lifelong learning; develops students' capacity to conduct research and enquiry; and enhances students' engagement and develops their capacity for independent learning.

21. The Oxford Learning Institute supports excellence in learning, teaching and research at the University of Oxford by promoting professional, vocational and management development and contributing to policy development. The Institute takes a research-informed approach to all its activities. The Institute is also host to the Centre for Excellence in Preparing for Academic Practice, one of the Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) funded by HEFCE.

22. Tutorial teaching for undergraduates is extremely resource-intensive. The University's 2006-07 TRAC return to HEFCE indicated a deficit of £45 million on publicly-funded teaching (together with a deficit of some £40 million on publicly-funded research). This sum is the equivalent of around £4,000 per undergraduate each year, which is subsidised by endowment and other streams of income. The TRAC methodology does not take into account the costs of Oxford's colleges, a significant proportion of which are met from their own reserves. Resource levels per staff member and per student are significantly below peer institutions in North America.

23. The University has a significant number of postgraduates—approximately 7,500—within the student population, whose education is related directly to the research undertaken in the University. Many work in major interdisciplinary research centres or in science and medical collaborations such as bio-medical engineering, radiation oncology and biology, medicinal chemistry and biomedical physics. A number will progress through externally awarded competitive research fellowships to posts in academic life, in Oxford or in other universities. Some progress through Oxford spinout companies into industrial and commercial institutions, and some move, on completion of a DPhil, straight into industry. A significant number of the overseas students swell the ranks of the most talented researchers working in the UK in universities, and in industry.

24. There are over 4,500 home and overseas students reading for research degrees. The number of studentships is extremely limited in some disciplinary areas. Competition to win a place at Oxford is intense and ensures that the University attracts highly talented and motivated candidates both from the UK and across the world. Many international students stay on after their studies, and add significantly to the

intellectual capital of the UK. In this regard the loss of the flagship national funding for overseas research postgraduates, Overseas Research Students Award Scheme (ORSAS), which served as a major recruiting tool for academic talent, is a significant problem.

#### DEGREE CLASSIFICATION

25. The UK higher education system is diverse, and government policy and the market encourage such diversity. This means that individual programmes, teaching methods, curricula, and assessment methods may vary significantly both among and within institutions. Nevertheless, institutions invest considerable time and resources in the examination process, and the external examiner system in particular. These efforts are designed to ensure the fairness and validity of assessments and the broad comparability of assessment norms among disciplines and institutions.

26. The current system provides a simple overall summary statistic that records a student's overall attainment. Degree classification allows the application of academic judgment, for example in dealing with mitigating circumstances affecting student performance, in arriving at the summary statistic. It may be that in time, stakeholders will learn to use and interpret efficiently the more fine-grained information contained in the transcript (or the proposed Higher Education Achievement Record), so that the value of the summary statistic will decline, and eventually become obsolete. This will be a long way in the future, and in the meantime it would be a mistake to pull down an edifice that is widely respected and generally understood. Further, in the absence of the traditional degree classification, the demand for a summary statistic will inevitably and quickly be met by the use of Grade Point Averages and class rankings as in the USA. The current debate has offered no substantive argument for preferring these forms of summary statistics over the current system.

#### STUDENT SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

27. As noted elsewhere, the tutorial system employed by the University of Oxford is immensely resource-intensive, requiring large amounts of subsidy from other funding streams and sources. However, the collegiate and tutorial systems not only challenge students intellectually, they also nurture them in both a pedagogical and social environment. Oxford has a retention rate of over 98% of its undergraduate student body, testimony to the hard work and dedication of its academic, administrative and support staff, to the stimulating educational environment and culture of the University, and to the effectiveness of its welfare and financial provision.

28. To make sustained improvements to student engagement, retention and the general student experience, and to secure a "world class" educational experience, we must maintain and build on the reputation of UK higher education institutions for teaching and learning characterised by challenging interactions between students and lecturers who are themselves actively engaged in "world class" research. To be effective this teaching is necessarily resource intensive and it is important that the unit of resource for such teaching is maintained and improved. Given the current context for HEFCE funding, it is uncertain that the unit of teaching resource for students can be maintained, let alone increased. The forthcoming fees review is therefore welcome.

*December 2008*

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### Memorandum 82

**Further submission from Bernard Longden<sup>337</sup> and Mantz Yorke<sup>338</sup>**

#### RESEARCH DATA SUBMISSION

*Full-time first year undergraduate university provision: the gap between expectation and experience*

#### ABSTRACT

- *Full-time student experience in the UK has been under researched without a robust potential for trend analysis.*
- The survey covers a diverse range of universities in the UK—data collection occurring in 2005–6.
- The analysis focuses on the gap between student experience and expectation of first year university life.

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<sup>337</sup> Bernard Longden—professor of higher education policy at Liverpool Hope University.

<sup>338</sup> Mantz Yorke—visiting professor Lancaster University.

INTRODUCTION

1. This submission is grounded on data collected during the academic year 2005–06. The full report has been published and available on the Higher Education Academy website (Yorke and Longden, 2007).

2. In the light of presentations of this data to several academic audiences over the past academic year it was decided to provide the data with a limited commentary to support it to I.U.S. Select Committee.

3. twenty-five institutions, spanning a wide range of institutional types from “Russell Group” universities to institutions specialising in Art and Design, expressed a willingness to participate in the project. Nine broad subject areas were represented, spanning a wide range of disciplines.

4. 7,109 usable questionnaires were generated.

RESEARCH QUESTION

*Is there a gap between the expectation and experience for the first year students?*

5. The data collection provided the opportunity to dichotomise the responses into those students who had considered leaving university, for what ever reason, and those who had not considered the option.

6. Data was collected as part of the Higher Education Academy study on the first year student experience of university. Responses to the questionnaire were subjected to a factor analysis in an attempt to identify latent variables. The data reduction identified five such variables that form the basis of this analysis. The latent variables are labelled

“Coping with academic demands of university life”;

“Supportive teaching”;

“Stimulating learning environment”,

“Feedback on work” and

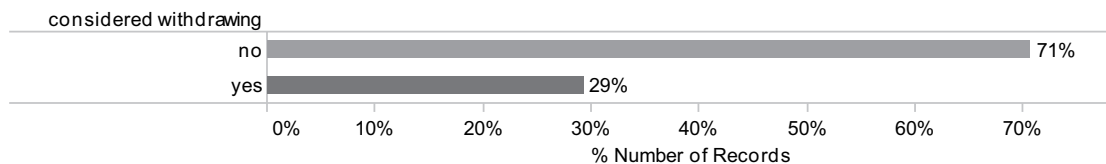
“Understanding the academic demands made by the university”.

7. Each one of these latent variables is assessed against the dichotomised variable for considering withdrawing from university during the first few mouths of integration into university life.

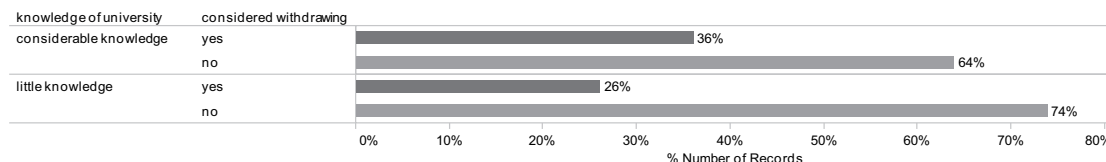
8. Where appropriate statistical confidence measures are provided.

Data

9. The survey sample reports that about thirty percent of the population had considered leaving at some stage. This can be interpreted as a measure of mismatch between the expectation and the experience of first year university life. Elsewhere possible reasons for early departure have been considered.(Yorke *et al.*, 1997; Yorke, 1999; Longden, 2004).



10. It might be expected that selecting the university of choice would require a sound level of understanding of the university selected—its facilities, organisation, structures etc. However there is a considerable gap between those students who had considered leaving and those who had not considered. The analysis indicates that the percentage who had considered withdrawing while having a good level of knowledge of their chosen university were twenty eight percentage points lower than those who had not considered leaving. The difference is significant at  $p < 0.01$ .

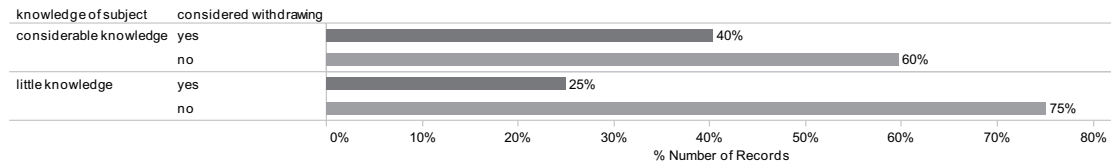




### INDEPENDENT SAMPLES TEST

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Considered withdrawal?	Equal variances assumed	132.507	.000	4.874	6864	.000	.091	.019	.055	.128
	Equal variances not assumed			5.362	830.653	.000	.091	.017	.058	.125

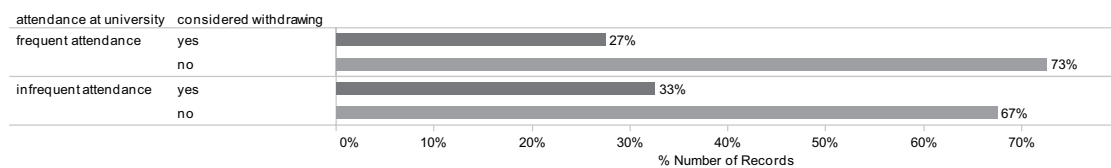
11. Similarly the level of understanding of the subject selected to study at university is twenty percentage points lower for those who had considered leaving university in their first year and who had a considerable knowledge of their subject. The difference is significant at  $p < 0.01$ .



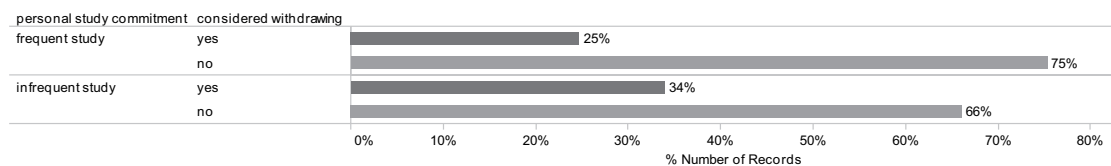
### INDEPENDENT SAMPLES TEST

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Considered withdrawal?	Equal variances assumed	194.191	.000	5.782	6863	.000	.105	.018	.069	.140
	Equal variances not assumed			6.467	919.409	.000	.105	.016	.073	.137

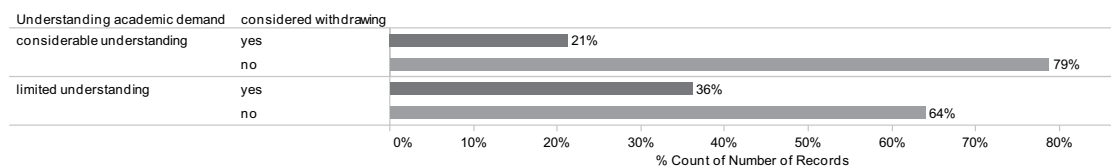
12. Frequency of attending university is a proxy for commitment to and assimilation into university life. Students who had considered leaving were forty six percentage points lower for high level of attendance at the university compared to those students who had not considered leaving.



13. Another proxy for commitment in the study was the level of private or personal study undertaken each week. Students defined as undertaking a high frequency of study when dichotomised on the question relating to considering withdrawing showed a considerable gap (fifty percentage points) ie student fully engaged and committed to university life were more likely to commit to private study at a higher frequency than those less committed to university life.



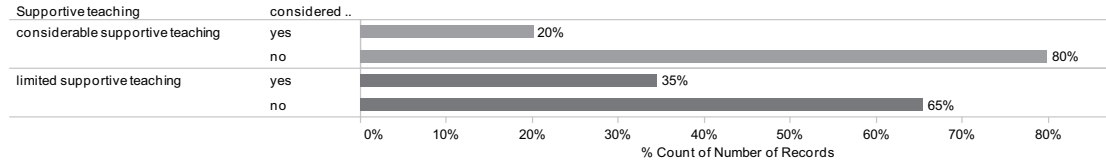
14. Understanding the demands made by the university indicates that a gap exists between the two groups. Those declaring a considerable understanding and who had not considered withdrawing are fifty eight percentage points difference compared to those who had considered withdrawing. The difference is significant at  $p < 0.01$ .



INDEPENDENT SAMPLES TEST

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Considered withdrawal?	Equal variances assumed	115.009	.000	11.904	6254	.000	.264	.0228	.221	.308
	Equal variances not assumed			10.734	487.612	.000	.264	.025	.216	.313

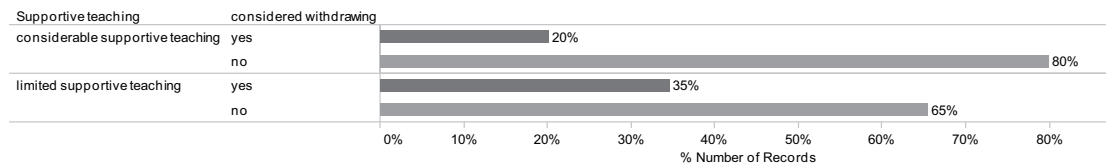
15. Awareness of the support teaching systems offered by the university indicates that students fully engaged with the university are sixty percentage points different when compared to those students who had considered leaving with a probability value of  $p < 0.01$ .



INDEPENDENT SAMPLES TEST

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Considered withdrawal?	Equal variances assumed	130.554	.000	16.261	6221	.000	.316	.019	.278	.354
	Equal variances not assumed			14.813	679.722	.000	.316	.021	.274	.357

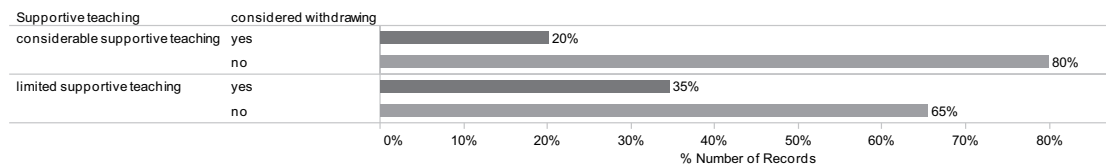
16. Perception of the level of feedback on assessment work provided by the university again indicates that those students fully engaged with the university and persistent have a higher positive perception about the nature and quality of the feedback they received from the university committed compared to those student who had considered leaving. The difference is significant at  $p < 0.01$ .



INDEPENDENT SAMPLES TEST

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Considered withdrawal?	Equal variances assumed	265.685	.000	10.436	5834	.000	.149	.014	.121	.176
	Equal variances not assumed			9.812	1933.788	.000	.149	.015	.119	.178

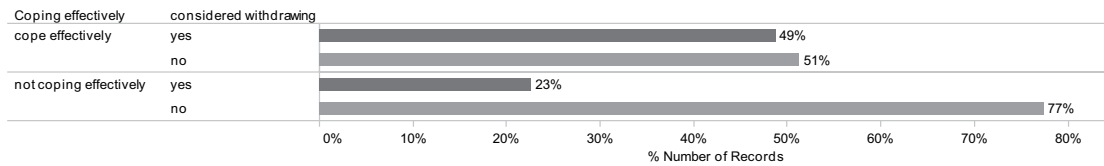
17. The gap between those who had considered withdrawing and those who had not considered withdrawing suggest that when there is recognition of the quantity and quality of supportive teaching provided by the university evident then those who had not considered withdrawing are sixty percentage points better. The difference between the two values is significant at  $p < 0.01$ .



INDEPENDENT SAMPLES TEST

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Considered withdrawal?	Equal variances assumed	130.554	.000	16.261	6221	.000	.316	.019	.278	.354
	Equal variances not assumed			14.813	679.722	.000	.316	.021	.274	.357

18. The latent variable termed “Coping” provides two interesting measures when dichotomised for considering withdrawing. In both cases the percentage is stronger for those who had not considered withdrawing, however those who were coping less effectively suggest a greater gap between those who had considered withdrawing and those who had not. This difference is significant at  $p < 0.01$ .



INDEPENDENT SAMPLES TEST

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Considered withdrawal?	Equal variances assumed	370.017	.000	18.298	6011	.000	.271	.015	.242	.300
	Equal variances not assumed			16.714	1518.007	.000	.271	.016	.239	.302

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND COMMENTS ON THE ANALYSIS PRESENTED

19. The first year student experience is critical to the process of social and academic integration into the university community. In each of the latent variables those students who had not considered withdrawing from the university community were always percentage points higher than those who had considered leaving early. In several cases the difference was substantial and significant.

20. Consideration about the level of commitment to university life is complex and multifaceted. Research on student retention and success discussed by Yorke and Longden (2004) has identified that universities themselves are able to make a difference for some students. If the student experience is considered by the university as important and the students’ experience appreciated then a more effective higher education outcome is possible.

21. In this sample, with all the caveats about representativeness and sample size, it is a possible surprise that one in three first year undergraduate students had considered withdrawing from their chosen university and their chosen degree subject.

22. Considering the implications of the differences between the dichotomised groups based on consideration to withdraw, it is possible to track the possible barriers that force the dichotomy.

23. The first is marketing.

24. It would appear from the analysis of the data that despite the considerable resource devoted to marketing and providing information by each university there would appear to be a disjunction for the two groups. Marketing and recruitment are required to steer a fine line between the polemics of hype, spin, hyperbole and data, information, fact. Clearly there is a problem about the nature of information provided, access to that information, understanding the information and interpretation of the information as it relates to the individual student. If information is basic is there a risk that it will be rejected?

25. The second issue relates to engagement to academic study.

26. The data relating to time spent in the university and the time spent in private personal study suggest differences that are significant. While these measures can be interpreted as proxy measures there is risk of taking the wrong weighting for their importance. It is worthy of note that for both measures, students who commit to attend with a high frequency—five day per week ( background information not provided in this

report) and those who engage in a high level of private study, do not consider withdrawing from university. This can be interpreted as these students are more likely to integrate and assimilate into the university community faster and presumably be potentially more settled and with increased potential for success.

27. For each of the latent variables identified in the factor analysis the gap between the two groups is consistent and significant. Perceptions about nature and value of feedback, the effort to provide an effective learning environment, to understand the demands that study at first degree level demands all indicate that students that integrate and experience a positive attitude to university life have positive stronger views about the level of support provided by their university.

28. These analyses provide an opportunity to tease out the qualities that contribute to success while on the obverse side allowing an insight into those aspects of the first year experience that may act as a barrier to that success. Universities might wish to consider the student responses in planning the first year student experience.

*January 2009*

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### Memorandum 83

#### Submission from UCAS<sup>339</sup>

##### 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 As the UK's full-time undergraduate admissions service, UCAS welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the inquiry. It will focus on predominantly on the admissions area where it considers itself to have the appropriate evidence and expertise to bring to the Select Committee.

1.2 It should be noted that whilst UCAS has views on the balance between teaching and research, degree classification, and student support and engagement, it feels that other stakeholders will be better placed to comment on these areas.

##### 2. SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 UCAS recommends the development of a shared admissions process for part-time under-graduate courses which should draw on the benefits of the existing, successful model for full-time courses whilst being suitably modified to meet the needs of part-time learners.

2.2 UCAS recommends the development of a strategy for delivering improved IAG through a centralised first point of call portal, as recommended by the National Student Forum.

2.3 UCAS recommends that further research is required into the particular issue of Non-Placed Applicants (NPAs) to identify how they might be better targeted and brought back into the system.

2.4 UCAS recommends an ongoing commitment from Government for the work currently underway to find a solution to the coding of applicants classified as having "Unknown" socio-economic status thereby enabling better data collection and further insight into issues of fair access.

2.5 UCAS would welcome Government support in promoting wider take-up of the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programme for admissions staff and the development of a CPD programme for schools, colleges and other centres from which students apply to enter Higher Education (HE) to promote best practice in admissions.

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<sup>339</sup> Universities and Colleges Admissions Service.

2.6 Extensive work is required to ensure that the full range of vocational qualifications can be brought into the UCAS tariff system. Support is required in the form of funding for this project and UCAS would welcome the support of the Committee in seeking this.

2.7 UCAS recommends further research into the impact of admissions tests on applicants from under-represented groups and to provide evidence that they are a necessary part of a holistic admissions process.

### 3. UCAS

3.1 UCAS was formed in 1993 by the merger of UCCA (Universities Central Council on Admissions), PCAS (Polytechnics Central Admissions Service) and SCUE (Standing Conference on University Entrance).

3.2 UCAS is the world's largest shared admissions service for higher education, processing well over half a million applications from around the world. Around 99% of these applications are made online via the "Apply" service. In addition to applications to full-time undergraduate courses, applications for postgraduate teacher training and to the music conservatoires are processed, respectively, via the GTTR (Graduate Teacher Training Registry) and CUKAS (Conservatoires UK Admissions Service). A new system UKPASS (UK Postgraduate Application and Statistical Service), launched in 2007, offers an application service for postgraduate courses in the UK.

3.3 As an independent organisation and a charity, UCAS is owned by its institutional members, to which it is accountable, and is governed by its Board of Directors. UCAS is responsive to the needs of members, helping them to conduct admissions efficiently and effectively, on an equal and fair basis, whilst always respecting the autonomy that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) hold in the matter of choosing their students.

3.4 Beyond these formal accountabilities, UCAS is also responsive to its student customers, for whom it provides not only admissions services, but also key information to inform choices about higher education. Some of these functions are dispensed by UCAS Media, a social enterprise that acts as the "trading arm" of UCAS. It adds value to student choices through publications, websites, conferences and education conventions designed to help students navigate their way through higher education more easily.

3.5 The UCAS website (ucas.com) is now one of the most popular in the UK and the most heavily used education site. 48% of university and college admissions staff use the site on a daily basis, and a further 32% use it once or twice a week. Applicants use it to select the right course at the right HEI and to find information on student finance, fees and bursaries, as well as to make and track their applications and reply to their offers. The UCAS website received 1,550,641 unique visitors during November 2008 alone. The recently launched ucas.tv received 330,000 hits within its first week.

3.6 Additional, more general information relevant to life at university is provided through the newly-launched interactive "yougofurther" website, an online community for applicants and students in HE launched by UCAS Media. The one year old site boasts in excess of 3,000 forums with over 204,000 registered users attracting at its peak 700,000 page impressions per day (average 500,000 page impressions per day). A wide range of publications is also produced, aimed at helping students make informed choices about higher education, and guiding them and their parents through the application process.

3.7 In addition to its core business, UCAS has evolved to carry out research, consultancy and advisory work for schools, colleges, HEIs, careers services, professional bodies and employers. UCAS organises conferences for HE admissions practitioners, higher education fairs and conventions across the UK, as well as participating in the British Council Education UK overseas tours designed to assist UK institutions and the British Council in recruiting students from abroad. It also offers continuing professional development tailored to meet the needs of individual institutions or subject areas. This ensures a long-term commitment to improving admissions processes across the education sector.

## 4. EFFECTIVENESS OF THE ADMISSIONS PROCESS

### *UCAS Admissions Process*

4.1 UCAS processes half a million applications a year to around 320 member institutions, and has wide-ranging data on the effectiveness of the process for admission to HEIs.

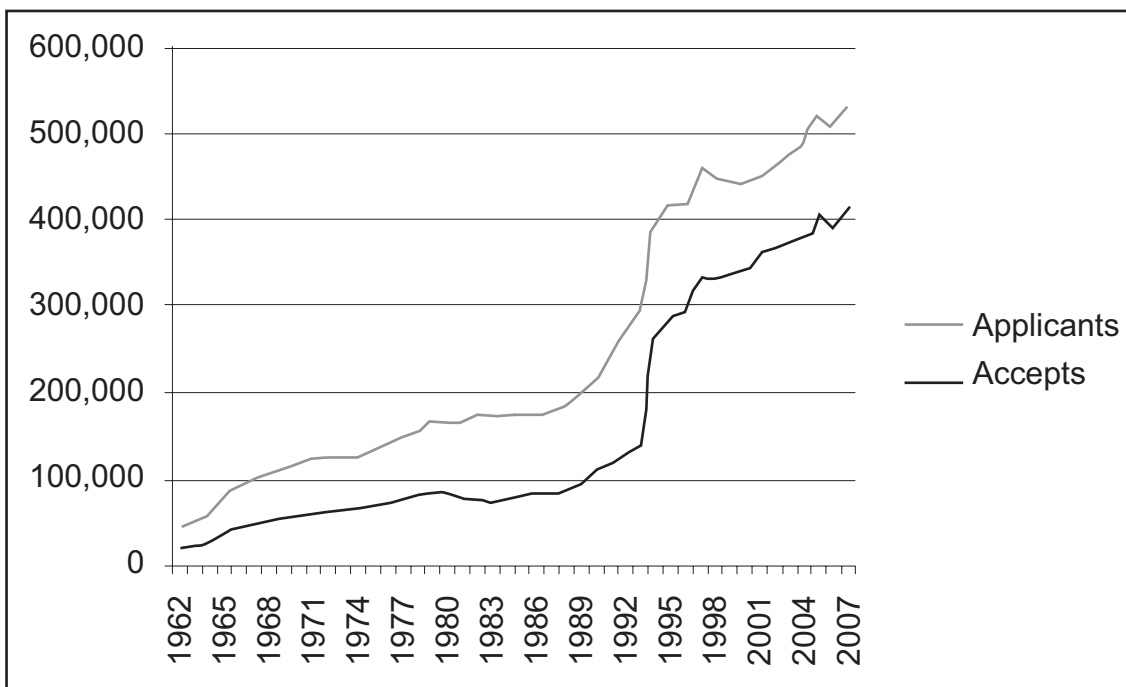
4.2 UCAS data shows that for a significant majority of applicants the progression from the 14–19 phase of education to higher education is smooth.

4.3 The move from a paper-based application system to an entirely electronic process has greatly improved the *speed* with which applications are processed. Overall, during peak periods, the average time for processing an application has fallen from 2-3 weeks to 24 hours.

4.4 The processing system is also *highly efficient* with the majority of places in HEIs confirmed within a day of the publication of GCE A level results. For example, in 2008, 349,449 applicants (63%) had their places confirmed on 15 August 2008, out of a total of 554,499.

4.5 By 8 October 2008 this percentage had risen to 81% (451,871 applicants). Only 2,804 (0.5%) had an outcome pending, and 13,973 (2.5%) had withdrawn from the scheme. The proportions are similar over the last three cycles, although the numbers of applicants have increased year on year.

**Figure 1: Application and Acceptance figures 1962–2007**



(Source: UCAS).

The latest results from market research into applicant satisfaction with the UCAS service confirm that 93.8% of respondents felt that they had received an *excellent or good service*. In respect of those who advise applicants, 91.3% felt that the service was excellent or good. The majority of HE staff felt satisfied with the service received from UCAS with 87.9% indicating that the service was excellent or good.

#### *Non-Placed Applicants*

4.6 There is a group of approximately 100,000 applicants who are eligible for clearing, yet do not hold offers, have not met the conditions of their offer, or their status is unknown at the end of the application cycle. Research carried out by UCAS into these non-placed applicants (NPAs) found that women, black and minority ethnic groups and older applicants are over-represented in this group. The research has confirmed that about one third of such students subsequently re-apply, but others may be lost to the system.

4.7 UCAS is keen to ensure that further study is undertaken to deliver a better understanding of NPAs and thereby inform a strategic approach to remedial outreach activity.

4.8 UCAS is currently collaborating with HEFCE, DIUS and HESA to explore ways in which application coding can be used to more clearly identify socio-economic status amongst NPAs which we hope will go some way to providing further insight into the nature of this problem.

4.9 UCAS is also providing universities with data tools to assess current cycle decisions in its Application Tracker and Data Tracker services.

#### *Part-Time Courses*

4.10 Achieving the Leitch targets of 40% of all adults in England gaining a Level 4 qualification by 2020, will depend on improving the take-up of part-time as well as full-time learning.

4.11 Part-time learning is an important route to HE qualifications for those who wish to combine work with learning. In particular, we believe that progression from vocational learning eg: Apprenticeships to HE is more likely to focus on part-time routes.

4.12 At present, there is no shared system for admissions or single source of reliable information for part-time undergraduate courses.

4.13 Providers of undergraduate part-time courses advertise on their websites and within their locality necessitating extensive research by potential learners. Research conducted by UCAS suggests that potential learners and their advisers find it difficult to locate the information they need.

4.14 Having conducted their research, potential learners will often limit their choice to one institution in order to avoid the need to make a series of individual applications.

4.15 The speed and efficiency with which these applications are then processed is hugely variable depending on the institutions concerned.

4.16 UCAS believes that the lack of a shared admissions system or source of information is potentially constricting learner choice; making it difficult to collate accurate data about part-time learning and undermining the likelihood of reaching the Leitch targets.

4.17 In Greater London, UCAS has gained support from the London-based Lifelong Learning Networks and HEFCE to investigate the feasibility of providing improved information, advice and guidance for those who wish to study part-time.

#### *Well-Informed Choices*

4.18 UCAS believes that an “effective” HE admissions system is one that not only enables people to be admitted to HE, but actually empowers them to make well-informed choices about the appropriate pathway, course and institution. This rationale has underpinned the development of the aforementioned “yougofurther” website.

4.19 Evidence suggests that the extent and level of Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) provided to students is highly variable depending on the type of learning centre from which an applicant is applying, the type of qualification being studied or sought, age group and ethnic background.

4.20 In addition, as noted above, there is no single source of reliable information about part-time courses accessible to all potential learners and their advisers.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

4.21 UCAS recommends the development of a shared admissions process for part-time under-graduate courses which should draw on the benefits of the existing, successful model for full-time courses whilst being suitably modified to meet the needs of part-time learners.

4.22 UCAS recommends the development of a strategy for delivering improved IAG through a centralised first point of call portal, as recommended by the National Student Forum.

4.23 UCAS recommends that further research is required into the particular issue of NPAs to identify how they might be better targeted and brought back into the system

#### 5. *Fair Access and Widening Participation*

5.1 UCAS believes in fair and equitable admissions for all and considers that it has a pivotal role in helping institutions to achieve this.

5.2 UCAS was closely involved with the development of the Schwartz Report in 2004, which recommended that students should be selected based on their achievement and potential, and that information should be provided in a transparent and consistent manner.

5.3 However, we note that in spite of Government initiatives to support fair access and widen participation, percentages progressing into HE from lower socio-economic groups have increased relatively little. Figure 2 shows the position from years of entry 2003 to 2007.

**Figure 2**  
APPLICANTS CLASSIFIED BY SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

<i>Socio-economic status</i>	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Higher managerial and professional occupations	17.0%	17.0%	15.7%	15.6%	15.6%
Lower managerial and professional occupations	24.5%	24.9%	23.8%	22.6%	22.6%
Intermediate occupations	12.2%	12.2%	11.8%	10.8%	10.7%
Small employers and own account workers	6.0%	6.0%	5.7%	5.7%	5.7%
Lower supervisory and technical occupations	4.0%	3.9%	3.7%	3.5%	3.5%
Semi-routine occupations	10.9%	11.1%	11.4%	10.6%	11.0%
Routine occupations	4.7%	4.7%	4.6%	4.5%	4.6%
Not classified/unknown	20.7%	20.4%	23.4%	26.8%	26.4%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: UCAS

5.4 UCAS is currently working with HEFCE, DIUS and HESA to try to code more effectively the high proportion of applicants who are classified as “Unknown” in terms of socio-economic status.

*Best Practice in Admissions*

5.5 UCAS has developed a CPD programme for admissions and recruitment staff. The programme consists of six key areas for those working in the field and is supported by professional development sessions in 20 areas. The development sessions range from “best practice when interviewing” to “qualification dates” to “verification and fraud”. With funding from the UK funding councils, UCAS has established the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) programme. SPA identifies, confirms and informs good practice in admissions.

5.6 UCAS also offers a schools consultancy service that offers bespoke training on a range of subjects ranging from “developments in 14–19 curriculum” to “mature entry to HE” to “writing successful reference and personal statements” and “providing advice to applicants”. During 2008 UCAS has delivered 230 individual school visits.

*Information for Potential Learners*

5.7 UCAS has played an important role in helping young learners find the courses and institutions where they would like to study. One method employed is requesting that HEIs provide Entry Profiles for all courses. UCAS has a target of achieving 100% completed Entry Profiles by September 2009.

5.8 This is particularly important for qualifications other than A levels. Concerns over the ability of HE Admissions Officers to digest and comprehend the range of Level 3 qualifications are borne out by analysis demonstrating that whilst full information in respect of entry requirements is provided for A levels, less information is provided for other qualifications. 93% of HEIs gave information about entry requirements for applicants with A levels, and 44% and 55% for BTEC National Certificates and National Diplomas respectively, and finally 21% and 24% for OCR National Diplomas and National Extended Diplomas respectively.

*Apprenticeships—Progression to HE*

5.9 UCAS has recently presented evidence to the Skills Commission Inquiry into Apprenticeships stating that progression from Advanced Apprenticeships to HE is minimal. In 2008, there were only 228 applicants through UCAS for full-time, undergraduate places in HEI institutions.

5.10 Part of the reason for low rates of progression from Apprenticeships to HE, may be a lack of understanding amongst admissions staff of the value of vocational qualifications and a subsequent reluctance to make offers.

5.11 This is reinforced by UCAS’ experience and is unfortunately underpinned by the incompatibility at present between Apprenticeship frameworks and the UCAS Tariff.

5.12 UCAS introduced its Tariff to help bring about a fairer and more transparent way of comparing applicants with different qualifications. However, whilst the Tariff is influential in raising the awareness within HE of the potential for non-traditional candidates to progress into HE study, it covers only a small proportion of the total number of vocational qualifications.

5.13 This is due primarily to the multiple permutations of qualifications within Apprenticeship frameworks. UCAS has considered incorporating Apprenticeship Frameworks into the UCAS Tariff but at present there is no comprehensive map of the full range of Apprenticeship frameworks (180 are on offer across 80 sectors) and the underpinning qualifications associated with each. Given the range and complexity of Apprenticeships, a mapping exercise would be costly and time-consuming and, as yet, no organisation has been in a position to dedicate the necessary resource.

5.14 UCAS has however undertaken some initial activity including the establishment of a protocol for IT and Engineering frameworks to determine UCAS points. This has not yet been uploaded onto [ucas.com](http://ucas.com) or applied to other Apprenticeships beyond IT and Engineering.

*Admissions Test*

5.15 UCAS and SPA are currently monitoring the use of admissions tests as an additional filter by which to select applicants. These admissions tests vary considerably in scope and type: from aptitude tests and critical thinking assessments to subject specific tests.

5.16 In the 2007 cycle, 46,213 applicants applied to courses with identified admissions tests declared as entry requirements. The largest proportion of those applicants applied to courses requiring the UKCAT (UK Clinical Aptitude Test) (20,543) whilst 6,019 applicants applied to courses requiring the LNAT (National Admissions Test for Law) and 8,696 to courses at institutions with their own admissions tests. A further 23,261 applied to courses that had an unspecified admission test.

5.17 In the 2008 cycle, 52,294 applicants applied to courses with identified admissions tests, 21,939 of them to courses requiring the UKCAT, 7,593 to courses requiring the LNAT and 12,030 to courses at institutions with their own admissions tests. A further 5,741 applied to courses with unspecified admission tests.



5.18 Notwithstanding the increased use of admissions tests, it is important to state that only 16% of institutions require them and that they affect only 0.7% of courses listed in the UCAS scheme. Nonetheless, there may be widening participation issues in relation to use of these tests in terms of cost and accessibility.

5.19 Those institutions which choose to support admissions processes through use of admissions tests need to be confident that these tests provide critical information that is substantively different from that derived from current 14–19 qualifications. There is also a need for HEIs to be transparent about the way in which tests contribute to the decision-making process and to ensure that students from lower socio-economic groups are not deterred from applying to institutions and courses which use admissions tests.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

5.20 UCAS recommends an ongoing commitment from Government for the work currently underway to find a solution to the coding of applicants classified as having “Unknown” socio-economic status thereby enabling better data collection and further insight into issues of fair access.

5.21 UCAS would welcome Government support in promoting wider take-up of the CPD programme for admissions staff and the development of a CPD programme for schools, colleges and other centres from which students apply to HE to promote best practice in admissions.

5.22 Extensive work is required to ensure that the full range of vocational qualifications can be brought into the UCAS tariff system. Support is required in the form of funding for this project and UCAS would welcome the support of the Committee in seeking this.

5.23 UCAS recommends further research into the impact of admissions tests on applicants from under-represented groups and to confirm that they are a necessary part of a holistic admissions process.

January 2009

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### Memorandum 84

#### Submission from Stephen Martin<sup>340</sup>

##### STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

##### *Quality and What is Worth Knowing*

1. Various commentators claim that our universities “don’t know what counts so they count everything”. How surreal this sounds against the crisis of the multi trillion-dollar rescue of the global economy. It is even more surreal when we learn that highly educated traders with degrees from some of our most prestigious universities have facilitated this catastrophe. So do our universities bear some responsibility for this systemic problem? More fundamentally are universities fit for purpose in the twenty first century?

2. The current approach to quality in higher education emphasises the role of universities in serving economic interests, which restricts how quality is defined, understood and measured. Hence value for money, completion rates, graduate employment and graduate earnings feature strongly. Does this mean that a degree becomes equivalent to a share certificate whose value is determined by the issuing university?

3. A recent report by the New Economics Foundation (nef), “University Challenge: towards a well-being approach to quality in higher education” takes this argument even further suggesting that the economic focus has led to a “marketisation of the sector” and links this to the discussion about the introduction of variable tuition fees. This report also quotes from The Guardian (10/08/06):

“This commercialisation of higher education serves a bigger purpose, though. It softens students up for the rigours of globalisation. By creating a market, young people are encouraged to think and behave like rational economic man. They become ‘human capital’, calculating the rate of return on their university investment. A degree becomes a share certificate. Commercialisation conditions students to expect no help from others, or society, and therefore never to provide help in return. Debt and economic conditioning discourages graduates from going into lower-paid caring jobs—and instead into the City, where the real ‘value’ is. It fashions a Britain that competes rather than cares.”

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<sup>340</sup> For the past eight years he has held the visiting chair in Education for Sustainable Development in the Center for Complexity and Change at the Open University. During this period he has been a sustainability change consultant for some of the largest FTSE100 companies such as BP, Barclays, Tesco and Carillion as well as Government Agencies such as the Environment Agency, the Higher Education Academy and the Learning and Skills Council. As a member of Her Majesty’s Inspectorate he held the national responsibility for Environmental Education. He was formerly Director of Learning at Forum for the Future, the leading Sustainability Charity in the UK. He is the co founder and president of Student force for Sustainability and serves on the Council of the Institute for Environmental Sciences one of the UK’s foremost professional bodies in sustainable development.

4. More value should be given to how learning contributes to wider social functions such as active and ethical citizenship and shaping a democratic civilised and more sustainable society. Universities have a significant role in developing “sustainability literate” leaders and hence optimising their contribution to the future of society and the environment and not only the future of the economy. But sustainability in this sense does not feature in our procedures for monitoring and evaluation and quality assurance.

5. The Higher Education funding Council for England (HEFCE) is about to publish the results of its recent consultation on Sustainable Development in Higher Education. DIUS has also recently published its sustainable development action plan for 2008–2009 in which it recognises the central role universities can play in developing our understanding of climate change and other sustainable development issues along with contributing to the development of a sustainability literate citizenry. All of which provide a significant opportunity to embed sustainability into quality assurance procedures. And offer an important opportunity to count things of real value.

January 2009

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## Memorandum 85

### Submission from the Higher Education Funding Council for England

#### INQUIRY INTO STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

##### *Introduction*

1. The Higher Education Funding Council for England was pleased to be invited to submit a memorandum to this broad-ranging inquiry. Because there has been a submission from the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills and also from the Quality Assurance Agency and the Higher Education Academy, both of which we fund to carry out certain tasks on our behalf, we have decided to focus on those elements in the call for evidence on which we have specific things to add. We are happy to provide further comment should the committee wish.

#### SUMMARY

2. We make the following key points:

- Admissions policies are a matter for individual HEIs but we are funding the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions programme in order to support and spread good practice.
- We are shortly to ask HEIs to produce a single assessment of their widening participation policies and practice which will include a high level statement on admissions and include the OFFA access agreement as an annex.
- We have developed 30 Lifelong Learning Networks to enhance progression for learners on vocational programmes.
- Progress towards the government’s participation target is being made. We advise the government on the resources needed in order to continue to make progress.
- Widening participation in higher education is a strategic aim of the funding council and this commitment is deeply embedded in the HE sector.
- We are committed to the best possible targeting of the resources dedicated to widening participation and to supporting research and evaluation to ensure the most effective use of funds.
- We have supported research into the use of compacts. The benefits of compacts to learners are significant.
- In 2008–09, we are providing £4,632 million recurrent funding for teaching (of which £364 million is for widening participation), £1,460 million for research (distributed on the basis of quality assessment), and £120 million for business and community engagement. In addition we are providing £902 million as earmarked capital grants to support teaching and research.
- Results of the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise show that: the UK continues to set a high global watermark, with “world leading” research well distributed throughout the sector, and 87 per cent of research recognised as of international quality.
- HEFCE is responsible for assuring the quality of the provision it funds. All the evidence suggests that the quality and standards of English HE are fundamentally sound.
- We recognise that there have been recent concerns about quality and standards expressed in the media and that the committee has itself been concerned. The funding council has established a special sub-committee to investigate the issue and this will report in the summer of 2009.
- We are funding a study of student engagement in HE, which will report early in 2009, and will then consider what action might be desirable in this area.

- We have funded, with the Paul Hamlyn foundation, a 3 year programme of studies of good practice in student retention.

## BACKGROUND

3. The HEFCE was established by the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 as a non-departmental public body operating with a high degree of autonomy within a policy and funding context set by the Government. The Council's main function is to administer grant provided by the Secretary of State for Education and Skills. We have distinct statutory duties and are thus free from direct political control; we are often referred to as a "buffer body" between higher education institutions and the Government. We provide independent advice to the Secretary of State on the funding needs and development of higher education. Further information about the role, policies and funding allocations of the HEFCE can be found on our web-site at [www.hefce.ac.uk](http://www.hefce.ac.uk) (HEFCE publications 2007/16, 2008/15, 2008/33 and 2008/40).

4. HEFCE employs around 240 staff, mostly based at our head office in Bristol with a small secretariat in London. Our running costs for the 2007–08 financial year totalled £18 million, just 0.23% of our total expenditure of £7,360 million. This compares with figures of between 0.5 and 5% for other public bodies.

## ADMISSIONS

### *Admissions processes*

5. Admissions policy is a matter for individual HE institutions (HEIs) but the HEFCE is concerned to support them in developing and maintaining high standards in their admissions processes. To this end, we have, with the other funding bodies, provided financial support to the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) programme. We have provided £1.86 million for the period from 2006–2011.

6. While we and the government fully recognise the importance of HEIs' autonomy in setting their admissions policies and managing the processes, the government has been concerned to ensure that the processes are fully transparent to potential applicants. As the committee will be aware, we have been asked by the Secretary of State to work with the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) to ask HEIs to bring together a strategic assessment of their widening participation achievements and to link this in a single document to their access agreement submitted to OFFA. This assessment will also ask for a high level statement on admissions policy showing how the institution will ensure transparency, consistency and fairness through its own internal procedures. We will be issuing the call for these documents early in the New Year and they will be submitted to us by the end of June 2009. The access agreement will be attached as an annex to this document.

7. In addition to supporting SPA, we are keen to open up opportunities for learners with vocational qualifications. While recognising the right of institutions to decide which students to admit, we do note that applications and entry to higher education (HE) are significantly lower for students with vocational qualifications and that those with these qualifications tend to enter some institutions much more than others. We have therefore invested £105 million since 2006 in the development of 30 Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs), which now cover the nation, and allocated more than 15000 additional student numbers to them. The overall objective for Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) is to improve the coherence, clarity and certainty of progression opportunities for vocational learners into and through higher education. The networks now involve approximately 120 HE Institutions (HEIs) and 300 Further Education Colleges (FECs) and the latest monitoring reports indicate that there are nearly 1700 progression agreements and that they are expected to benefit more than 32,000 learners per annum in due course. The work of the LLNs is evidence of real commitment by the sector in wishing to ensure that all level 3 qualifications are recognised for entry and that there are clear progression routes into a wide variety of HEIs for learners with vocational qualifications.

8. It was only in March 2008 that we completed national coverage for the networks but an interim evaluation of the programme, published in April (<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/news/hefce/2008/lln.htm>), concludes that LLNs are working effectively with institutions to develop curricula and procedures that should, in due course, make a difference to vocational learning. The role of LLNs is recognised as important to developing relationships with partner institutions that enable them to deliver programmes of activity enhancing the coherence, clarity and certainty of opportunities for vocational learners. The report, while recognising the potential in the work already undertaken, makes it clear that it is too soon to make "substantive and well-evidenced statements". In the interim, it outlines a series of conclusions and recommendations for HEFCE and LLNs which we are implementing.

### *Participation targets*

9. The targets for participation in higher education are set by government and the role of HEFCE is to advise on the student numbers which are needed to achieve them and then to allocate those numbers to meet priorities. The evidence is that the sector is making progress towards the 50% target for initial participation in HE. Though the government has asked us to reduce the rate of growth in additional student numbers (ASNs) for 2009–10, the sector is continuing to grow and should enable progress towards the target to continue to be made. We will continue to advise government on the resources which we believe are needed to continue to make progress towards whatever target it sets.

*Widening participation*

10. Widening participation (WP) in HE has long been one of our key strategic aims and remains an important priority of ours. While we have always recognised that WP is not a task for higher education alone but has to involve collaboration between different sectors of education, we have supported HEIs with funding to support their outreach work in schools, colleges and communities. We welcome the strong and embedded commitment of the sector to supporting this activity.

11. In late 2006 we undertook a review of widening participation activities in the sector and reported to the Minister of State for Higher Education and Lifelong Learning (<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/aimhigh/review.asp>). The review contains two main messages:

- a. There is evidence of real progress in embedding widening participation as part of the core mission of all higher education institutions and this commitment should be carefully reinforced and nurtured;
- b. Widening participation practice and the evidence base (what works and why) can be improved. There are lessons about the way widening participation activity is organised and delivered and how it is targeted. There are also lessons about the pattern of engagement that suggest relatively simple steps that can be taken to improve substantially both effectiveness and the evidence for success.

12. We have taken the second message seriously. We published guidance in May 2007 on targeting WP activity (<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/target/>) and this has informed the plans of Aimhigher partnerships for the period 2008–2011. We have also undertaken a number of initiatives to support better research in WP and evaluation of the impact of widening participation initiatives (see <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/research/>). In particular, we have given specific guidance to Aimhigher partnerships on evaluation and funded the development of an evaluation toolkit to improve the quality of the evidence base for WP activities. Our work in this area is recognised in the 2008 NAO report “Widening participation in higher education” ([http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/0708/widening\\_participation\\_in\\_high.aspx](http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/0708/widening_participation_in_high.aspx)).

13. The committee’s call for evidence refers specifically to compact agreements. Jointly with DIUS, we recently sponsored research into the nature of compact schemes ([http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2008/08\\_32/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2008/08_32/)).

14. Broadly speaking, there are three kinds of compact scheme:

- a. Outreach-type schemes that focus more on raising aspirations and attainment and providing advice and guidance than they do on admissions. Although all must have some link with admissions to be counted as compacts, the emphasis is on aspirations and attainment.
- b. Schemes that rely mainly on the “standard offer” and form part of the wider marketing, recruitment and widening participation strategy of higher education (HE) providers.
- c. Schemes that link achievement, or evidence of potential, in some form of additional learning to variable offers.

15. There are known to be 51 institutions offering some form of compact, although many reject the use of this term. Most are offered by single institutions but some are collaborative schemes. They engage up to 60,000 learners in around 1,700 schools and colleges and help at least 8,000 people enter HE every year

16. The benefits of compacts to learners are significant. They provide additional support for learners prior to entry: learners are better prepared, make more effective applications and have a familiarity with HE that stands them in good stead on entry. There is little available data, but it appears that learners, on the whole, perform as well or better than other students.

17. Compact arrangements are diverse and this is a strength. It reflects the market position and mission of institutions, and the relationships they have negotiated with partner schools and colleges. There is no reason to expect them to conform to a single model, nor any good reason why they should.

## THE BALANCE BETWEEN TEACHING AND RESEARCH

### *Levels of funding for teaching and research*

18. The total funding of £7,476 million available for 2008–09 includes £4,632 million recurrent grant for teaching (of which £364 million is for widening participation), £1,460 million for research, and £120 million for business and community engagement through the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF), which together comprise the £6,212 million funding for recurrent grant available for 2008–09.

19. The funding for research includes:

- £62 million to support business-related research
- £185 million to support charity-funded research
- £199 million to support postgraduate research.

20. The total grant includes £337 million for special funding representing a reduction of 25 per cent on 2007–08. This decrease is largely the result of transferring the HEIF to formula recurrent funding, in order to reduce the accountability burden on institutions.

21. £902 million of the total funding has been allocated separately as earmarked capital grants to support teaching and research.

22. Results of the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise show that:

- a. The UK continues to set a high global watermark, with “world leading” research well distributed throughout the sector, and 87% of submitted research recognised as of international quality.
- b. 54% of UK research activity falls into the top two grades of “world leading” or “internationally excellent”.

*Responsibility for assuring the quality of teaching*

23. HEFCE has a statutory duty to secure provision for assessing the quality of education provided by the institutions that it funds. Prior to 1997 the HEFCE undertook the task of quality assurance itself. Since 1997, HEFCE has discharged its duty for quality assessment under the 1992 Act by commissioning the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) to undertake teaching quality assessments on its behalf. The HEFCE Board is still ultimately responsible for the quality of the provision it funds, and in this it is advised by its strategic committee on Teaching, Quality, and the Student Experience (TQSE). The QAA are observers on the TQSE Committee.

24. The QAA is an independent body funded by subscriptions from UK universities and colleges of higher education, and through contracts with the main UK higher education funding bodies (HEFCE, the Scottish Funding Council, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, and the Department of Education and Learning in Northern Ireland).

25. As the QAA carries out work on HEFCE’s behalf, the HEFCE monitors the QAA’s work closely. We receive regular reports from the QAA on the activities we fund and the TQSE Committee oversees the QAA’s performance and receives regular updates. Officers produce an annual report to the committee, which gives a summary of audit results for the year but also includes wider issues such as an analysis of the QAA’s work and of the relationship between the two organisations. This report provides the basis for TQSE’s annual report to the HEFCE Board.

26. All the evidence available suggests that the HE Quality Assurance Framework is working well and the reports of the QAA and the review of the Framework, carried out between 2005 and 2008 confirms this. We recognise, however, that recent concerns expressed in the media have raised some questions about both quality and standards. The HEFCE Board, on the advice of the Chief Executive, therefore decided to ask QAA to carry out reviews of key areas of concern and also to establish a sub-committee of TQSE to advise the committee and the Board.

27. The QAA is reviewing the following areas

- a. Student workload and contact hours
- b. Language requirements for international students
- c. Recruitment practices for international students
- d. The use of external examiners
- e. Institutional assessment practices

28. The QAA will produce an initial report by the end of December 2008.

29. The overall purpose of the sub-committee is to advise the HEFCE Board on how best to fulfil its statutory duty with regards to the quality of HE provision, as set out in section 70 (1) of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. In order to achieve this, the sub-committee will:

- a. Consider evidence from the sector (commissioning research where appropriate) on quality and standards, and will advise HEFCE as to whether action is necessary.
- b. Establish what information HEFCE needs to maintain confidence in the quality of publicly funded higher education.
- c. Advise the Board, via TQSE, on the form of reporting that should be requested from the Quality Assurance Agency.
- d. Advise HEFCE on implementing policy on quality assurance in England.
- e. Contribute to discussions on the structure of the next Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) which will apply from 2011–12.

30. The sub-committee will report In June 2009 and the TQSE committee and the Board will consider what action is needed, if any, to secure continuing confidence in the quality and standards of English HE.

## STUDENT SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

### *Student engagement*

31. The funding council is committed to supporting DIUS in its work with the National Student Forum and to working with the National Union of Students to support the enhancement of student learning opportunities. We have funded a study of student engagement which will report early in 2009 and will consider what further action might be desirable in response.

### *Non-completion*

32. We have for some time been concerned to ensure that best practice in supporting students in completing their studies should be as widely spread as possible. We have recently funded, with the Paul Hamlyn foundation, a three year programme from 2008–2011 which evaluates practice in student retention, with a view to becoming much clearer about what works most effectively and to spread good practice across the sector.

## CONCLUSION

33. In our submission, we have decided to focus on those elements in the call for evidence on which we have specific things to add. We are happy to provide further comment should the committee wish.

*December 2008*

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## Memorandum 86

### Submission from Professor Roger Brown<sup>341</sup>

## INQUIRY INTO STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

### *Summary*

1. The standards and quality of student learning are complex matters which it is difficult to talk about in general terms.
2. Nevertheless we do not know enough about them, and this partly reflects the focus of our current quality assurance arrangements.
3. However, we do know that there are some significant longstanding weaknesses in UK quality assurance.
4. The increasing “marketisation” of the system will exacerbate these, as could increasing partnerships between universities and other organisations.
5. Experience in America and Britain suggests that whilst marketisation may have many benefits, it can be detrimental to quality.
6. If we wish to maintain the reputation and standing of UK higher education, and prevent managerial intrusion into academic judgments, there needs to be a strengthening of our national and institutional quality assurance arrangements.

### *The complexity of standards and quality*

7. For the purpose of this submission, “standards” are defined as the standards of student learning achievement disclosed through assessment, “quality” as the learning opportunities that students have to obtain and demonstrate that learning. Ultimately, standards and quality can only be assessed through expert judgment in relation to the specific purposes of the programme concerned and the criteria and methods used by the assessor. Widely differing learner motivations, institutional missions, academic disciplines and modes of study are further complicating factors. In a diverse mass system there can be no single “gold standard” (and no single rank ordering of universities).

### *Our knowledge of quality and standards*

8. This is not to imply that we can say or do nothing about the factors that affect student learning. But too much of our quality assurance effort is devoted to trying to make futile comparisons between different courses and institutions, and too little to assessing how these contextual factors may be affecting standards and quality, and taking the necessary remedial actions. In my book “Quality Assurance in Higher Education: The UK Experience since 1992” (Brown, 2004: 163) I quoted from a paper I wrote in 2000 for the then Standing Conference of Principals (now Guild UK):

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<sup>341</sup> Professor of Higher Education Policy, Liverpool Hope University.

*We have major challenges in our midst which at the very least pose challenges for quality: the expansion in student numbers; the worsening of staff-student ratios; the fall in the real unit of resource; serious and continuing under-investment in the learning infrastructure and in staff development; the increasing use of communications and information technologies; the increasing resort to untrained, unqualified and poorly motivated “teaching” staff; the increasing separation of “teaching” from “research”; increased student employment during the academic year etc. Yet hardly any of these has been seriously studied or evaluated for its impact on quality, any more indeed than the accountability regimes themselves*

#### *Longstanding weaknesses*

9. We do know that there are a number of longstanding weaknesses in our quality assurance arrangements. The chief one is student assessment where there is a substantial and largely critical literature going back over many years. Another major area concerns partnerships with organisations outside the mainstream sector, including organisations abroad. This is particularly important given that the challenges UK universities and colleges will be facing over the next 20 years will all involve working more closely with partners inside and outside higher education. Other areas of weakness which affect student learning include our failure to achieve effective synergies between student education and staff research and the analysis, presentation and use of student feedback. Questions have also been raised about the veracity of much of the information that institutions publish about themselves and their offerings. Finally, we know from surveys by the respected Higher Education Policy Group that there are significant, even remarkable, variations between institutions in things like the amounts of scheduled teaching each week (within subject), the size of teaching groups, and access to academic staff.

#### *Marketisation*

10. However the biggest threat to standards and quality arises from the progressive marketisation of the system whereby higher education is increasingly seen as a tradeable private good rather than a non-tradeable personal process. Under marketisation, barriers to entry for providers are reduced or removed; public subsidies for teaching go to students in the form of tuition fees rather than to institutions through block grants; institutions compete vigorously for students; and students choose between institutions on the basis of information about price, quality and availability. This phenomenon is not of course confined to Britain. It is usually associated with a decrease in the amount of public financial support of higher education.

#### *The impact of marketisation*

11. Increased competition undoubtedly makes universities more efficient in their use of resources, more responsive to external stakeholders, and more open to change. But markets, and the associated policies for public and private expenditure, also represent a threat to quality. A continuing study of higher education markets in America, Australia, Britain and elsewhere (Brown, in preparation), suggests the following as some of the detriments to quality that can arise through marketisation:

1. a reduction in the volume of the curriculum, a shorter academic year, less regular contact with lecturers and teachers, larger teaching groups, more students working in term time, more students living at home rather than on campus etc. This mainly reflects long term resourcing pressures (I owe to Professor Ian McNay the information that the proportion of GDP spent on higher education now is very little different from what it was in the mid-1980s when the proportion of the population going into higher education was only half what it is now). But it also reflects the greater priority given to research by both institutions and academic staff. It means above all less personal interaction between students and staff which many see as essential to the quality of student learning, and not only in higher education;
2. a declining level of trust between students and staff. This is seen in increasing student complaints, and even misbehaviour in the form of violence, public humiliation and rudeness, as well as accusations of unfairness and lack of professionalism. This is partly about a process (“consumerisation”) whereby students have moved rapidly from being seen as apprentice academics to being seen as novice consumers;
3. increased resort to temporary and part-time lecturers and tutors, including graduate students, many of them neither properly trained nor fully committed to the institution. There is clear evidence in America that this has damaged standards;
4. greater pressure on pass rates, increased grade inflation, increased plagiarism and other forms of cheating, facilitated by the internet;
5. a growing tendency for educational products and processes to be valued for their “exchange” value (especially in the labour market) rather than for their “use” value (to the student), a phenomenon sometimes called “commodification”. Hence increased enrolments in vocational and applied subjects. There is also concern about students adopting a more “instrumental” approach to their studies, focusing their efforts on what will win them marks rather than on what their tutors think will be good for them;

6. a diversion of resources away from teaching and learning towards activities such as marketing, enrolment, student aid and administration. Whilst some of this expenditure is unavoidable, it can at best have only a small and indirect effect on student learning;
7. finally, we should note the opinion of many academic staff that one factor that may be affecting quality is the increasing number of students who are not well prepared for degree level studies. It is not clear how far this is simply a function of expansion and how far it is a result of further changes, such as changes in the secondary school curriculum (“teaching to the test”). This cannot simply be dismissed as the uninformed opinion of academic staff but needs an urgent, thorough and independent investigation

#### RESPONSES

12. Before considering possible responses to these issues, it should be noted that, according to surveys, levels of student satisfaction remain high; that although there are concerns about cost and value for money, Britain is still the second most attractive destination for internationally mobile students; that the long resource squeeze that began in the early 1980s has begun to be reversed; that by international standards our levels of graduation remain high; and that the private returns to a degree remain positive, although much depends on subject studied, institution attended, degree class obtained and socioeconomic background.

13. Nevertheless there are already some indications of competitive pressures beginning to affect institutional behaviour and academic judgments. These pressures will become even stronger if and when the present cap on tuition is lifted and/ or there is a further squeeze on public expenditure on higher education after 2011. At the same time, universities’ and colleges’ partnerships with other organisations inside and outside the sector and abroad will make such quality assurance even more problematic. To try to deal with these issues, and to maintain the reputation of UK higher education, a strengthened quality regime is needed. This should have five main elements:

1. whatever the corporate status of the recipient, degree awarding powers should in future be time limited and subject to renewal;
2. institutional audits should be replaced by a system of institutional accreditation with clear links to public funding;
3. to maintain standards, institutions should ensure that their curriculum is periodically reviewed by academics with relevant expertise from other institutions (the external examiner system should either be replaced by or subsumed within this new system);
4. we should be realistic about the information that can be given to students and others about the quality of provision;
5. we need a stronger, more powerful, and more independent quality agency.

#### *Degree awarding powers*

14. Four private providers now have taught awarding powers. It is true that the public/ private distinction is becoming blurred. Nevertheless there is a difference between an institution which is subject to the sanction of having its public funding withdrawn and one which is not. Ideally, no provider should have its degree awarding powers granted in perpetuity. However it is unrealistic to think that any of the powers that have been conferred to date will be withdrawn. In future, though, degree awarding powers should only be granted for periods of, say, seven years at a time, subject to renewal (where the provider concerned changes ownership, that should automatically trigger a review).

#### *Institutional accreditation*

15. The present system of institutional audit should be replaced by a system of periodic institutional accreditation. To be able to continue to receive public funding, an institution should receive a judgement of confidence from the QAA or its successor. The accreditation process should be extended to cover governance and financial management including the interaction between resource allocation and deployment (including the deployment of teaching staff) and academic decisions. It should also scrutinise the links between staff research and student education. QAA should take over the financial and management audit functions of HEFCE; the latter could then be combined with the Student Loans Body. This would mean one agency being responsible for all the public funding going to institutions, whilst another would be responsible for monitoring and reporting on the uses made of those funds. This would be a valuable and logical streamlining. QAA could also take over the functions of OFFA and the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Student Complaints. As well as yielding useful savings this would improve the quality of regulation by creating a much clearer focus in our regulatory arrangements than we currently have.

#### *Academic standards*

16. The present quality regime looks essentially at the procedures for maintaining standards, not at the standards themselves. A new process at institutional level is needed whereby academics with appropriate expertise from other institutions with broadly cognate missions look periodically at all aspects of the curriculum being offered in a particular discipline or group of disciplines. These academics would report to



the head of institution as to whether the purposes of the relevant academic programmes were being achieved, whether those purposes were worthwhile, and what further actions were needed. QAA would sample these reports as part of the regular accreditation process. This would provide the necessary reassurance that standards and quality were being maintained at acceptable levels. The need for external examiners, a system that is well past its sell-by date, would disappear. The abolition of degree classification and its replacement by transcripts would help.

#### *Information about quality*

17. There appears to be a general assumption that if only more information about quality could be provided, all would be well. Students would make better choices and therefore be better satisfied. Institutions would become more responsive and efficient. The best possible use would be made of public and private funds. Unfortunately this is a complete chimera. For reasons set out more fully elsewhere (Brown, 2007), valid and reliable information about the relative quality of programmes and awards is impossible to obtain, and even if it existed, could not be made available in a timely, accessible and economical form. Quality in higher education is an elusive concept that ultimately resides in a series of interactions between students and other actors in a variety of settings, by no means all of them in the lecture theatre, seminar room or laboratory. It is very difficult to boil all these down to a single measure of quality for each individual student, and certainly impossible to do so in advance. It is high time we abandoned the notion that there is one “best buy” for each student which we could identify if only we had sufficient information.

18. What can—and should—be provided by institutions is better information about things like the typical size of teaching groups, access to tutors, the amount of class contact, preferred assessment styles, return times for assignments etc. All these are important for students but they will not tell you much about the quality of the experience the student will receive, not least because so much depends upon what the student brings to the party. In any case, a strengthened quality regime would provide what is surely the essential safeguard, namely that whatever, wherever and however you study, you will have a proper opportunity to acquire a worthwhile qualification. (We also need to be much tougher on institutions that are persistently found to be providing false or misleading information about their provision).

#### *The role of the QAA*

19. QAA should have stronger powers, including the power to order an investigation into standards and quality at an institution even if not invited to do so. It needs a much wider remit, to cover not only the setting of standards but also the all important interactions that occur between resource allocation and deployment, marketing, and academic decisions. Above all, QAA needs greater independence both from the Government/Funding Council and from the sector. This could be acquired through obtaining a Royal Charter.

#### *Implementation*

20. With the exception of degree awarding powers, this strengthened quality regime would not require legislation. As regards costs, the present cost of external regulation is not excessive in relation to the overall amount of public and private money invested in teaching and learning (the issue is the quality of regulation rather than the quantity, with too many different bodies with overlapping, competing or confusing remits). Second, there will bound to be some offsetting savings (abandoning degree classification would be a good start). Third, even if the total cost were to be a great deal more than our present arrangements, it will be money well spent if it enables us to deal with the serious threat to quality that even the present degree of marketisation poses, never mind future challenges to quality. It is in fact a small price to pay for the continuing high standing of UK higher education.

#### CONCLUSION

21. Whilst our current quality assurance regime has many strengths it also has some major weaknesses. Marketisation is already exposing some of these; enhanced competition and partnerships with institutions and organisations outside the sector will exacerbate them. If we are to avoid further detriments to quality we must strengthen our quality assurance regime so as to ensure that academic judgments are both genuinely academic and properly professional. There is no time to lose.

## NOTE

This submission was prepared before I had sight of the recommendations of the Committee appointed by the Australian Government to review higher education. There are some striking parallels between their recommendations and mine.

## REFERENCES

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**Memorandum 87**
**Submission from the Council for Industry and Higher Education**

## THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

The Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE) has not made a formal submission covering the whole range of our work but would like to submit the attached reports as helpful evidence to inform the work of the Select Committee. This Memorandum summarises the evidence in those reports.

*What employers want and what graduates offer*

Employers are pleased with the overall quality of graduates developed by UK higher education (HE). The *National Employer Skills Survey 2007* confirmed this—84% of employers recruiting graduates thought them very well or well prepared for work, compared with 67% of employers recruiting 16 year-old school leavers. Other less robust surveys or anecdotes need to be viewed against this evidence. That is not to say that the employability of graduates could not be further enhanced and related to employer needs.

Our report "*Graduate Employability: What do employers think and want?*" noted that employers seek graduates who have a range of competencies as well as subject knowledge (where this is relevant). These include:

- communication skills
- team working skills
- integrity and
- intellectual ability.

While they generally rate highly the intellectual abilities of the graduates they recruit, they find too many of them lacking adequate communication and team-working skills. This confirms the views in CBI employment trends surveys.

It should be one of the purposes of higher education to develop employable graduates and the student experience should aim to achieve this objective. More learning might be undertaken in teams, more presentation and communication built into the process of learning and more learning to mirror the approach of problem solving in teams which is the essence of the way the world of work functions.

*We suggest that* all universities and their career services should better signal to students early in their time at university or college the capabilities that employers seek in graduates, how the learning experience aims to meet those needs and how the student can supplement that through on-campus and off-campus experiences. Work placements or part-time paid work can increase the employability of graduates and are welcome by employers.

*Developing globally aware UK graduates*

We have stressed in a range of reports on the theme of Global Horizons that universities should be developing globally aware graduates and global citizens. This is a prime function of a university in the modern interconnected world. It is a way more enterprising graduates and postgraduates from all nationalities can be developed as it is through multi-cultural and multi-disciplinary teams and interchange that different ways of thinking can be appreciated and new ideas and insights generated. Employers increasingly seek graduates who have this global awareness, who are sensitive to different cultures and who can work in cross-cultural teams. Our report "*Global Horizons and the Role of Employers*" brings together the employer evidence on this matter.

But UK domiciled students are in real danger of missing out on the top jobs in global businesses because they lack this global experience. They do not travel as part of their HE experience as much as their peers from most other European countries and universities have made less progress in developing teaching

partnerships and student exchange arrangements as they have in developing international research partnerships. The EU Erasmus programme remains unbalanced with many more EU students coming to the UK than UK students going overseas.

Global employers welcome the quality of the learning that underpins the UK HE system; but they note the mismatch between what they increasingly seek from graduates in terms of their global awareness and experiences and what UK graduates offer and think is required.

*We suggest* that universities develop more strategic partnerships with universities in other countries so that more students and staff can be exchanged and the curricula enriched through a greater global input.

#### *International graduates*

The UK has the potential to be the preferred world-wide location for internationally mobile students and also for global businesses who increasingly seek graduates from a range of locations who can be deployed globally. But to realise this potential, more needs to be done to raise the quality of the international student experience, to better integrate all students on campus and to increase the employability of international graduates.

The key messages for the Select Committee from our report with i-graduate “*Does the UK lead the world in international education*” are:

- international students view the UK as offering a high quality if high cost experience;
- they consider that the quality of teaching, learner support and student union support to be higher than offered in other countries;
- but they consider that their integration on campus and the development of their employability is less good compared with other countries.

To some extent these results reflect the expectations international students have of the countries where they aim to study. The Careers Services suggest that some international students have too high an expectation of what they will receive from studying in the UK; this may reflect optimistic marketing by universities on their websites or what they have been told by overseas marketing agents.

Our report “*Global Horizons for UK Universities*” suggested the issues that universities face as they develop their international strategies, how these are being addressed and might be addressed with existing practice shared. In particular it made suggestions on how universities might better integrate students on campus including on learning programmes. It noted that positive action may be needed if international students are not to end up in cliques.

The CIHE is currently undertaking work for DIUS on how more UK businesses (and especially small companies) can be persuaded to take an international student on a placement and recruit more international graduates and postgraduates. This work will lead to a marketing effort later this year with the aim of helping businesses think through the skills strategies that might be appropriate as they start to look beyond the current recession.

January 2009

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### **Memorandum 88**

#### **Submission from Dr Frederick G Page**

##### STUDENT SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

- the effectiveness of initiatives to support student engagement in the formulation of HE policy, and how the success or otherwise of these initiatives is being assessed
- how the student experience differs in public and private universities
- examples of reasons for, and potential strategies to reduce, the non-completion of higher education programmes by students
- the adequacy of UK higher education (HE) funding and student support packages, and implications for current and future levels of student debt
- any further action required by the Government and/or HEFCE to ensure that UK HEIs offer students a world class educational experience

I have taken the above headings from your website and wish to express a personal opinion regarding interest charges made against student loans currently operated by the Student Loans Company of Glasgow on behalf of the DIUS. I believe such an opinion is relevant to your considerations of these headings.

I am of the strong opinion that it is unfair, indeed immoral (if we are to accept the recent remarks of the Archbishop of Canterbury) to levy interest against student loans whilst any student is currently studying (or indeed unemployed).

I will not enlarge on this opinion; either one is for or against adding to the now alarming amounts of debt incurred by most University students. Suffice it to say that I regard such interest as entirely misplaced and should cease.

I find that most parents of potential university entrants are completely unaware of this tax and merely assume a student accrues repayable fees only. To quote my own daughter's situation currently in her third and final university year, I estimate her debt will approach £20,000 and, have in mind that interest is being applied at 3.0%. Can any compassionate parent or student believe this to be fair?

May I respectfully ask you and your committee to consider this aspect of Student support and engagement?

January 2009

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## Memorandum 89

### Submission from Professor Barrie W Jervis

#### 1. SUMMARY

Owing to the expansion in university places, the entry requirements to some Honours Degree courses are now minimal, in order that the universities can fill the places. This leads to low ability students receiving Honours degrees. These graduates cannot satisfy all the demands of their eventual employers. There are a wide range of possible entry qualifications, some of which rely on high coursework elements and are unjustly awarded. These students are not prepared for university studies. The resultant lowering of academic standards calls into question the meaning and purpose of universities and of degree courses. Adjusting entry requirements to admit more less-qualified students from poorer backgrounds is likely to be counter-productive as these students may not be prepared for the demands of university, may not catch up, and may not complete their courses. Plenty of routes exist to allow motivated students to qualify. There would be more confidence in degrees if only the most academically able students took them (top 20%, say). This would also reduce the drop-out rate. Other young people would benefit from technical training at different levels, satisfying a national demand. Good teaching and good research are mutually supportive, but in most cases lecturers have too much teaching and administration to devote much time to research. The current research system is wasteful, and many foreign research students take their knowledge home to our competitors, leaving little behind. Better remuneration and career structures for researchers are recommended. Degree classifications include an element of luck, and degree standards vary considerably between courses. The external examiner system does not guarantee a uniform standard and needs revision. The degree certificate could be accompanied by a general statement by the university about the skills the degree was intended to foster. Degree courses could be ranked nationally, and external examining could be anonymous. Plagiarism should be severely punished. The academically more able should receive full grants or scholarships for their degree courses; the rest should receive loans. Twenty recommendations are offered for consideration.

#### 2. INTRODUCTION

2.1 I am a fairly recently retired Professor of Electronic Engineering with particular teaching interests in communication engineering (signal transmission), and have published many research papers. I have taught in two English ex-Polytechnic universities, in an American university, and have tutored for the Open University. I have also worked briefly in a German company and in a French university research laboratory. I have taught students with HNC qualifications through to final year Honours Degree and MSc students, including their final projects. I have supervised and examined MPhil and PhD students in the UK, and have been an external examiner for French PhD and Habilitation candidates. I come from a poor family, but obtained a place in a Cambridge college, thanks to my state Grammar School education, and obtained an Honours Degree in Natural Sciences. After some years in English industry I obtained a PhD at Sheffield University and undertook post-doctoral research. I have strong views about universities and the scientific and engineering education they provide, derived from this experience.

#### 3. INFORMATION

##### 3.1 *Admissions*

3.1.1 There was a time when the minimum entrance requirements for university were set at 5 GCEs and two A-levels, and this system seemed to serve well the smaller number of universities then extant. There are now a large number of universities and their expansion and independence has been accompanied by a corresponding burgeoning in the number and type of acceptable entry qualifications. Since there are now more places than well-qualified and motivated students, many universities enrol students with minimal qualifications. For example, the entry requirement for some BSc (Honours) courses in engineering is the possession of GCSEs in English and maths and a stab at a technical A-level, or equivalent. Few such poorly

qualified students have the skills to study at degree level, yet most obtain an Honours degree, because their lecturers are encouraged to pass them at all stages. The argument goes that, if you are qualified to enrol on a course, then you must be capable of succeeding. Any failures must therefore be the fault of the lecturers.

3.1.2 Some of these entrance qualifications are of doubtful value. At one extreme they are achieved almost entirely by coursework assignments, and I hear stories that many teachers are pressurised to pass their students, however poor their knowledge and understanding, if they want to keep their jobs.

3.1.3 Clearly the country needs as many qualified and trained people as possible, and the government has set a target for 50% of the annual cohort to enter higher education. It is questionable that all these students, or the country, will benefit by them all studying for the current three or four year degrees. The expansion in the numbers of university first degree students and in the number of universities themselves has been acknowledged by many university lecturers and industrialists alike to have resulted in a serious overall lowering of standards. Not only are many graduates “not fit for purpose”, but the very definition of a university and a degree course and their purposes is called into question. Courses other than degree courses should be available for the less academically gifted. For example, there is a shortage of skilled technicians.

3.1.4 The current policy of requiring universities to enrol a quota of less qualified students from poorer backgrounds is likely to be counter-productive. The intellectual abilities of students with lower qualifications may not be as well developed, and it is possible that this handicap will not be overcome at university, and may lead to them dropping out. Students with a desire to succeed have many possible routes to follow including universities with lower entrance requirements, local colleges, part-time courses, and evening classes. It might take longer, but the opportunities are there.

### 3.2 *The balance between teaching and research*

3.2.1 This is a difficult issue. Ideally teaching and research should reinforce each other. However, for different individuals with different enthusiasms in different universities in different circumstances one may dominate the other by choice or necessity. Probably the more common situation is that teaching and administrative duties take up most of the time, with little being left for research. There is a valid argument for concentrating research in a few universities, leaving the remainder as teaching universities. Some lecturers are happy to only teach, but they may not be as enthusiastic about their subject or as competent at it as those who are pushing back its boundaries. If all lecturers should undertake some research to stimulate their teaching, then this would have to be reflected in their recruitment and by a maximum teaching load.

3.2.2 The present system of research in UK universities seems to me to be rather wasteful and inefficient. Research projects are proposed and directed by lecturers, who generally lack sufficient time for the task, and are carried out by research students and post-doctoral workers, who are temporary. Because research students are badly rewarded financially, a high percentage of them are foreigners, seeking to improve themselves in their own countries. After completion, they usually return to their own countries. These people are the repositories of the latest research and technical knowledge, so when they leave, they take it with them, both depriving the UK of it and at the same time transferring it to what are probably our competitors. It is difficult to imagine a more unsatisfactory scenario.

### 3.4 Degree classification

3.4.1 There may be differences in the methodologies adopted for degree classifications. One system is to base the classification on the aggregated marks gained. These could be for the final year, but sometimes this mark is combined with some percentage of the second year mark. Sometimes a mark from an industrial, sandwich year might be included. Compensation may be applied. A poor mark in one subject may be compensated by a good mark in another. Some judgement is exercised in deciding this and the class boundaries, thus introducing a small element of luck from year to year. Another system is to allocate a higher class to a candidate who may have shown exceptional ability in one or two exams. This introduces subjectivity, and therefore an element of chance. A common assumption has been that the student cohort varies negligibly from year to year, and so the same distributions of classification are often ensured by processing the marks statistically. This is invalid, if there are significant variations in the students' abilities from year to year. There may be an argument for ensuring that the process itself is uniform nationally.

3.4.2 Certainly in science and engineering there is a wide disparity between university departments in how the students are taught and assessed, and in the expectations of them regarding motivation, independence, and originality, and in how they perform. Teaching covers the gamut from a demanding intellectual formation down to rote learning. Assessment varies from rigorous examinations, to primed questions, to assessment by coursework, and may include practical project work.

3.4.3 The external examiner system, which is supposed to ensure parity of standards, frequently fails to do so. External examiners usually do not know the details of how the students have been aided in various ways or how closely the material in examination questions has been covered. They may not know how the raw marks may have been treated before appearing on a final spreadsheet. Rarely are boundary cases the subject of a student interview. The external examiners have probably been appointed through personal knowledge. My view is that degree standards in a subject vary greatly between universities.

3.4.4 It seems to me that formally providing more information about a candidate's marks beyond the degree classification may have as many disadvantages as advantages. For example, if these corresponded to a poor lower second, would they harm the graduate's chances of employment? On the other hand, it could be helpful to the student for their tutor to informally discuss them with him. A report on the student's skills is perhaps unlikely to be perfectly honest. However, the university could provide a general statement of the qualities the graduate should possess as a result of his education.

3.4.5 There would be more confidence in degrees, if only the more academically qualified young people took them (20% or less of the age group). There is a strong case for reducing the number of degree courses and replacing them with training certificates or diplomas for technical education. Perhaps something could also be decided about the role of a university as opposed to a technical training college.

3.4.6 One might consider appointing anonymous examiners to courses.

3.4.7 One might consider ranking degree courses.

3.4.8 I have come across widespread, unmistakable cases of plagiarism, which were predominantly committed by non-EU students, despite them having been warned against it. My view is that this might be allowed once, but not twice. The first time, the work should be repeated and the student should be required to pay a marking fee, whilst the lecturer should be paid for the additional work. The second time, the student should be expelled from the course with no refund of fees.

### 3.5 *Student support and engagement*

3.5.1 Students who lack the necessary skills and knowledge should not be enrolled on degree courses since there is an increased risk of non-completion. This means setting the entry qualifications sufficiently high and holding an interview in at least the dubious cases.

3.5.2 Loss of motivation is another problem. Students should be encouraged to discuss any disillusion regularly, and their tutors should attempt to overcome them, including persuading the university to make any necessary and possible changes.

3.5.3 In my opinion all students on degree courses should receive a full grant. Perhaps this cannot be afforded when 40–50% of the year-group attend university. In this case it makes sense to award the full grant to the, say 20%, best qualified upon entry, so that any others will have to rely on loans. Alternatively, there could be an equivalent scholarship scheme. Students will have to consider whether obtaining a degree is going to benefit them, or whether an alternative education would be more advantageous for them.

## 4 RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 National minimum entry qualifications for all degree courses should be set, both in level and in the nature of the examination.

4.2 The marks for coursework in each subject in both qualifying and university examinations should be a small percentage of the final mark.

4.3 Abandon entry quotas for less qualified students from poorer backgrounds, and ensure multiple routes to universities are available.

4.4 Ensure lecturers have time for research by restricting the amount of teaching and administration they have.

4.5 Ensure lecturers recruited are capable of research.

4.6 Develop a better pay structure and career path for UK researchers.

4.7 Restrict the numbers of temporary foreign researchers according to the economic importance of the research.

4.8 Develop a network of specialised research centres where the lecturers and researchers undertake their research. Consider the French model for this.

4.9 Consider a national process for determining degree classifications and distributions.

4.10 Appoint external examiners on a national basis.

4.11 Require at least two examiners to be present for an examination board to be validly constituted.

4.12 Universities should consider providing a general statement of the qualities the degree course was intended to develop in the student.

4.13 Only the more academically able students should attend degree courses.

4.14 Provide more technical training courses at different levels.

4.15 Decide the meaning and purpose of a university.

4.16 Appoint anonymous examiners to (anonymous) courses.

4.17 Officially rank degree courses.

4.18 Students committing plagiarism should pay for remarking in the first instance, and, if it is repeated, should be expelled without refund of fees.

4.19 The department should actively solicit any expressions of disillusion and attempt to remedy the situation.

4.20 Award full grants or scholarships to the most qualified degree course entrants only.

January 2009

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### Memorandum 90

#### Submission from Dr Mary Stuart<sup>342</sup>

##### INQUIRY INTO THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

I have been involved in a range of research projects looking at the Student Experience in Higher Education, all funded by external bodies. I report below on the results of these projects for the interest of the committee. I have been principal investigator on the projects and worked with my colleague Dr Catherine Lido as co-investigator and Dr Jessica Morgan as our postdoc researcher.

##### *HEA Project: Aspirations and Barriers for Different Student Groups in undertaking Post Graduate Study (2006–07)*

1,073 questionnaires were collected from students in their final year of undergraduate study at two different Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in England examining students' attitudes to undertaking postgraduate study beyond their Honours degree programmes. A wide variety of subjects were targeted to make the results generalisable. While there is substantial literature on all aspects of the undergraduate student experience (Thomas et al 2002; Woodrow 1998; Tinto 1988; Hatt, et al 2005; Woodfield 2002; Kantanis 2002), research is limited in the area of postgraduate (PG) study. This lack of research has been noted in several recent publications (Leonard et al 2006; Wakeling 2005; HEFCE 2006). Green (2005) argues that the research previously undertaken in the area of the PG student experience has tended to focus on PG research students.

The regression analyses revealed that UK students, those who studied practical/applied courses, those who were more worried about debt (but not necessarily in more debt), those with no children, white/non-ethnic minority students and those from families who have no previous Higher Education (HE) experience are less likely to intent to undertake PG Study.

On the other hand, overseas students (including European mainland students), those on theoretical/non-applied courses, those who are less worried about debt (but not necessarily in less debt), those with children, ethnic minority students and those from families who have previous HE experience are more likely to intent to undertake PG Study.

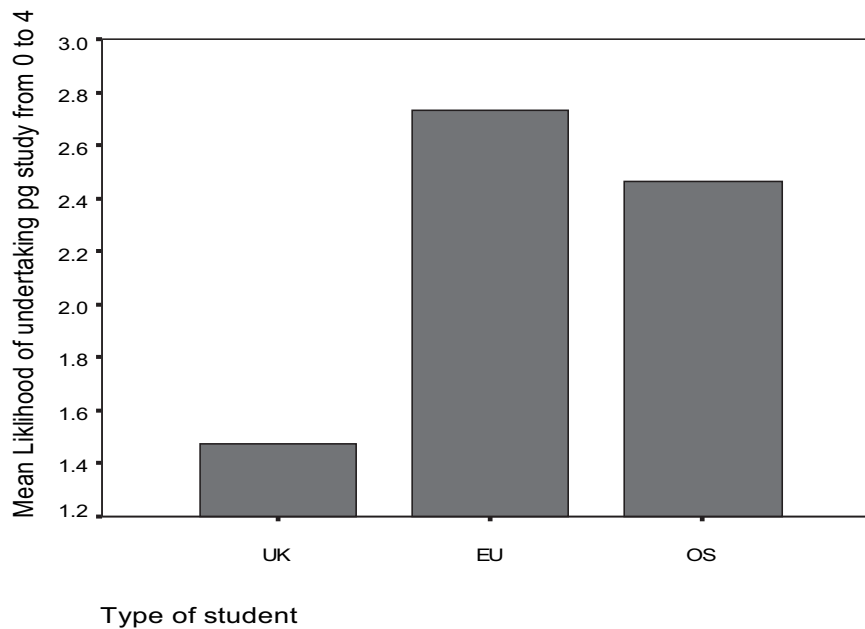
There were no main effects of age groups, occupational class, or actual debt on the students' intentions to undertake PG study. There were differences between class and reported family HE experience, but class alone was not a sufficient factor in affecting intentions to undertake postgraduate study.

The regression analyses revealed a very "similar" picture of key factors predicting intentions to undertake a postgraduate qualification at both the sites studied. The sample as a whole reveals a fairly homogenous and coherent representation of factors important for predicting postgraduate study. The factors encouraging intentions to postgraduate study were the domicile status of the student (overseas), the course of study (theoretical), debt worry (low), family HE experience (high) and then marginally, their ethnicity (minority groups) and sex (female).

<i>Factor Ranking</i>	<i>Variance in PG Intentions Explained= 8% (Adjusted R2=.06) F(8, 510) = 5.15, p &lt; .001</i>	<i>Beta</i>
1	Home or overseas student	.24***
2	Main subject of course	-.11***
3	Debt worry	-.13**
4	Dependent children	.06*
5	Ethnicity	.06*
6	Family members HE experience	-.15***

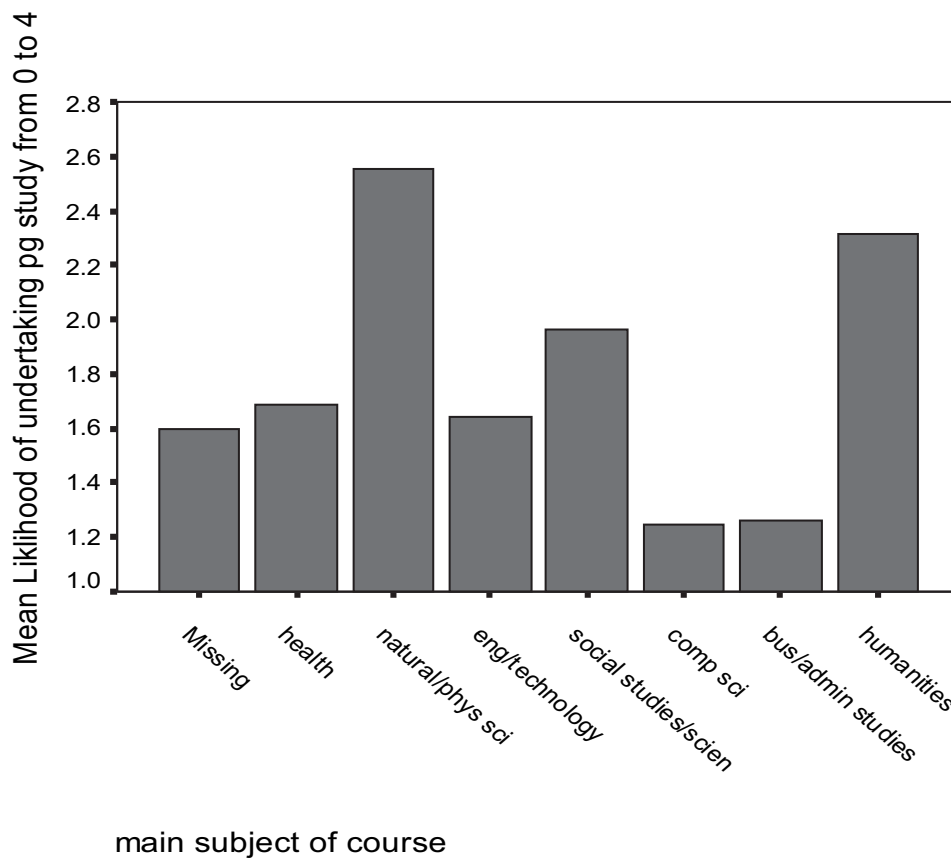
\*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001 and tp < .10

#### UK, mainland Europe and Overseas Students' Intentions to undertake PG study



Post hoc tests revealed that both EU and OS students are more likely to intend to undertake PG study than UK students ( $p < .001$  in both cases), however there is no difference between EU and OS students.

#### Applied and Theoretical Discipline Differences in Intentions to undertake PG Study



A highly significant predictor of intentions to undertake PG study in this sample is the area of study they are undertaking (which is compounded with the “type of degree” the student is studying). The highest “intenders to PG study” are those in the natural/physical sciences, the humanities and social studies. Those who are in more applied courses, such as business administration, computing, engineering and health disciplines are lower in intentions to undertake PG study. The above graph shows a clear split between technical and non-technical disciplines. This pattern is replicated at both of the University sites. This result



suggests that where there is a clear vocational outcome from the undergraduate programme, students are keen to get out into the job market immediately. It indicates that students are making choices based on their future careers and are quite focused on their future opportunities.

#### *Debt Worry*

Debt worry is a significant negative predictor, such that the higher the debt worry the lower the students' intentions to undertake PG study. As both of these variables are scale data, the correlation ( $r = -.13$ ,  $p < .01$ ) reveals that the magnitude is only moderate, but the direction of the relationship is in the predicted direction and it is a highly significant finding. This finding occurs for both Universities. In other words, it is not the amount of debt a student might have, but rather the attitude associated with the debt that acts as a barrier to PG study intentions.

#### *Children*

Having dependent children is also a significant predictor of PG study. Those who have children (of any age) are significantly higher, than those who do not, in intentions to undertake PG study. Interestingly, those with children aged 11 to 16 are highest in their intentions. This pattern is generally replicated at both Universities.

#### *Ethnicity and Gender (marginally significant)*

The ethnicity of the participant is only marginally significant, but this factor emerges as significant when the universities are examined separately. Gender, is also a marginally significant factor, with women being slightly higher in intentions to undertake PG study than men ( $p < .10$ ), but caution must be used in interpreting this effect given the unequal numbers of men and women in the sample overall and in distribution throughout the various courses.

#### *Family HE Experience*

Although family's HE experience does not appear as a significant predictor in the overall regression, it is in fact an important factor when the Universities are examined separately (this is due to the fact that different combinations of family factors emerge with each data set. Overall Family experience was a significant predictor at one university, and fathers experience and mothers experience predicted intentions to study at the other university. But, when this pattern is examined using ANOVAs to look closer at the differences, father's study is found at both Universities.

In the interview phase of the research (20 in-depth interviews), many students felt that they wanted to get out into the workplace quickly to use the knowledge they had gained at undergraduate level, giving them a break from study which they found stressful and personally challenging. They also felt that employers would value work experience more than further study. Several believed they would return to gain further qualifications in the future, possibly paid for by their employer. This expectation may well have implications for HEIs as they develop their plans for employer engagement. On the other hand students on theoretical courses felt a PG qualification would give them an "edge" in the workplace after they had completed their PG course. Career prospects were important to all interviewees, whether they had gone on to PG study or not.

Several of the interviewees, from whatever background, highlighted the importance of emotional support from family and friends in succeeding in what many saw as the stressful environment of HE study. Other personal factors, such as setting a good example to their children, also had an impact on undertaking PG study.

Actual debt was accepted as part of studying but students attitudes to debt did vary. Most did not regard the cost of PG fees as prohibitively high. Far more significant for many of the interviewees was not having any money. In other words, access to credit was seen as a positive for many, but not having enough money for the lifestyle that they wanted was one reason given by students who did not continue on to PG study.

There were differences between different ethnic groups and between UK and overseas students in their intentions to take on PG study. In the interviews these differences often related to experience of higher education within their families (parents and partners in particular).

Students were making choices about further study based on their perceptions of their future position in the workplace. The research provides clear evidence of students' balancing the risks between employment prospects, study and their own view of acceptable levels of debt. In this context the sociological concept of "reflexivity" (Beck, 1992, and Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994) is particularly useful in that it offers a way of understanding the decision-making process, students seek to minimise individual risk as they construct their career and learning biographies.

The final report is available at:

[http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/WPtoPG\\_Stuart.pdf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/WPtoPG_Stuart.pdf)

There is a health warning to this research. The study is based on students who graduated from their Honours degrees in 2007. This means that the cohort had studied under the old fee regime. It is possible that concerns about debt may have significantly changed for students graduating this year (2009) as their fees have been higher in England. Also it is important to consider, given the changes in economic climate, if students with vocational qualifications would be as certain of gaining employment as they were in 2007. I am currently developing a further funding bid to re-do this research to specifically look at these two questions.

*HEA Project: Student Diversity, Extracurricular Activities and Perceptions of Graduate Outcomes (2007–08)*

This project examined the role of extra-curricular activities (ECAs) on students and their futures. The research was carried out at four geographically and demographically diverse UK universities, from the perspective of students, alumni and employers, based on 700 respondents across the UK. The report is currently being peer reviewed.

There is little research that examines the role of ECAs on student life and their future prospects in Britain, (Little, 2006). Research undertaken in the USA on high school students suggests that engagement in ECAs that are social or cultural can have a positive impact on grades. There is also evidence that different social and cultural backgrounds can have a significant effect on participation and type of extra curricular activities (Brown & Evans, 2002).

Overall students seem to spend most time with friends, in private study and engaged in web based activities and less time on student union activities and other traditional University activities such as course representation. This suggests that students are highly sociable, and technologically adept, using new technologies such as Web 2.0 to stay in contact with friends, meet new friends and do business.

There are a number of groups of students who are not engaged in University activities which co-relates with the categories often broadly defined as “widening participation” students; working class students, minority ethnic students and mature students. This is for a variety of reasons but all of which “disadvantage” students in obtaining what is considered to be the traditional student experience. These widening participation students spend more time studying, are more involved in their families (whether they are mature or not), are involved in more paid part-time work and are therefore unable to spend as much time at University.

A significant minority were deeply religious and spend time in praying. This was particularly noticeable in the post '92 institution whereas the 1960s South of England institution had a strong secular feel.

*Different student group participation*

Different student groups were involved in different types of activities. Young, white, middle-class students tended to be heavily engaged in activities offered by their University and students' union, as well as undertaking a reasonable amount of paid employment. Older students and those from ethnic minority backgrounds spent more time outside the university on family commitments, religious involvement, private study and paid employment; whilst those from lower socio-economic backgrounds spent more time in paid employment and less time studying and engaging in other activities. There were also differences related to discipline studied, for example Science students reported feeling excluded from the students' union.

*Different types of institutions also had different participation profiles*

Those at the post-'92 institution focused more on career-orientated activities but felt dissatisfied with the lack of social interaction and choices of activities on offer. “Widening participation” students (ie working class students, minority ethnic students and mature students) were less engaged in university activities for a variety of reasons, all of which “disadvantaged” them in obtaining what is considered to be the traditional student experience.

As this is a relatively new area of research further work does need to be undertaken but this study suggests that effort in studying is not the only criteria for success at University. Students do seem to do better if they are more engaged in the whole University than if they have other commitments outside of the University. This research also paints a picture of different groups of students having very different student experiences depending on their socio-economic-cultural background. It also maps the range of activities that University students are involved in.

*Alumni and Employers*

Reflections from Alumni highlighted the importance of contacts and friendships which involvement in ECAs provided. The social capital gained was of central importance to their accounts of university progression and subsequent employment. Employers tended to have a mixed view of the value of ECAs, each favouring a different set of experiences. However, “cultural fit” with the company appeared to be universally important, as did activities involving leadership or responsibility, long-term commitment, and achievement. They also emphasised the importance of graduates “selling” their activities, and making full use of their university careers services to do this. The following tables present how different demographics engaged in different activities.

PARTICIPATION RATES IN DIFFERENT ACTIVITIES BY STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

	Overall		Males		Females		Young		Mature		Disabled		L. Needs		Religious		Not religious	
	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%
Seeing friends	615	98	278	97	336	98	433	99	177	94	14	100	40	95	320	97	291	98
Studying	613	98	274	96	338	98	422	96	187	100	13	93	41	98	323	98	285	96
Films	581	92	260	91	320	93	410	94	166	88	13	93	37	88	300	91	277	94
Existing friends online	567	90	259	91	307	90	421	96	144	77	11	79	38	91	285	86	277	94
Library	554	88	240	84	313	91	372	85	177	94	13	93	38	91	304	92	245	83
Online Communities	530	84	238	83	291	85	382	87	144	77	13	93	34	81	267	81	258	87
Reading other books	517	82	227	79	289	84	355	81	158	84	7	50	28	67	262	79	251	85
Shops/Cafes	520	82	220	77	299	87	373	85	144	77	12	86	36	86	267	81	249	84
Sport	484	77	223	78	261	76	339	77	142	76	10	72	33	79	248	75	231	78
Pubs/Bars	469	74	222	78	246	72	354	81	113	60	8	57	30	71	209	63	256	87
Family Commitments	428	68	185	65	242	70	286	65	138	73	9	64	24	57	249	76	177	60
Music	323	51	148	52	174	51	221	51	98	52	8	57	20	48	175	53	145	49
Employment	311	49	125	44	186	54	218	50	92	49	3	21	19	45	164	50	146	49
Clubs/Societies	288	46	137	48	151	44	198	45	86	46	11	79	33	55	162	49	122	41
Art	293	46	137	48	156	45	209	48	82	44	7	50	24	57	146	44	145	49
Business online	273	43	143	50	130	38	193	44	78	42	8	57	24	57	123	37	147	50
Student Union	230	37	118	41	111	32	183	42	46	25	3	21	17	41	112	34	116	39
Prayer	203	32	76	27	127	37	114	26	85	45	6	43	10	24	194	59	8	3
New friends online	202	32	86	30	116	34	141	32	60	32	5	36	13	31	123	37	76	26
Voluntary Work	93	15	42	15	51	15	58	13	34	18	5	36	10	24	61	19	32	11
Councils/Committees	83	13	49	17	34	10	53	12	28	15	5	36	9	21	54	16	28	10
Course Rep.	60	10	31	11	29	8	37	8	23	12	1	7	6	14	38	12	22	7

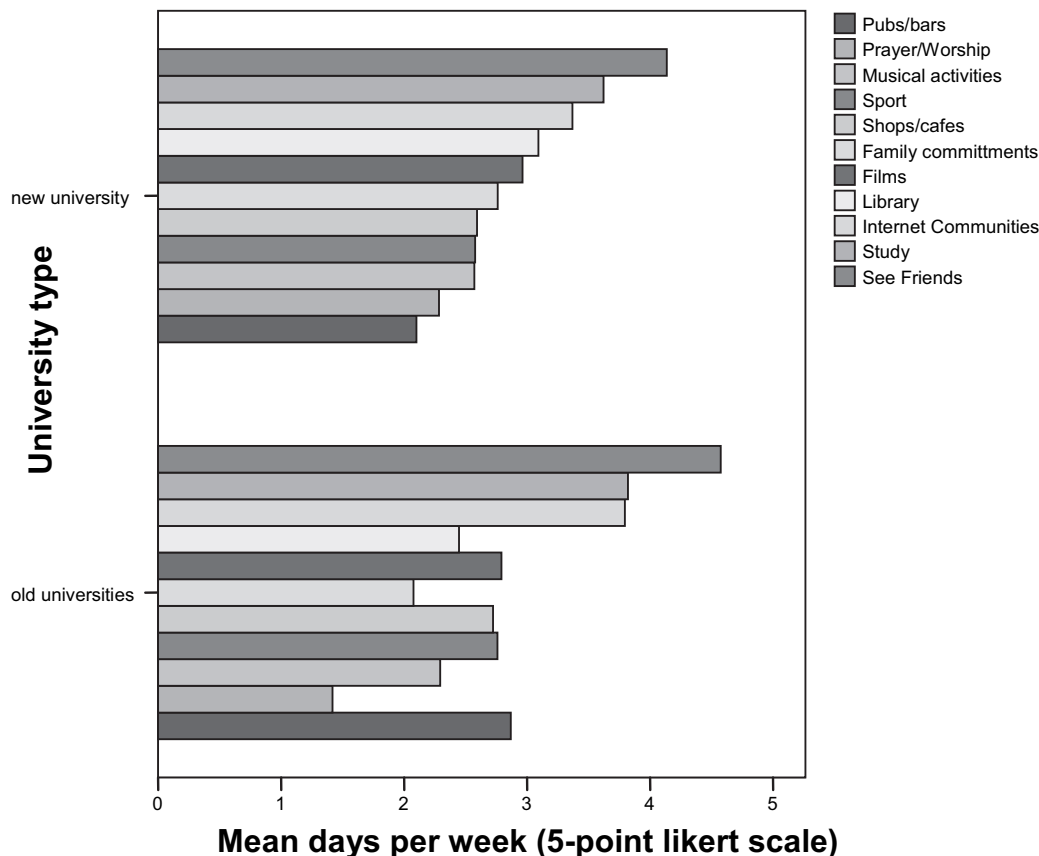
PARTICIPATION RATES IN DIFFERENT ACTIVITIES BY STUDENTS' ETHNIC BACKGROUND AND SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

	Overall		White		Black		Asian		Arab/Persian		Lower SES*		Higher SES*	
	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%
Seeing friends	615	98	388	99	58	91	112	97	53	93	129	96	431	98
Studying	613	98	379	96	62	97	112	97	56	98	130	97	430	98
Films	581	92	361	92	60	94	106	92	51	90	124	93	402	91
Existing friends online	567	90	363	93	48	75	104	90	49	86	114	85	401	91
Library	554	88	325	83	62	97	108	94	55	97	122	91	383	87
Online Communities	530	84	333	85	51	80	95	83	48	84	108	81	371	84
Reading other books	517	82	325	83	52	81	88	77	49	86	112	84	355	81
Shops/Cafes	520	82	329	84	44	69	96	84	49	86	111	83	360	82
Sport	484	77	295	75	53	83	88	77	47	83	104	78	335	76
Pubs/Bars	469	74	339	87	26	41	67	58	35	61	99	74	333	76
Family Commitments	428	68	235	60	48	75	96	84	46	81	97	72	293	66
Music	323	51	202	52	37	58	53	46	31	54	70	52	226	51
Employment	311	49	184	47	40	63	59	51	26	46	81	60	200	45
Clubs/Societies	288	46	167	43	28	44	60	52	31	54	51	38	207	47
Art	293	46	193	49	23	36	46	40	29	51	60	45	207	47
Business online	273	43	202	52	10	16	37	32	22	39	62	46	192	44
Student Union	230	37	146	37	14	22	55	48	14	25	38	28	170	39
Prayer	203	32	51	13	49	77	71	62	31	54	38	28	140	32
New friends online	202	32	101	26	27	42	49	43	24	42	44	33	138	31
Voluntary Work	93	15	46	12	12	19	20	17	15	26	13	10	69	16
Councils/Committees	83	13	45	12	8	13	22	19	7	12	13	10	57	13
Course Rep.	60	10	35	9	4	6	13	11	7	12	5	4	46	11

\*Socio-economic groups (SEG) I—IV (Unemployed, Unskilled trade, Skilled trade, Support worker)\*\* SEG V—VII (Public sector, Modern Professional, Professional)

**TIME SPENT ON ACTIVITIES AT OLD AND NEW UNIVERSITIES**

1 = none; 2 = once a week; 3 = 2/3 times a week; 4 = 4/5 times a week; 5 = every day



**SIGNIFICANT CORRELATIONS BETWEEN EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES AND SELF-REPORTED MARKS**

	<i>Self-reported marks</i>
Time spent studying	.19**
No. of university-based activities engaged in	.12**
Having experience as a course representative	.09*
Time spend reading	.08*

\* correlation significant at the 5% level; \*\* correlation significant at the 1% level

The key message from this work suggests that engagement in university life is very important to student success. While obviously studying and reading is essential to success, the important finding of this research is that being part of University life also seems to affect success. These findings are even more significant when we looked at the results from our third research project set out below.

*ESRC—The Impact of Social Identity and Cultural Capital on Different Ethnic Student Groups at University (2007–09)*

This project is currently nearing completion so results presented here are tentative. Based on responses from 820 students at four different institutions with very different profiles, it examined the HE environment, students’ sense of feeling comfortable at University and their identification with their institution, their preferred teaching and learning styles and their academic progress in order to assess how different ethnic groups can be best supported to succeed in their studies. Following the quantitative phase, focus groups and longer in-depth educational life history interviews were conducted.

The National Student Survey highlighted that minority ethnic groups are less satisfied with their higher education (HE) experience than other groups of students (SurrIDGE 2006). A recent DfES report (Brooke & Nicolls, 2007) pointed out that although participation of students from minority ethnic countries in HE is higher their degree outcomes, by class of degree, are markedly lower than their white peers. The limited research available on the needs and experiences of minority ethnic students highlights the importance of students’ racial identity (Gallineau, 2003) and sense of belonging or alienation (Calbrese & Poe, 1990; Connors, Tyers, Modood & Hillage 2004; Archer et.al. 2003) as main factors for positive learning

experiences and outcomes. Ball (2002) points out that minority ethnic students make choices about HE study based on how “friendly” they regard the institution. This research sought to examine some of these factors in more detail.

On analysis of the material, our initial findings showed that “belonging” and “identification” were conceptualised and experienced differently across ethnic groups.

#### *University for Study and University for Fun*

Peer support and academic self-esteem appeared to play a more important role in ethnic minority students’ sense of identification and belonging, suggesting the importance of social capital and academic confidence for enabling these students to “fit in” at university. Ethnic minority students viewed university as primarily “for study”, prioritising academic concerns over their social life and reporting more positive feelings towards their institutions such as a sense of pride and connection.

By contrast, white students tended to view university as primarily “for friendship”, viewing higher education as a time for personal development, socialising and “having fun”. They described ways in which their friendship networks indirectly benefited their studies, giving them the social confidence and knowledge to collaborate with peers, or successfully seek out extra help and support.

Ethnic minority students, particularly Black students, despite their stronger focus on study appeared to be missing out on many of the benefits of social capital at university. These inequalities were often compounded by students’ early educational experiences (often mediated through other demographic factors such as ethnicity, SES and gender), which influenced their focus on study and/or friendship at university, as well as their expectations, knowledge and uptake of peer, teacher and institutional support.

#### *Comfort Zone and University Identification*

To explore different ethnic student groups’ experiences of social identity and sense of belonging in higher education, we created two new variables. “Comfort Zone” measures how well students “fit in” at their university, and refers to how physically comfortable they feel in and around the university itself. “University Identification” measures positive feelings towards the university, including feelings of pride and identification with peers.

The table shows that these two variables are very important for students of all ethnicities for a variety of key academic outcomes, but particularly for social capital concerns.

Ethnic minority students’ comfort zone and university identity are more strongly associated with peer support and engagement in activities that provide a good social network, suggesting the importance of social capital for helping these students “fit in” at university. White students’ comfort zone and university identity are associated with time spent seeing friends outside class, and engaging in university-based extra-curricular activities, suggesting that these students are finding their peer support in different contexts. See below for the co-relations of significance of these factors for different ethnic groups.

CORRELATES OF IDENTIFICATION AND BELONGING—FEELING AT HOME OR COMFORTABLE AT UNIVERSITY FOR DIFFERENT ETHNIC GROUPS

	"UNIVERSITY IDENTIFICATION"										"COMFORT ZONE"							
	WHITE	BLACK	ASIAN	AR/PERS	MIXED	OTHER	WHITE	BLACK	ASIAN	AR/PERS	MIXED	OTHER	WHITE	BLACK	ASIAN	AR/PERS	MIXED	OTHER
comfort zone	.33**	.56**	.32**	.44*	-	.57**	.33**	.56**	.32**	.44*	-	.57**	.31**	.53**	.46**	.51**	-	.57**
ac. esteem	.40**	.42**	.31**	-	.42*	-	.31**	.53**	.46**	-	.42*	-	.33**	.53**	.46**	.63**	-	-
peer support	.43**	.48**	.38**	.40*	-	.53**	.33**	.53**	.46**	-	.53**	-	.33**	.53**	.46**	.63**	-	.73**
well-being	.29**	.22*	.28**	-	.38*	-	.30**	.42**	.43**	-	.38*	-	.30**	.42**	.43**	-	.47**	-
social net.	.23**	.23*	-	-	-.49**	-	.18**	.25**	.26**	-	-.49**	-	.18**	.25**	.26**	-	-	.40*
uni activities	.24**	-	-	-	-	.44*	.15**	-	-	-	-	.44*	.15**	-	-	-	-	-
friends	.11*	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
marks	-	-	-	-	-	-	.17**	.24**	-	-	-	-	.17**	.24**	-	-	-	-
n	400	121	146	27	30	25	400	121	146	27	30	25	400	121	146	27	30	25

Note.  
social net. = my commitments and activities provide me with a good social network of friends  
uni activities = total number of different university-based ECAs engaged in  
friends = number of days per week spend seeing friends

In addition to showing that comfort zone and university identity are conceptualised and experienced differently across ethnicities, our findings showed some worrying differences in key academic outcomes across ethnic groups. Black students reported significantly lower levels of peer support at university compared to other ethnic groups, and Asian students reported significantly lower levels of well-being at university.

As mentioned before ethnic minority students, particularly Black students, despite a stronger focus on study appear to be missing out on many of the benefits of social capital at university. Students who are “first generation” have less “insider knowledge” about their institutions’ social support networks, and this can be compounded by an early lack of institutional and peer support at school level among ethnic minority students that can shape their patterns of formal and informal learning. Thus, students’ early educational experiences (often mediated through other demographic factors such as ethnicity, SES and gender) influence their focus on study and/or friendship at university, as well as their expectations, knowledge and uptake of peer, teacher and institutional support. Again there is further work to do in this area and this is an initial study but the results suggest that there are important factors that affect student success that are less tangible than just curriculum or teaching styles.

This research is currently being completed and the report will be submitted to the ESRC in July of 2009.

#### *Institutional Research at Kingston University*

In addition to the work I have conducted as a researcher, as a senior manager at a University I have established a student experience project in partnership with our students’ union to examine our students’ experience. This includes annual surveys, focus groups and interviews and a Kingston Observer Project. These are all in their infancy but should you wish to discuss this further, I would be happy to talk about the project.

January 2009

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### Memorandum 91

#### Further submission from Professor Bernard Longden<sup>343</sup> and Professor Mantz Yorke<sup>344</sup>

##### RESEARCH DATA SUBMISSION

*Part-time undergraduate university provision: aspects of the student experience*

##### ABSTRACT

- *Part-time student experience in the UK has been under researched.*
- An analysis of part-time study on full-time programs of study is provided
- An analysis is provided on the nature of concerns about the finance is provided and an assessment of the impact this has on “coping with academic demands”.

##### INTRODUCTION

1. This report is an extract from a paper presented at the Society for Research in Higher Education (Longden and Yorke, 2008).

2. Part-time undergraduate provision in the UK has provided and continues to provide a substantial and significant alternative pathway for those seeking to secure an undergraduate or postgraduate qualification. In 2006/07 there were 706,935 part-time undergraduate degree students in the UK compared to 1,267,470 full-time students, representing around 35% of the provision of undergraduate degree students in the UK (HESA, 2008). About 84% of PT undergraduate degree students were attending classes provided by universities with a residual percentage attending classes provided by further education colleges.

3. Over the past ten years or so there has been strengthening policy emphases on part-time study, the widening of participation and employer engagement in higher education. Despite the emphasis on part-time provision there does not appear to be a commensurate emphasis, at a national level, on analysis of the part-time experience.

4. For institutions seeking to enhance their provision of part-time study the imprecise focus of the NSS data coupled with the broad nature of the student experience scale scores, together with the limited survey of the student experience contained within the Universities UK (Ramsden and Brown, 2006) report presents serious limitations. Hence a more detailed study of the part-time student experience was warranted.

##### *Data source for the study*

5. Eleven post-1992 universities (all of which had a broad range of programs) accepted an invitation to participate in this study. The post-1992 university sector was chosen as the focus of the study because of its historical high level of commitment to part-time programs and because of its generally high level of commitment to the widening of participation.

6. The data collection covered a wide range—from taught master’s programs to short courses—and attracted 2,871 valid responses. *This report deals with the 1,613 responses received from students on part-time undergraduate programs*

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<sup>343</sup> Bernard Longden—professor of Higher Education Policy at Liverpool Hope University.

<sup>344</sup> Mantz Yorke—visiting professor of higher education at Lancaster University.

*The survey instrument*

7. There were three parts to the survey questionnaire (see the final report by Yorke and Longden, 2008 for full details relating to the questionnaire.).

8. The first section consisted of 28 Likert-type which were grouped for ease of response, some of which were in common with a previous study on full-time first year students' experience (see Yorke and Longden, 2007). The second section consisted of demographic and other background items. It was necessarily fairly lengthy because of the wide diversity of both the part-time student body and the kinds of program on which the students had enrolled. The final section provided an opportunity for "free-response" which allowed students to comment (albeit fairly briefly) on the *best and worst aspects of their experience*, and on anything that important to them that was not covered by the questionnaire. The questionnaire was made available to the target student population between late April and June 2008.

## ASPECTS OF THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

*Revealing latent variables*

9. Exploratory factor analysis (principal components, with varimax rotation) of all but the final "recommend" item suggested a 6-Factor solution for the whole dataset, which accounted for 56.69% of the variance.

10. Two of the six factors have good reliabilities (Cronbach's alpha); three have reliabilities that are adequate for indicative purposes; and the reliability of the last is very poor, indicating that the two items from which it is formed are better treated as separate items. The five factors with reasonable reliability, together with three individual items, are given in Table 1 and are used as the basis for the analysis that follows.

**Table 1**  
FACTORS AND THEIR ASSOCIATED RELIABILITIES

<i>Label or short for of item</i>	<i>Factor</i>	<i>Reliability</i>
Programme quality (10 items)	1	0.902
Coping with demands (6 items)	2	0.683
Feedback (3 items)	3	0.859
Support Services (4 items)	4	0.653
Social engagement (2 items)	5	0.656
Worry about financing through HE	Item	N/A
Not able to attend all sessions	Item	N/A
Would recommend my PT programme	Item	N/A

11. Item-by-item analyses are provided in the final report (see Yorke and Longden, 2008 Statistical Appendices). The dataset falls considerably short in respect of the requirements for statistical testing. However where tests of statistical significance are used they are merely used to provide indicative levels of confidence regarding the significance of the differences. Where differences do occur, therefore, the possibility has to be entertained that these arise through an interaction effects amongst the variables. Such differences, however, invite investigation beyond the scope of this study as to their robustness.

**Table 2**  
LATENT VARIABLE DERIVED FROM FACTOR ANALYSIS WITH MEAN SCORES FOR EACH ITEM

<i>Latent variable name</i>	<i>Descriptive Statistics</i>	<i>Mean</i>
Coping with the program	Getting what expected	3.53
	Showed what needed to do	3.67
	Satisfied with quality/teaching	3.55
	Clear from start	3.74
	Satisfied with tutorial support	3.46
	<b>Program well organised</b>	<b>3.10</b>
	Program is intellectually stimulating	3.90
	Able to contact academics	3.73
	Clarity of asst criteria	3.73
	Feel belong to academic grouping	3.20

<i>Latent variable name</i>	<i>Descriptive Statistics</i>	<i>Mean</i>
	<b><i>Difficult to balance academic &amp; other</i></b>	<b>2.54</b>
	Difficult to study at home	3.22
	Not done background reading	3.53
Coping with demands	Coping with acad workload	3.64
	Academic work is harder than expected	3.23
	Scheduling of assts if a problem	3.19
	Feedback-detailed comments	3.30
Feedback	<b><i>Feedback-prompt</i></b>	<b>3.04</b>
	Feedback-helped learning	3.41
	Can access inst computing when need	3.74
	Library provision good enough	3.59
Support Services	Institutional catering is adequate	3.26
	Institutional support services sufficient	3.21
Social engagement	Made at least 1 close friend at instn	3.68
	Discuss acad work with others	3.69
Finance worries	<b><i>Worry about financing through HE</i></b>	<b>2.97</b>
Attending sessions	Not able to attend all sessions	3.18
Recommendations	Would recommend by PT prog	3.66

#### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

12. Two propositions are tested.

— *Proposition 1*

*Part-time students on full-time programs of study.*

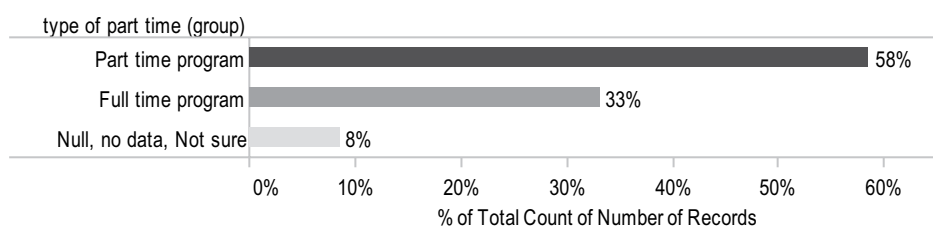
*Is there a perceived difference in the experience between those students who “fill-in” on full-time programs and that of students on programs designed specifically as part-time provision?*

13. Comparing the mean values for the latent variables indication that the type of provision makes a difference.

14. Two distinct types of provision can be identified—part-time study on a part-time program and part-time study on a full-time program (filling-in). It can be seen from Figure 1 that nearly 60 per cent of the students in the survey were on “filling-in” on full-time programs. The latter arrangement can be seen by some providers as a means by which revenue can be secured with little additional expenditure. Teaching space and faculty have already been committed to the full-time program of study and slotting a part-time student into a full-time program is viewed as economically sensible—the part-time student is “filling-in”.

**Figure 1**

#### TYPE OF PROGRAMS THAT PART-TIME STUDENTS EXPERIENCE



15. Students filling-in on full-time programs commented strongly on the failure of teachers to appreciate that part-time students might not be able to fulfil requirements as rapidly as their full-time peers.

16. Comparing the grouped responses from the two modes of engagement hints at problems in coping with demand “infilling” students’ ratings being generally less positive. The item-by-item analysis (refer to Yorke and Longden, 2008 for a detailed exposition of the analysis) shows that the difference between the two modes of engagement is concentrated in the areas of program organisation (a matter that institutions should be able to address) and in the students’ inability to attend all sessions (which, for a full-time program, may be less easily amenable to institutional intervention).

**Table 3**

## TYPE OF PROVISION AND THE LATENT VARIABLE: COMPARING MEANS VALUES AND SIGNIFICANCE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MEANS

<i>Descriptive Statistics</i>	<i>mean</i>		<i>T-test</i>	<i>significance</i>
	<i>PT on PT</i>	<i>PT on FT</i>	<i>p value</i>	
Not able to attend all sessions	<b>3.28</b>	<b>3.04</b>	<b>0.00</b>	***
Social engagement (2)	<b>3.73</b>	<b>3.59</b>	<b>0.01</b>	***
Would recommend my PT programm	<b>3.71</b>	<b>3.56</b>	<b>0.01</b>	***
Support Services (4)	3.49	3/40	0.02	*
Worry about financing through HE	3.04	2.87	0.02	*
Coping with demands (6)	3.25	3.19	0.13	
Feedback (3)	3.26	3.19	0.17	
Programme quality (10)	3.58	3.53	0.22	

17. It is unclear why those studying part-time on a full-time program should evidence a higher level of concern over financing their studies than those who were studying on a part-time program. Part-time students on full-time programs of study exhibit low mean scores for the item relating to not being able to attend all sessions (Table 3). Possible explanations for the difference include: organisational aspects of the program that militate against regular attendance for those students who are part time and irregularity of the program timetable allocation.

**Table 4**

## DICHOTOMISED DATA FOR TYPE OF PROGRAM COMPARING THE MEAN SCORES FOR CONTRIBUTING LATENT VARIABLE ITEMS

<i>Latent variables</i>	<i>Descriptive Statistics</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Part-time on</i>	<i>Part-time on</i>	<i>significance</i>
			<i>part time program</i>	<i>full-time program</i>	
			<i>Mean</i>	<i>Mean</i>	
Program quality	Getting what expected	941	3.56	3.48	*
	Showed what needed to do	937	3.68	3.66	
	Satisfied with quality/teaching	932	3.53	3.60	
	Clear from start	942	3.78	3.66	***
	Satisfied with tutorial support	935	3.47	3.43	
	Program well organised	939	3.14	<b>2.98</b>	*
	Program is intellectually stimulating	938	3.91	3.91	
	Able to contact academics	932	3.75	3.68	
	Clarity of asst criteria	932	3.74	3.72	
Coping with demands	Feel belong to academic grouping	897	3.21	3.16	
	Difficult to balance academic & other	934	2.58	2.44	
	Difficult to study at home	932	3.27	3.14	*
	Not done background reading	923	3.51	3.54	
	Coping with acad workload	937	3.66	3.60	
	Academic work is harder than expected	936	3.23	3.26	
Feedback	Scheduling of assts if a problem	938	3.23	3.16	
	Feedback-detailed comments	916	3.32	3.24	
	Feedback-prompt	919	<b>3.06</b>	<b>2.98</b>	
Support Services	Feedback-helped learning	905	3.43	3.35	
	Can access inst computing when need	871	3.77	3.71	
	Library provision good enough	907	3.62	3.56	
	Institutional catering is adequate	826	3.31	3.20	
Social engagement	Institutional support services sufficient	824	3.26	3.11	*
	Made at least 1 close friend at instn	901	3.74	3.59	*
	Discuss acad work with others	926	3.75	3.61	***
	Not able to attend all sessions	909	3.28	<b>3.04</b>	***

<i>Latent variables</i>	<i>Descriptive Statistics</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Part-time on part-time program</i> <i>Mean</i>	<i>Part-time on full-time program</i> <i>Mean</i>	<i>significance</i>
	Worry about financing through HE	827	3.04	<b>2.87</b>	*
	Would recommend by part-time program	926	3.71	3.56	*

\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

\*  $p < 0.05$

18. When the two means for type of provision with respect to the variable “*social engagement*” are considered the difference indicates that the difference is not a chance event (Table 4). It could be argued that part-time students on a part-time program are all in the same boat and therefore that social interactions are facilitated. In contrast those students on full-time programs may “feel” that they are missing out or are less able to integrate into the class, with barriers possibly reinforced unwittingly by faculty when they treat the class as a homogenous group of full-time students pay insufficient attention to the presence of part-time students with specific needs and concerns.

19. Where a part-time student was on a full-time program of study the data suggest that there is a significant difference ( $p > 0.01$ ) in attendance with those students on part-time constructed programs. It could be argued that a difference of this nature could be down to the lack of recognition by the teaching staff that part-time students are on the program.

20. For quite a large number of respondents co-presence (ie part-time and full-time on the same full-time program) gave rise to difficulties. This can be exemplified by the three comments which part-timers felt that they missed out on administrative information:

*Failure to recognise the fact that part-time students may be in full-time employment and that by giving a return time of 4pm for an assignment on the first day of College means that time must be taken off from work as annual leave .....—[574: Female; 46–55, Bachelor’s degree, Law].*

21. The trade-off between the negative and positive aspects derived from part-time study is clearly expressed in the following extract.

*The best of times, the worst of times! Being invisible—part time students get left out of the general buzz. We’re left out of even university admin level information .... It’s assumed we know things about our course work because full time students have been given info on days we don’t attend. Our experience is fragmented—we don’t form the bonds that full time students make. On the plus side, it gives us a fantastic opportunity to study and improve our situation. It offers stimulation and challenge that everyday life fails to offer ....—[788, Female, Bachelor’s degree, Creative Arts].*

22. While if organisation and communication issues for part-time students had been considered in advance the experience would have been improved and appreciated.

*The fact that part-time students are virtually treated like second class citizens. The provision made for support, administration, such as handing in or picking up coursework is poor. Furthermore, full-time students get far more information regarding career advice and have greater access to guest speakers or other student activities.—[681, Female, 36–40, bachelor’s degree, Law].*

23. Where both full-time and part-time students were on the same program (or part thereof), the bias seemed to be towards the circumstances of the former rather than the latter.

*A large proportion of the students on this course are part-time and hold down full-time jobs, but a lot of tutors/admin support do not take this into account and consequently have unrealistic expectations of the amount of time that we can devote to the course outside of the scheduled lectures.—[140: Female; 26–30; Bachelor’s degree; Architecture, Building & Planning].*

— *Proposition 2*

*relates to costs—tuition and maintenance expenses and sources for payment*

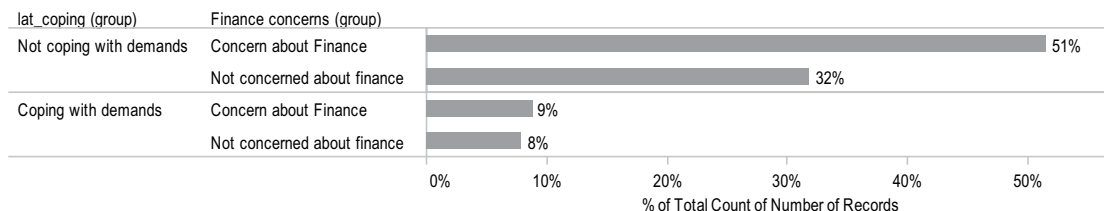
*What are the sources of funding for part-time study and what is the impact that the source has on coping with the academic demand of part-time study?*

24. The mean score for the latent variable item relating to “worried about finance” (highlighted in Table 2) implies that financial matters were a concern for the part-time student population. The mean scores for the dichotomised item “worried about finance” when tested against each of the latent variables reveals a significance difference for “coping with the demands of part-time study” ( $p < 0.01$ ). The mean differences are shown in Figure 2.

25. What can be deduced from this? It could be argued that the concerns over finance were impacting on the smooth operation of part-time study and creating secondary tensions that were materialising in an increasing concern over the academic demands of the program.

Figure 2

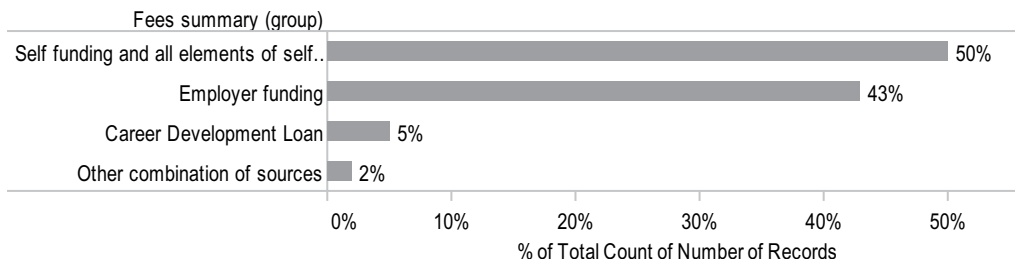
MEAN SCORE RESPONSES FOR DICHOTOMISED DATA ON LATENT VARIABLE ITEM “COPING WITH DEMANDS” AND “CONCERN ABOUT FINANCE”



26. Worry about finance has at least two elements of importance. The first is the tuition fees levied by the university for attending the program, receiving tuition, marking work, assessing performance using resources. For some students financial support for paying these fees is crucial aspect of part-time study. Figure 3 shows that many students managed to secure funding from their employer (43%). In contrast, over 50% were responsible for their own charges. When the various mixes of funding elements are taken into account, those relying on a mixture of self funding and support from the LEA pushes the percentage of self funding exceeds the percentage support from the employer alone.

Figure 3

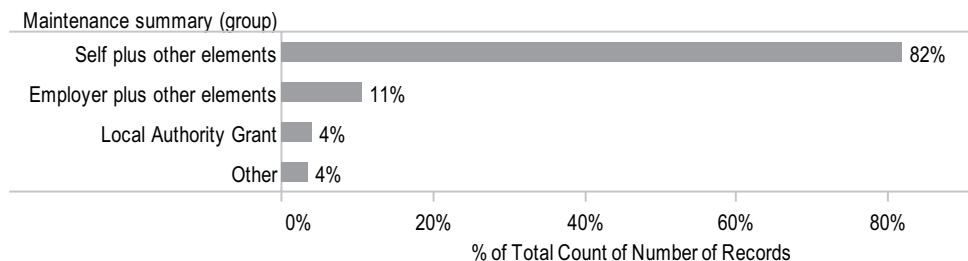
SOURCE OF FUNDING FOR UNDERGRADUATE PART-TIME STUDY



27. The second element is the maintenance costs for travel and material and perhaps loss of pay.

Figure 4

SOURCES OF MAINTENANCE FUNDING FOR PART-TIME STUDY



28. Self funding (82%) is made up of a “self funding” alone (71%), plus a mixture of “self funding” supplemented by “other sources” (11%) such as employer and LEA (Figure 4). The following student comments succinctly identify elements of the additional costs that part-time students incur without recourse to financial aid:

*Travel/car parking costs/accommodation for residential weekends far from ideal (but little can be done about it).—[2038, Male, 41–45, Foundation degree, Business and Administrative Studies]*

*Juggling workloads, lack of free time/social life, costs for travelling, parking around campus, the price of coffee.—[975, Female, 36–40, Bachelor’s degree, Business and Administrative Studies].*

#### ISSUES RAISED BY THIS PAPER

29. Some methodological caveats need to be reiterated. Although there are nearly 2,000 undergraduate responses in the analysis, these are a small proportion of the number of part-time students in the participating institutions. Reiterating the view expressed earlier in the paper, where statistical measures have been used they provide indicative pointers of possible underlying influences and worthy of further investigation. Hence caution needs to be taken when drawing inferences and conclusions. The picture suggested by the data is more like a pen-and-ink sketch than a finely-detailed photograph. A sketch can, of course, draw attention to features of interest.

30. This study has shown that, in general, the respondents had a strongly positive view of their part-time studies. Part-time study is particularly demanding for many students who have to juggle more commitments than (especially younger) students on full-time programs. The responses to this survey indicate that considerable respect needs to be accorded to those who take the part-time route.

31. The present study does, however, raise a number of issues which merit further attention.

#### *Issues for consideration by institutional providers*

32. The analysis, inclusion of part-time students on full-time programs, implicitly invites institutions to consider whether their provision for part-time students stands in need of enhancement. Some felt that institutional provision reflected a bias towards full-time study, and that the needs of part-time students were not adequately taken into account. Maybe this is related to the absence of clearly defined performance measures comparable to a full-time student, a point identified by King (2008: 10) in her report on part-time study to the Secretary of State.

33. From the free response comments to the survey questionnaire there are some clear messages that need to be addressed.

- The making of appropriate allowances for the particular circumstances of part-time students, in which the balancing of time between employment, home and academic study is rather different than for those who are enrolled as full-time students.
- Increased opportunity for greater interactions with peers (for learning and mutual support), and to having more of an opportunity to engage in the explicitly social aspects of higher education.

34. A briefing paper from Birkbeck College cited in King’s report (2008) implies that Government’s unwillingness to support part-time students is based “*on the erroneous assumption that they can afford it, or that their employers are helping them*”.

35. Evidence of a widespread concern over financial aspects of part-time study has been provided in this submission—it is clear that Government’s assumption needs further testing.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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January 2008

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## Memorandum 92

### Submission from Stonewall

1. This paper contains Stonewall's response to the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee's inquiry into students and universities. Stonewall is a national organisation that has campaigned for equality for the 3.6 million lesbian, gay and bisexual people across Britain since 1989.

2. Stonewall welcome the Committee's decision to investigate students and universities. Stonewall believe that all of the key areas identified by the Committee are important, but this response will focus primarily on admissions and student support and engagement.

#### SUMMARY

- Although higher education institutions have made progress in relation to race, disability and gender equality, sexual orientation equality is still broadly neglected.
- Higher education institutions continue to face challenges to successfully admit and retain undergraduates who are lesbian, gay or bisexual.
- Lesbian, gay and bisexual people experience high levels of discrimination and bullying at school. Their aspirations may be affected—making them less likely to aim to enter higher education. Homophobic bullying continues into higher education institutions.
- Estrangement from parents is also common. Some gay students find that parents stop funding them after they come out as gay. It is difficult to be re-assessed. This impacts on attainment and can lead to students dropping out.
- The combination of financial difficulties and discrimination can lead to a disproportionately high drop-out rate for lesbian, gay and bisexual students.
- If higher education institutions' support infrastructures were better equipped to respond to the particular needs of some gay students, it is likely issues could be resolved before students dropped out. This would significantly reduce non-completions.
- If the Local Authority Assessment process was better prepared to respond to parental estrangement this would also impact on non-completion rates.
- The higher education sector has a limited understanding of the barriers gay students face and often fails to appreciate the short, medium and long-term impact these barriers may have on admissions, retention and participation.
- Stonewall believes that higher education institutions need to demonstrate a greater commitment to sexual orientation equality.

#### ADMISSIONS

3. Stonewall welcomes the Committee's focus on admissions—in particular the commitment firstly to examine the implementation and success of initiatives to widen participation and secondly to consider the role of Government in developing and promoting fair access and admissions policies for the UK Higher Education sector.

4. The widening participation agenda is about increasing not only the numbers of young people entering higher education, but also the proportion from under-represented groups. However, Stonewall understands that higher education institutions continue to face a wide range of challenges to successfully recruiting, and retaining, undergraduates who are lesbian, gay or bisexual. There are also complex interactions between students who are lesbian and gay and from low-income backgrounds.

5. Lesbian, gay and bisexual people experience a high level of discrimination when at school. *The School Report*, 2007, which surveyed over 1000 young lesbian, gay and bisexual pupils, found that 65% have experienced direct bullying and half of these students have skipped school because of it. The research also found that gay pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds are twice as likely as white pupils to disagree with the statement "I plan to go to university or college when I finish school" and three times more likely to disagree with the statement "It is important for me to finish school with good qualifications."



6. Stonewall believes that young people's experiences at school may affect the choices they make in relation to further and higher education. For example, young people may drop out of school or they may not achieve their expected grades because of bullying. Schools may be reluctant to explain these particular circumstances in supporting statements and young gay people may think they will be discriminated against by the university or college if they disclose their experiences in their personal statement.

7. The widening participation agenda encourages schools to outline the context in which students have achieved their grades or predicted grades, for example, the family background of the student and the average GCSE and A-level rates in their school. Similar disclosures should be encouraged that outline whether a pupil has found it particularly difficult to enjoy and achieve at school because of homophobic bullying.

8. The aspirations of victims of bullying may be severely affected—lesbian and gay pupils are less likely to aim to enter higher education as a result. In some cases bullying can also contribute to mental health issues. *Prescription for Change* (2008) found that half of all lesbian and bisexual women under the age of 20 have self harmed and 16% have attempted to take their life. *The School Report* also found that more than half of lesbian and gay pupils don't feel able to be themselves at school.

9. Young gay people also express concern about whether they will be able to afford to go to university. Despite extensive investment in student funding, many potential students believe that parental contributions are an essential pre-requisite to attending a higher education course. For lesbian and gay students, this may be perceived to be an insurmountable barrier, particularly if parents have indicated that they do not intend to support their child since they have come out as lesbian, gay or bisexual. It is very difficult for a potential student to find information about other options in these circumstances. This is also an issue for students who have already started a course.

#### STUDENT SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

10. Stonewall welcomes the Committee's focus on student support and engagement—in particular the decision to examine both the non-completion of higher education programmes by students and the adequacy of current funding and student support packages. Stonewall believes that these two areas are inextricably linked and that gay students may face certain specific challenges across these connected areas.

11. Through Stonewall's work with young people we know that for many young gay people university is a time when they have opportunities to discuss and consider their sexual orientation. Being away from home, parents and school, many students feel more able to explore their sexuality and consequently many come out for the first time while at university.

12. Coming out can be stressful for young gay people and may have emotional and mental implications. In some cases coming out can also lead to a breakdown in the relationship between gay students and their parents.

13. This estrangement from parents often has serious financial repercussions. After coming out some gay students find that their parents cease to provide adequate funding in line with their Local Authority Assessment. It is very difficult for students in this situation to be re-assessed. This impacts on attainment and can lead to students dropping out of university.

14. Stonewall would also stress that the high levels of homophobic bullying in our schools often continue into higher education. Bullies who have never been told that their actions are wrong are unlikely to arrive at university with values of respect and fairness. Further data on this subject will shortly be available from the Equality Challenge Unit (see paragraph 19).

15. The combination of financial difficulties and discrimination can lead to a disproportionately high drop-out rate for lesbian, gay and bisexual students. Although Higher Education Institutions have made considerable progress in relation to race, disability and gender equality, sexual orientation equality is still broadly neglected. No higher education institutions are in the Stonewall Top 100 Workplace Equality Index and DIUS are not members of the Stonewall Diversity Champions Programme.

16. Stonewall feels these issues are highly relevant to the Committee's inquiry. If higher education institutions' support infrastructures made specific provision for lesbian, gay and bisexual students and were better prepared to deal with their particular needs, it is likely that issues could be resolved before they developed into the kind of larger problems that ultimately result in students dropping out of university. This would significantly reduce non-completions.

17. Similarly, in relation to the adequacy of current funding and student support packages, it is likely that if the Local Authority Assessment process was better prepared to respond to the issue of parental estrangement among gay students this would also impact positively on non-completion rates.

#### CONCLUSION

18. In conclusion, Stonewall believes that higher education institutions need to demonstrate a greater commitment to sexual orientation equality and understand some of the potential barriers faced by students. Stonewall has a perception that the higher education sector in general has only a limited grasp of the unique barriers that gay students face and fails to appreciate the short, medium and long-term impact that these barriers may have on admissions, retention and participation.

19. The Equality Challenge Unit, a unit for advancing equality in Higher Education funded by HEFCE, has recently commissioned a study conducted by Professor Gill Valentine of Leeds University to investigate the experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual students and staff in higher education. The study is likely to provide further in-depth evidence about the experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual people in higher education, including information about estrangement from parents. The report is being launched on 4 March 2009. Preliminary findings indicate lesbian, gay and bisexual students experience a range of barriers to fully accessing and participating in higher education.

March 2009

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### Memorandum 93

#### Submission from John Wildman

##### STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

###### 1. *Statement of Personal Background Experience*

1. I lost the hearing in my left ear due to a cholesteatoma (a benign tumour) at the age of 16. Nevertheless, I achieved a place at the University of Liverpool to read a Bachelor's degree in Psychology and Neuroscience which I started in September 2000.

2. Although I had declared my disability, I was not provided with note-takers for lectures, sometimes for entire modules. The University later claimed that this was my duty to arrange.

3. The University did not put the SENDA provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act in place for my cohort of students in 2003. There were no alternative dates for examinations or adjustments based on need.

4. In my second year the tumour began to re-grow and worsened in my final year. This caused dizziness, tinnitus, infections and severe pain. I fell and broke my wrist requiring an operation. Three letters from my ENT Consultant to the University were disregarded. I was advised by my tutor to complete my degree, delaying an operation on my ear condition.

5. Agreed extensions to course work were not honoured and the University capped my coursework marks. My supervisor for my "Third Year Project" resigned and was not replaced. I was failed by 1% for this element.

6. Due to a certified illness, I missed three examinations in my final year. There was no opportunity to sit them on an alternative date.

7. I was awarded a Pass degree instead of the 2.1 which was my expectation. This meant that I was ineligible for Graduate Basis for Registration (GBR) with the British Psychological Society (BPS).

8. Soon after I graduated, I underwent the operation that I had previously delayed. This went wrong because I was not given antibiotics and this left me very ill for over a year. Consequently, I was unable to bring the University to account under the Disability Discrimination Act because I missed the six month time limit for bringing action.

9. My complaints under the University system were all handled by the same Director who was responsible for disability support at the University. Complaints to University Council members were not substantially answered.

10. A complaint to the University Visitor, administered by the Office of Independent Adjudicators for Higher Education (OIA) was unsuccessful. A Small Claims Court action was similarly unsuccessful. In both cases the University position was put only by the Director responsible. He incurred £18,500 in legal costs.

11. At no point did the University attempt to seek a solution to my situation and rejected my advances about re-sitting my third year.

12. I subsequently gained a Master's degree in Sport and Exercise Science (Psychology) at Manchester Metropolitan.

13. Without the GBR, I could not enrol for a specialist psychology Master's accredited by the BPS. Only with the Secretary of State's approval of the Disability Discrimination Code of Practice for Professional Organisations did the BPS make a "reasonable adjustment" and admit me to GBR in October 2008.

14. I have applied for many PhD and NHS clinical and research jobs. All have required a 2.1 or First at undergraduate degree level. My Master's degree is disregarded.

###### 2. *Disability Issues in Higher Education*

1. I accept that understanding of the duties and provision of services has improved considerably since my experience of the negligence of the University of Liverpool. Since leaving university, I have had involvement with the charity Scope which provided into work initiatives for graduates with disabilities. However, this scheme has recently been mothballed.

2. My own case was recently featured in the Higher Education Academy conference “Into the professions: enabling entry and success for disabled learners.”

3. The number of Disability cases against Universities brought in the County Court is very small, but this probably reflects the difficulty of the process. Awards by the OIA in disability cases are very low.

#### PROPOSALS

1. HEI’s must be given greater responsibility for assisting students with disabilities into work. This will encourage improved perceptions of their employability and clarify competencies.

2. Cases within the Disability Discrimination Act Part 4, Further and Higher Education, should be brought before the more familiar and appropriately experienced Tribunal Service.

3. A nominated University Council member should have responsibility for disability issues.

#### 3. *QAA Code of Practice*

1. The QAA issues Codes of Practice on a number of topics to condition the delivery of university activities. These are not mandatory, given the “light touch” supervisory regime of QAA and Funding Councils.

2. The University I attended did not have in place measures meeting QAA Code standards on:

- Disability
- Student Complaints
- Public Law (Nolan Committee) standards

3. I asked HEFCE to investigate these matters under its “whistle blowing” process. This was refused on the basis that they could not respond to student complaints.

4. It is a contradiction that the Quality Assurance Authority precepts are not enforced. The Codes set out standards, not aspirations and are often reiterations of requirements in other regulations.

5. Students should have a reasonable expectation that the university they choose will adhere to the “industry standards” set by the Quality Authority.

6. Proposal: That QAA Codes of Practice are mandatory and that this is a principle of the Funding Councils’ memorandum with universities.

#### 4. *The Academic Record and entering work*

1. My attendance at lectures, seminars and tutorials while at university was very good. Disability related illness and injury significantly affected only my final year, final term, examinations and assessments, for which the University had no alternative arrangements

2. An employer within the NHS has recently asked me to provide evidence of the areas of study in which I had engaged as part of a “reasonable adjustment”. In specialist fields of practical application like my own (Psychology and Neuroscience) this has more relevance than a degree standard based on a short period of examination. Thus, the Academic Record enables compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act.

3. I applied for a PhD training studentship at the Institute of Hearing Research (part of the Medical Research Council). The Research topic embraced areas with which I was familiar. However, the required competency was for a First or 2.1 degree in any of a range of disparate scientific disciplines. An Academic Record would better match applicants to job requirements.

#### CONCLUSION

4. The Academic Record is warmly endorsed

#### 5. *The Status and Function of the Master’s Degree*

1. The number and variety of Master’s degree courses has increased as people choose specialisms, vocational study or enhancement of their first degree awards.

2. The abolition of funding for Equal and Lower Qualifications will increase this trend.

3. Because of the diversity of awards, there appears to be an unwillingness to recognise the academic merit of a Master’s degree.

4. Appointment minimum qualification standards set by the NHS and Research Councils are for a 2.1 or First at first degree level. The value of a Master’s is taken to raise a 2.2 to 2.1 level. This places a Master’s as equivalent to a Second Class degree.

5. This position is not consistent with the perception of a Master’s as a higher level degree (level 5 qualification).

6. It is accepted, however, that the increase in Master’s degrees of a vocational nature may have devalued the academic status of the qualification.

PROPOSAL

7. That the “Master’s” degree be examined, with the possible outcome of differentiating between those of a vocational nature and those which enhance academic progression.

6. *Appointment to PhD Studentships*

1. Anecdotal evidence and personal experience indicate that very few PhD studentships carrying a stipend funded by Research Councils are awarded to graduates who studied outside the host institution.

2. A recent advertisement for a PhD scholarship required applicants to have a “first class degree from a prestigious university”.

3. The majority of research funding and thus PhD opportunities is directed through Russell Group Universities.

4. This progression through to doctorate studies under present arrangements is not reflecting “Wider Access” aspirations.

PROPOSAL

5. (a) That PhD opportunities must be advertised outside the host institution

(b) That an appointment panel include an independent member.

7. *Student Complaints*

My experience of using the Office of Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education’s service for resolving my dispute with the University of Liverpool proved to have a number of flaws:

1. The OIA process is one of review. As such, it presumes that the student’s complaint has been already closely considered by the university’s internal processes and that that process meets QAA standards.

2. The QAA has a Code of Practice which establishes minimum standards for university complaint procedures.

3. In March 2007, Professor Neville Harris of the University of Manchester Law Department found that the quality of procedures varies widely across the sector and that there was an increased risk of unfairness occurring.

4. In my own case, I did not have the opportunity to personally put my case to anybody of the University or the OIA. This opportunity is required by Human Rights legislation.

5. The OIA did not have a grasp of the Disability Discrimination Act, which was the basis of my complaint.

6. The OIA reiterates the Public Law precepts of the Nolan Committee in its guarantee, yet all the complaints I made against the university, including to the OIA, were handled by the same manager that was responsible for those issues which were the subject of the complaint.

7. I was young and ill and from a “Wider Access” background. The process of appeal against the adverse OIA decision, through a Judicial Review, was not a realistic option. Indeed, the education solicitor I consulted clearly did not know how to go about it.

8. The OIA argument for its own continuation is its own relative economy. However, the costs and consequences to students of a failure in the university/student relationship are considerable.

PROPOSAL

9. That the OIA is wound up and the dispute process beyond those within the University be vested in the Tribunals Service.

I understand that the OIA has itself instituted a review of its arrangements, to which I have contributed.

*December 2009*

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**Memorandum 94**

**Supplementary evidence from Professor Paul Ramsden, Chief Executive, Higher Education Academy, following the oral evidence session on Monday 9 March 2009**

Thank you for the opportunity to give oral evidence to the Committee’s inquiry into students and universities.

As time was short I thought it might be helpful to provide some brief additional information in response to two of the questions put to me by Mr Gordon Marsden MP.

## ROLE OF THE ACADEMY

I am confident that the Academy has made a positive difference to the quality of the student experience in UK higher education. Perhaps our greatest strength is that we can work right across the sector and do things that no university or college could do on its own. The Professional Standards Framework is a good example of where we have been able to develop criteria for teaching and supporting student learning that apply across the whole of UK undergraduate higher education.

We provide a focal point for raising the status of teaching—through our fellowship schemes, through accrediting universities' and colleges' approaches to initial teacher training and CPD, and through our research activities. We celebrate excellent teaching through the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme (England and NI) and through our fellowship scheme, which is available to academic staff who have achieved the criteria set out in the Professional Standards Framework.

We support networks of academics at subject level, providing resources for individuals and departments to enhance the student learning experience. Overall our subject centres have contacts with around 85% of academic departments.

We bring together and into the open successful approaches for improving the student experience, allowing universities and colleges to learn from each other.

Specific projects have brought about changes in many institutions and we have case study evidence relating to, for example, the NSS, first year experience report, our post graduate research and post graduate taught projects and Change Academy.

## WORK WITH STUDENTS

The Academy involves students in its work at all levels—from membership of our Board, to strategic partnerships with the NUS, to work with individual students in our subject centres. Examples include:

### *Policy level*

- The Academy is an active partner in SPARQS (Student Participation in Quality Scotland)
- The Academy participates in the Cross Sector Group including members from DIUS, HEFCE, UUK, GuildHE, NUS, QAA
- We contributed to the development of DIUS's response to the National Student Forum's first annual report

### *Institutional level*

- Change Academy's institutional teams must include a student
- We have launched a project to further the involvement of disabled students in higher education by increasing the level of meaningful engagement of disabled students in institutional quality mechanisms.
- Our assessment team has worked with institutional teams comprising students and staff to enhance institutional assessment strategies.

### *Discipline level*

- A collaboration between SPARQS and Subject Centres has initiated five discipline-specific student networks in Scotland. On the basis of the experience gained, we are planning the first UK wide discipline student network.
- Subject Centres deliver student specific events, which have included:
  - weekend residential organised by the UK Centre for Materials Education (UKCME) for class reps focusing on students as change agents
  - workshops to develop professionalism in teaching for postgraduates who teach eg Psychology, Maths Stats & OR
  - Student survey by Economics which attracted 2000 replies from 56 HEIs
- Subject Centre projects engaging students:
  - The Centre for Education in the Built Environment is working with a cohort of 3rd year students to design their own curriculum
  - UKCME is supporting the Department of Materials Science and Metallurgy at the University of Cambridge in establishing practices for using students as “curriculum developers” to work alongside academics to produce electronic-based teaching and learning packages.
- Student-focused resources (such as the Employability guides developed by Philosophy and Religious Studies)
- Subject Centre student essay competition

*Formal engagement of students in the Academy's structures and mechanisms*

- Student representatives on the NTFS individual and project strand panels.
- Research and Evaluation Advisory Group and Senior Fellowship Committee includes an NUS representative.
- We are committed to increasing the number of Subject Centre Advisory Panels that include a student representative.
- The Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences and Economics subject centres have successfully hosted student interns.

I would be happy to provide any further information you may need to assist your inquiry.

March 2009

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**Memorandum 95**

**Supplementary evidence from Professor Geoffrey Alderman following  
the oral evidence session on 9 March 2009**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Universities in the UK are free to launch degree programmes in whatever subjects they please, no matter how controversial, sensational or inappropriate.
- Neither the Quality Assurance Agency nor any other body has authority to prohibit a university from launching a particular programme of study.

SUBMISSION

1. Following my oral evidence to the Select Committee on Monday 9 March 2009 a member of the committee suggested to me that I might wish to submit a short supplementary note which addressed an issue that had been raised on 9 March. The issue is simply this: what action might the Quality Assurance Agency take in respect of a UK university that announced it was launching a Bachelor of Science degree in—say—Homeopathy or indeed Astrology?

2. The answer is that there is no action the QAA could take other than to make a judgment as to the *process* by which the degree had come to be authorised.

3. Suppose a university wished to launch a BSc in Astrology. It would draw up a curriculum, supported no doubt by a Programme Specification Template (as mandated by the QAA) and a statement locating the proposed degree within the Qualifications Framework for Higher Education. Doubtless the views of a couple of suitably qualified external assessors would be garnered—say two practising astrologers who wrote weekly newspaper columns. All this material, plus a business plan, would make its way through the appropriate committee structure—typically the university's Planning Committee, Academic Board and Senate (or similar). Then marketing would begin, followed by recruitment of students, and teaching would commence. At least one external examiner would need to be appointed—again probably a practising astrologer, perhaps one who had authored some books and had a university degree. The programme would be up and running!

4. In due course the programme would come within the purview of a QAA institutional audit. But all that the auditors would be concerned with would be that the relevant sections of the QAA's *Code of Practice* had been followed—on programme approval and monitoring, student support and guidance and so on—and that due deference had been paid to the Qualifications Framework. It would be no business of the QAA to suggest that—perchance—Astrology might not be an entirely suitable subject to be taught at a UK university—let alone for the award of a BSc degree. Matters of that sort are entirely outside the QAA's purview.

5. Interestingly, in the USA universities must seek the specific approval of their regional accrediting commissions for each degree programme that they wish to run, and for which they wish their students to be eligible for Federal financial aid. An accrediting commission could tell a university that Astrology was not a suitable subject for the award of a BSc degree, and that approval of it, therefore, would not be forthcoming. There is—currently—no body with a similar authority in the UK.

March 2009

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**Memorandum 96**
**Memorandum from Professor Charles E Engel related to the evidence session on Monday 9 March 2009**

1. The emphasis appeared to relate to non-professional higher education only.
2. No overriding criteria seemed to be offered in relation to the general and specific aims of higher education which could act as “touch stones” for the acceptability, effectiveness and efficiency of the components and outcomes of a degree curriculum.
3. The evidence did not appear to attempt to explore the relationship of performance prior to, and subsequent to graduation (how does a superb degree relate to the recipient’s subsequent contribution to society?). What independent, long term evaluation has or is being undertaken?
4. Where selection of students is concerned, research over some ten years at a medical school demonstrated that students with lower school leaving attainment from less privileged schools succeeded equally well during and by the conclusion of a demanding five year curriculum. One contributing factor was thought to be the affect of an integrated, cumulative curriculum. In the absence of modules all disciplines contributed throughout the curriculum (in a problem-based learning setting).
5. The educational disadvantages of the modular design of many academic curricula would suggest that the design of courses might benefit from revision with the needs of the 21st Century in mind.
6. One major impediment may be the persistent autonomy of separate disciplines which make an integrated development and application of knowledge and understanding quite difficult for students. There is now some experience with the application of matrix management for the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of cumulative, integrated curricula, where academics from the participating disciplines can collaborate—not as guardians of their respective discipline.
7. Perhaps more attention might be paid to the nature and application of assessment and the consequent affect on students’ learning.
  - 7.1 Active, self directed and reflective learning (leading to lifelong learning) would call for frequent formative, informal assessment for rapid guidance of the individual student’s learning..
  - 7.2 Less frequent summative assessment would also contribute to the student’s educational development in a maturation process designed to foster progressive maturation from late adolescence to adult membership of society.
  - 7.3 Where collaboration, rather than inhibiting competition, is the educational aim, emphasis on grading ought to be avoided.
8. Teaching would preferably be regarded as a range of different activities and responsibilities, including not only face to face interaction with students but also mentoring, acting as a consultant to help students to arrive at their own insights, designing assessments, assessing students’ performance, designing curriculum constructs, selecting students, supervising research.
  - 8.1 Development in educational expertise might be seen as a gradual maturation process. Post doctoral academics may feel more secure in their current detailed knowledge and thus wish to emphasise this in their teaching. More senior academics, with their deep scholarship and appreciation of fundamental principles may be quite outstanding teachers. Thus teaching might be recognised as a privilege of more senior colleagues, while junior colleagues are still earning their academic spurs through their research.
  - 8.3 Where higher education is seen as preparation for productive adult citizenship, academic teachers ought to have experience of the outside world, rather than only the relative security of progression from school to undergraduate and postgraduate study and research, and thus on to academic posts. Successful teachers in professional subjects tend to remain active in professional practice. They are familiar with the need for continuing their further education.
9. One of the issues raised by the Committee was whether the standard of university education in this country was satisfactory. Both within the UK and elsewhere, eg North America, questions are being asked whether their respective higher education is adequate to prepare students for world wide competition in the 21st Century.
  - 9.1 This issue relates to the Recommendation in my Submission with Bland Tomkinson.

*March 2009*

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## Memorandum 97

### Submission from the University and College Union (UCU)

#### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

##### *Admissions*

UCU welcomes any curriculum development that boosts entry to HE. However, it is too early to evaluate whether a new qualifications strategy embedded in Diplomas will become a viable curriculum and learning strategy. In particular, we are concerned about the lack of practitioner involvement in the development of Diplomas.

UCU supports the government's objective of widening participation in HE, but we are concerned at the slow rate of progress. Continued investment is needed in widening participation activities in HE—as well as initiatives in schools and FE colleges—and in supporting “non-traditional” students once they are at a university or college of HE.

Further education colleges have a key role to play in meeting the government's HE participation targets. However, FE colleges will require additional resources to ensure that the student experience is comparable to that in purely HE institutions.

##### *The balance between teaching and research*

While large funding increases have gone into the research and science base, the unit of resource for teaching has remained static. Consequently, UCU members have to deal with much larger class sizes, have less time to spend with students and are increasingly employed on short-term, casual contracts.

Serious public investment in the HE teaching base is required. In particular, we favour:

- Increasing the proportion of UK public expenditure on higher education to the OECD average, of 1.1% of GDP;
- Transforming the career structure for fixed term staff, including the conversion of hourly paid teaching posts on to fractional contracts;
- Improved recognition of good teaching in the HE promotions and rewards system.

##### *Degree classification*

We welcome the debate on alternatives to the current degree classification system, though we recognise the difficulties in developing a consensus on this issue.

We acknowledge that significant concerns exist about the changing nature of academic standards in higher education. Issues of student preparedness are one of the key concerns cited by UCU members.

UCU receives occasional reports from members about pressure to admit or to pass students against their academic judgement. UCU believes that stronger procedures are needed to protect academic whistleblowers. A strengthened external examiner system should also form part of the protection of academic standards in higher education.

##### *Student support and engagement*

UCU—as the voice of practitioners in both further and higher education—welcomes various attempts to involve students as active participants in the learning process.

However, we are concerned that there has been a systematic attempt to downgrade the role of HE professionals in the formulation of policy. UCU believes that staff should have a clear, active voice in the governance of higher education institutions.

We would welcome a proper inquiry into the role of “for-profit” providers in higher education, including the growth of specialist English language providers.

We believe that the costs of offering financial support to poorer students should be shared by the sector as a whole, via the introduction of a national bursary scheme.

We also believe that something will need to be done about making access to post-graduate degree education available to those who are financially disadvantaged.

We urge the government to invest in higher education as part of a wider strategy to deal with the severe economic downturn.

#### INTRODUCTION

1. The University and College Union (UCU) represents 117,000 further and higher education lecturers, managers, researchers and many academic-related staff such as librarians, administrators and computing professionals across the UK. We welcome the opportunity to respond to the select committee inquiry into students and universities. Given the broad-ranging nature of the inquiry it has not been possible to respond to all the questions. Instead, we have decided to focus on what our members perceive to be the key issues: namely, fees and funding, academic standards and the balance between teaching and research.



2. Our response will also focus on a number of cross-cutting themes: the importance of practitioner voice, the need for a cross-sectoral approach, and the centrality of public investment in our higher education system. On the latter, we believe that expanding higher education funding and increasing participation, rather than restricting the growth in funded places and student support, ought to be an important policy lever in coping with the current economic downturn.

### *Admissions*

The effectiveness of the process for admission to HEIs, including A Levels, Advanced Diplomas, apprenticeships and university entrance tests.

3. UCU strongly supported and actively contributed to the Tomlinson Review of 14–19 curriculum, assessment and reform, a comprehensive architecture for learning from which the Diplomas were unfortunately extracted. So whilst UCU welcomes any curriculum development that boosts entry to HE it is too early to evaluate whether a new qualifications strategy embedded in Diplomas for the assessment of learning, which must compete with A Levels, will become a viable curriculum and learning strategy used by a wide range of learners.

4. UCU also strongly supported the Tomlinson proposal to use existing qualifications as “building blocks” over a ten year piloting period, effectively utilising the expertise of 14–19 practitioners in refining them into an overarching Diploma strategy.

Unfortunately, 14–19 and HE practitioner voice has not been brought into this process and, if at all, too little and too late. We suspect that Diplomas, like most of their predecessors (eg “Curriculum 2000”, GNVQs), will need to be re-evaluated and re-configured to better meet and match the needs of learners, HEIs and employers.

5. We would also urge the Committee not to overlook the tried, trusted and valued route for otherwise insufficiently qualified adults to enter HE, the Access to HE courses successfully developed by HEI and FEC partnerships over the last thirty years.

The UK’s ability to meet government targets for Higher Education participation and the relevance of these targets

6. We believe it is more important that providers of HE have sufficient resources to meet adequately the demands of additional student numbers—especially being able to retain students drawn into the sector through widening participation activities—than to meet particular targets.

7. Nevertheless, the UK’s ability to meet government targets for higher education participation will depend partly on the role played by further education colleges. In fact, we are disappointed that the current inquiry refers only to universities. Further education colleges (FECs) are a key source of recruits into higher education as well as an important component of HE provision, with more than 10% of those studying for HE qualifications doing so in FECs.

8. We support the further development of HE in FECs, including the delivery of sub-degree programmes and filling in the geographic gaps on HE coverage. However, colleges will require additional resources to ensure that the student experience is comparable to that in purely HE institutions. It requires proper resourcing of the college infrastructure, (library facilities and ICT provision), improved opportunities for FE staff to undertake scholarly and research activity in their subject area, alongside the expansion of student activities (for example, the development of clubs or societies, and the inclusion of student representatives on governing bodies).

The implementation and success of widening participation initiatives such as Compact agreements, and the impact of the current funding regime on these objectives and the role of the Government in developing and promoting fair access and admissions policies for the UK Higher Education sector

9. We strongly support the government’s policy of widening participation in higher education. Since 1997, public spending in England on supporting widening participation through Access Funds to help students in financial hardship, and through recurrent allocations by HEFCE to HE institutions, has grown from £22 million to £410 million in 2006–07—a total spend of more than £2 billion over the period. But despite prioritising this in recent years, there has to date been little impact on admission to higher education in terms of social class.

10. The main reason for this is that widening participation depends closely for success on long-term improvement in pupil achievement in schools, particularly in the early years, but also within further education. We urge the government over the next decade to effect a deep-rooted improvement in educational attainment, to enable higher education institutions become places which more closely reflect the make-up of the UK population. To this end we welcome the funding being put into the Aimhigher programme, and urge that in relation to improving aspiration, attainment and applications to HE, the government continues to promote partnership working between HEIs, FECs, schools, employers, parents and community groups, rather than a model of inter-institutional competition (epitomised by the Academies programme).

11. However, we also recognise that HE providers themselves have a key role to play in outreach and curriculum change, mode of provision and effective student support, in order to facilitate student retention and success. To this end it is vital that institutions are not disadvantaged in terms of funding or prestige by

taking a high share of less academically well-prepared students or by offering flexible and part-time provision. Whilst we welcome the increase in the widening participation premium paid to institutions, and initial changes in support for part-time students, the premium is still too low, and the funding model still penalises students (and their institutions) who do not progress according to a rigid and increasingly outdated model of a full-time, three-year degree. Above all, such institutions and their students must not be disadvantaged by a funding regime that relies more and more heavily on rising fees and rising levels of student debt.

#### *The balance between teaching and research*

Levels of funding for, and the balance between, teaching and research in UK HEIs, and the adequacy of financial support for the development of innovative teaching methods and teaching/research integration and the availability and adequacy of training in teaching methods for UK academics and the importance of teaching excellence for the academic career path, including consideration of the role of teaching fellows

12. One of the big challenges facing the higher education sector is providing sufficient individual tuition for those students who need it. Meeting this challenge requires sustained public investment in our teaching base. The decade of under-investment in the 1980s and 1990s, although partially reversed under recent Labour governments, continues to affect staff and students in higher education. While large funding increases have gone into the research and science base, the unit of resource for teaching has remained static. Consequently, our members have to deal with much larger class sizes, have less time to spend with students and are increasingly employed on short-term, casual contracts.

13. UCU believes that we need serious public investment in higher education to reduce current student:staff ratios. The recent JNCHES review of HE finance and pay reports that “Although most HEIs are financially stable in the short-term, the levels of surplus and investment of HEIs are too low confidently to assure a sustainable future. HEIs are facing new financial challenges and risks which threaten their ability to innovate and advance as fast as some overseas competitors.”<sup>345</sup> Because of this, we believe that the proportion of UK public expenditure on higher education should be increased to the OECD average, of 1.1% of GDP.

14. We also need to transform the career structure for fixed-term staff and believe that the conversion of hourly paid teaching posts on to fractional contracts offers the only way forward in this area.

15. A related problem is the dominance of research as the driver of the HE system, which manifests itself in terms of funding levers, institutional prestige and staff reward structures. Although there has been some progress in recent years, it remains the case that if you want to progress in academia, excelling in research is the best way to do this. The greatest single incentive for encouraging excellence in teaching and learning, therefore, is the recognition of good teaching in the promotions and rewards system. Forms of reward should include a mix of salary and non-salary elements, but with a focus on salary-enhancement, promotion opportunities and scholarship funding. Such a strategy would form an element of overall reward strategies, rather than separating out teaching from the broader academic role (for example, as often occurs with the establishment of “teaching only” posts). We also need to see greater transparency in promotion procedures and genuine parity of esteem between research and teaching. UCU has been working at a local level, through the new pay and grading structures, to help deliver this but more needs to be done at departmental, institutional and national levels.

16. The lack of funding in the sector, as well as the dominance of research as the route to career progression, help to explain the failure of accredited, in-house teaching courses to transform the status of teaching in higher education. We would also argue that the generic nature of these courses has sometimes alienated course participants. Moreover, there are workload issues resulting from these accredited courses, in particular the huge demands placed on young academics to complete a postgraduate teaching certificate, whilst juggling a significant administrative, teaching and research load.

#### *Degree classification*

17. We welcome the recent debates on the future of the UK’s system of degree classification, including the planned piloting of the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR). Our members have raised concerns about perceived “grade inflation”, though they believe that it is caused mainly by pressures on examiners from above (managers and funders) as well as from students. Changing the metric, therefore, is unlikely to have an impact on “grade inflation”.

18. There is a case for ensuring that the new HEAR includes all relevant information, including records of non-formal learning. However, a missing element in the current debate is the impact on staff of more intensive student assessment. Effective evaluation of student performance requires a degree of attention to individual student needs, which is desirable but difficult to achieve in an under-funded and rapidly expanding mass higher education sector.

<sup>345</sup> Joint Negotiating Committee for Higher Education Staff (JNCHES) *Review of HE Finance and Pay Data Report*, December 2008.

19. As a trade union and a professional association, we receive regular reports from members about the changing nature of academic standards in higher education. Some of the negative trends are well known. An increasing proportion of students are combining a detrimental level of paid work with their study. Student:staff ratios are too high, and staff cannot always select the most effective teaching methods as a result.

20. Another major concern for UCU members is students' preparedness for higher education study, especially in science subjects. The national curriculum and in particular SATS have accentuated the curricula and assessment gap between schools and universities. For example, one of the detrimental effects of the testing regime in schools is that students tend to see the goals of education in terms of passing tests rather than developing an understanding about what they are learning, and that they judge themselves and others by their test results. As a result, academics are increasingly challenged with preparing students for undergraduate and postgraduate degree level. This so-called "remedial work" has placed a huge additional burden in terms of workload and expectations, a burden which has gone unrecognised and is a significant factor in the increasing unhappiness and decreasing job satisfaction.

21. We also receive occasional reports from members about pressure to admit or to pass students, or to approve new programmes, against their academic judgement. The recent case of Dr Paul Buckland at the University of Bournemouth was one of the few cases to reach the wider public domain. In general, institutions are also under pressure in the HE marketplace not to disclose concerns about their own standards. Whistleblowing procedures and the academic freedom protections in the 1988 Education Reform Act have proved to be inadequate in protecting academic whistleblowers.

22. A strengthened external examiner system, as recommended by the Dearing Committee, also remains one of the best safeguards of academic standards in higher education. We would be the first to admit that the system has suffered in recent years from lack of resources and from increasing and competing demands on staff time. It is difficult now to persuade staff with the appropriate experience and academic standing to devote time to external examining; apart from anything else, the rewards for doing so (both professional and financial) are unattractive. There will be financial costs involved in strengthening the system, but they will not be on the scale of those consumed by previous quality assurance regimes such as Teaching Quality Assessment (TQA).

#### *Student support and engagement*

23. We welcome attempts to involve students more as active participants in the learning process. For example, the development of student course reps, the involvement of students in quality enhancement processes and the presence of student reps on university governing bodies are positive initiatives in the sector. One of the advantages of this approach is to challenge the notion of students as passive consumers of education, which has been fostered by the current fees regime.

24. While we welcome student participation in the learning process, we are concerned that there has been a systematic attempt to marginalise the role of higher educational professionals in the formulation of policy. For example, at the institutional level, large numbers of universities have reduced or abolished staff presence on governing bodies. Academic Boards and Senates are also increasingly sidelined in the decision-making process and denuded of any rank and file participation. UCU believes that staff should also have a clear, active voice in the governance of higher education institutions. Collegial decision-making should encompass decisions regarding curricula, research, administration, outreach and community work, the allocation of resources and other related activities.

25. Given the small number of private universities in the UK, it is too early to compare the experience of students with public institutions. However, we are concerned about the expansion of "for profit" providers in UK higher education and the potential for the profit motive to undermine academic standards. We would welcome a proper inquiry into the role of "for-profit" providers in higher education, including the growth of specialist English language providers such as Kaplan and INTO.

The adequacy of UK higher education (HE) funding and student support packages, and implications for current and future levels of student debt

26. UCU welcomes a recent report by the National Union of Students (NUS), *Broke and Broken: A Critique of the Higher Education Funding System*. It highlights the unfairness and lack of sustainability in the current HE funding system. In particular, the report shows that the system ensures that the richest institutions financially benefit most from poor performance in widening participation—and vice versa. Significant amounts of institutional bursary help arising out of the new system are also being allocated on criteria that are not related to financial need. We believe that the costs of offering financial support to poorer students should be shared by the sector as a whole, via the introduction of a national bursary scheme.

27. We also believe that something will need to be done about making access to post-first degree education available to those who are financially disadvantaged. The present system just shifts the middle-class advantage from degree level to postgraduate level. Unless there are significant changes we will be looking at a more socially exclusive staffing demographic in higher education (for example, mirroring trends in other professions such as journalism).

Any further action required by the Government and/or HEFCE to ensure that UK HEIs offer students a world class educational experience

28. The government has rightly recognised the role of universities and colleges in helping businesses and employees deal with the current recession. However, a new counter-recessionary policy requires additional funding. If the financial crisis means the government is prepared to re-write the rule-book in terms of banking, borrowing and fiscal policy, the looming rise in unemployment means it should revisit its current reliance on market mechanisms in higher education. For example, we urge DIUS to reverse the £100 million withdrawal of funding from ELQ students who may need the training to make themselves employable.

29. More widely, the global economic downturn is likely to have a detrimental impact on private investment in higher education. Current policies—based on increased student contribution towards their tuition (particularly from non-EU students), employer co-funded places and greater alumni giving—look increasingly threadbare. We, therefore, urge the government to invest in higher education as part of a wider strategy to deal with the severe economic downturn.

March 2009

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## Memorandum 98

### Submission from Professor MS El-Sayed

#### SUBMISSION OF WRITTEN EVIDENCE TO IUSS REGARDING PLAGIARISM AT LIVERPOOL JOHN MOORES UNIVERSITY

##### INTRODUCTION

I would like to submit written evidence on “plagiarism” at Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU). I have been fighting for years to expose the truth about plagiarism at the University but to no avail. I have recently written to the Rt. Hon Mr John Denham MP, Secretary of State for DIUS and Professor Paul Ramsden, Chief Executive for HEA regarding this issue. I have also formally written to HEFCE (evidence enclosed;<sup>346</sup> electronic correspondence with Professor David Eastwood) and QAA (evidence enclosed<sup>347</sup> letter from Mr Peter Williams to the Chairman of Select Committee on IUSS) asking for the issue to be thoroughly investigated.

It was made clear to HEFCE and QAA that I am unwilling to disclose the substantive, compelling and indisputable evidence of plagiarism at the University without protection against future litigation (please see Mr Peter Williams letter to the House of Common on 30 October 2008).<sup>348</sup> The position of these organisations is that they cannot investigate my revelations without disclosing my identity to the University, nor can they offer me protection against future litigation.

I understand the only available pathway to divulge the truth to the public about plagiarism at the University is through the “Parliament Protection Privilege”. To this end, enclosed please find a very small sample of the plagiarised students’ course work reports<sup>349</sup> as evidence.

##### 1. *Background information*

I am Professor of Applied Physiology and worked at the University till I was summarily dismissed on 3 January 2007. I have contributed significantly to the British Education over the last 30 years in the teaching and research domains (please see enclosed statements by colleagues).<sup>350</sup> This encompassed academic and administrative commitments including the supervision of several Ph.D. and MSc students to successful completion. I have published more than 200 refereed articles, scientific correspondence items, and meeting abstracts. My capability as a teacher and researcher furnish the grounds for my personal written evidence to IUSS on plagiarism at the University.

##### 2. *Competing interest declaration*

I declare that I do not have any competing financial interest or otherwise. I aim to expose the truth to the public and clear my name by disclosing the truth about plagiarism at the University. I only enclose *very few* samples of plagiarised (as defined by LJMU Academic Misconduct 2004–05, document enclosed)<sup>351</sup> course work reports by the students. Additional substantial evidence will be submitted on request to prove beyond any reasonable doubts that plagiarism has taken place, widespread and chronic academic impropriety at the University.

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<sup>346</sup> Not published.

<sup>347</sup> Not published.

<sup>348</sup> Not published.

<sup>349</sup> Not published.

<sup>350</sup> Not published.

<sup>351</sup> Not published.

### 3. *Plagiarism: the case*

As it was advised by [committee staff], I sent to the Committee a *very few* course work of the students' plagiarised reports. I would be happy to send substantially more plagiarised reports if this is required at this stage. These reports clearly and unambiguously exhibit the following:

- The verbatim copying of another's work within reports without clear identification and acknowledgements. This is defined as plagiarism according to the University's definition.
- That some or all of the students appear to have copied review articles and text books carelessly. Unidentified and unacknowledged quotations from another work are the main feature of the students' course work reports. This is plagiarism according to the University's definition.
- That some or all the references at the back of the report are not referred to within the text. This is plagiarism according to the University's definition.

3.1 The majority of students are tempted to lift sections of words from published papers or from textbooks. This is a very serious problem in the University. The students were clearly informed at the beginning of each academic semester and prior to the submission of the course work that this lifting is known as plagiarism and it is a very serious academic offence (please see evidence attached).<sup>352</sup> Students were also informed when they were handed back their course work reports to reinforce the point.

3.2 The first lecture of each new semester was allocated for an overview of the module syllabuses and the subject of the course work assignment. An over head projector was used to advise the students how to write their assignments and avoid plagiarism in line with the University's Modular Framework Assessment Regulations. A single printed sheet of A4 under the title "Assignment general and specific comments" was handed to the students at the commencement of the semester. This sheet contained a number of comments defining plagiarism and stating why it was unacceptable (please see evidence attached).<sup>353</sup> Students were advised to develop their own ideas and arguments and learn how to express themselves. They were informed about the seriousness of plagiarism and how to avoid it. The enclosed "Assignment general and specific comments" sheet<sup>354</sup> was clearly explained to the students and at the commencement of each new semester, during the semester, and prior to the submission of the course work.

3.3 Students were also referred to the University's Modular Framework Assessment Regulations (Section D Appendix C) regarding academic impropriety and that their course work should conform to those regulations. Students were advised to show that they have learnt about and can use other people work. They were taught how to quote and reference to show where they got the material from. Students were clearly informed that, in their assignment, when discussing other people ideas, they should acknowledge where the ideas came from with supporting references.

3.4 Students were advised that they must avoid direct copying from published papers or textbooks as this practice may suggest that they are incapable of using ideas for themselves. Students were also informed not to rely heavily on copying out segments from printed literatures as copying the literatures obscure whether the students understand the topic of the course work. Students, when submitted their course work reports, were required to sign a declaration that all sources consulted have been appropriately acknowledged (evidence submitted as attached to some of the plagiarised course work reports already sent to the Committee).

4. Although plagiarism is a very serious academic impropriety as clearly stated in the University's Modular Framework Assessment Regulations (Section D Appendix C), the University management has not taken this issue seriously.

4.1 The University strategies to identify plagiarism were inadequate and the procedures available to combat plagiarism were ineffective. I repeatedly tried to have my concerns about excessive toleration of plagiarism considered by the University. However, I was constantly put off by the University Management. All my complaints were ignored despite a litany of requests for action and no penalties were sanctioned when plagiarism was suspected and detected.

4.2 I had numerous grounds of grievances in relation to plagiarism over the years against colleagues and Management at the University. Most notably in May and December 2003 I have attempted to have my grievances about excessive toleration of plagiarism dealt with and investigated under the University's grievance procedures. This never happened.

4.3 When I suspected and identified plagiarism, the University should have taken my concerns seriously and a thorough investigation should have been conducted promptly in line with the University's regulations. This never happened.

4.4 I was only allowed to down mark the plagiarised assignment by 10% (see attached evidence entitled "Disciplinary Case").<sup>355</sup> I was not allowed to sanction more severe penalty or to fail any plagiarised course work during the consultation and moderation processes. Following my suspension, two Managers at the School alleged that they have remarked the assignments and came to the conclusion that no plagiarism had

<sup>352</sup> Not published.

<sup>353</sup> Not published.

<sup>354</sup> Not published.

<sup>355</sup> Not published.

taken place (evidence would be provided on request). The external examiner confirmed the Managers conclusion (evidence would be provided on request)! I viewed this as an unacceptable practice. I believe that the managers at the University in collaboration with the external examiner were trying to cover up plagiarism.

4.5 I raised my concern about plagiarism through the University's procedures but it was then converted into a disciplinary against me with allegations that I had not followed University procedures, which is not true (see attached evidence entitled "Disciplinary Case").<sup>356</sup> There has been not the merest hint of actually dealing with the issue of plagiarism and I was stopped from providing the evidence I had gathered (abundant compelling evidence is available on request). This demonstrates, I believe, disregard for professional standards to an extent that should be intolerable in a British University.

4.6 Instead of investigating and determining my concerns of May and December 2003 in respect of plagiarism, managers at the University chose to suspend me on 10 December 2003. I was suspended for an unimaginable long time while the most dilatory "investigation" imaginable was conducted. This is viewed as the worst kind of sharp practice. Then I was accused of gross professional misconduct. The University managers made up false allegations against me to justify "Gross Professional Misconduct". I was eventually dismissed in January 2007 following an investigation and grievance and disciplinary hearing in October 2006. In April 2007 I appealed to the University's Board of Governors against the dismissal, but my appeal was not upheld and the final dismissal decision was conveyed to me in May 2007. The investigation was flawed in design and substance. The grievance and disciplinary and the appeal hearings were discriminatory and I was unfairly dismissed.

5. Through the University College Union (UCU) Legal Services Department, three claims (one in 2005 and two in 2007) were lodged with the Employment Tribunal and 20 days have been allocated for hearing the case commencing 14 January 2008. These complaints were based, among other issues, on protected disclosures in relation to plagiarism and overseas students' bench fees and unfair dismissal.

5.1 The Employment Tribunal hearings to a full trial never took place as I was virtually forced to enter into a compromise agreement with confidentiality clauses attached. The compromise agreement was signed on my behalf by the UCU's Director of the Legal Department as I was in a hysterical state and heavily sedated with medications and utterly refused to sign the compromise agreement.

6. My health disintegrated further as can be established by reference to several medical reports including one by the University's own occupational health doctor.

6.1 My academic career is now completely ruined, my health is ruined and the normal social fabric of my family is in a state of turmoil. The damage to my reputation and to my name and career is immense.

#### 7. Conclusion and Recommendation:

I do believe that the unfortunate story of plagiarism at Liverpool John Moores University is in the public interest and it is therefore my responsibility to bring the above facts to the IUS Select Committee Attention. The corrupted practices by the University are a threat to the public interest and to the reputation of British Education standard nationally and internationally.

I believe that the allegations about plagiarism presented in this written evidence are very serious and warrants further considerations and investigation by IUSS Select Committee. It is hoped that IUSS Select Committee will consider the following recommendations:

- To investigate plagiarism at Liverpool John Moores University.
- To introduce and enforce rules to protect public interest and the reputation of the British Education against plagiarism.
- To introduce rules on personal and collective responsibilities and penalties for those helping to conceal plagiarism at the British Universities.
- To introduce rules to protect individuals from victimisation when exposing to the public academic improprieties.

#### *Documents already submitted to the Committee:*<sup>357</sup>

1. Letter from Mr. Peter Williams; Chief Executive of QAA to IUSS Select Committee regarding my allegations about plagiarism at Liverpool John Moores University.

2. Correspondences exchanged with Professor David Eastwood, Chief Executive of HEFCE about plagiarism at Liverpool John Moores University.

3. Liverpool John Moores University's widely distributed and publicised literature regarding academic misconduct and definition of plagiarism and cheating.

4. Very small sample (eight) of plagiarised students' course work reports (2002 and 2003). This was the advice of [*committee staff*].

<sup>356</sup> Not published.

<sup>357</sup> Not published.

New documents enclosed:<sup>358</sup>

1. Statements by colleagues
2. Assignment general and specific comments.
3. Two pages report entitled “Disciplinary Case”.

PS. Additional substantial and compelling evidence to prove beyond any reasonable doubt that plagiarism at the University had occurred, widespread and chronic will be provided on request. Likewise, additional substantial and compelling evidence to prove that the University has not taken the issue of plagiarism seriously and endeavoured to cover it up will be provided on request. The involvement of the external examiner in this issue is relevant and, I believe, warrants special consideration and investigation.

February 2009

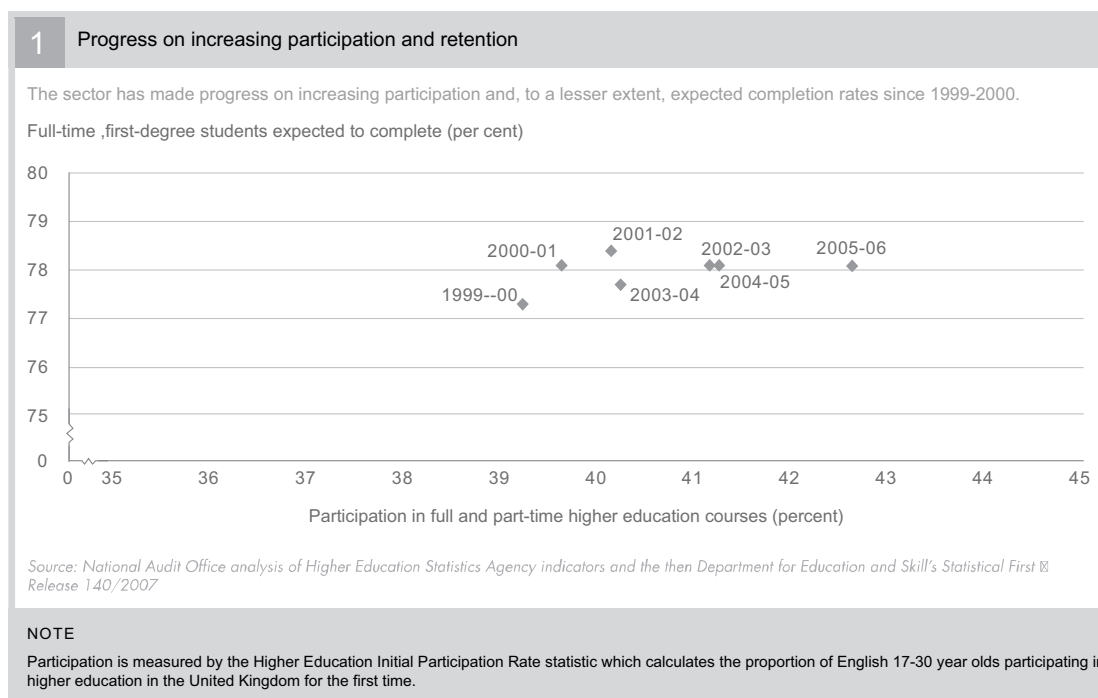
**Memorandum 99**  
**Submission from the National Audit Office (NAO)**

**INTRODUCTION**

1. This memorandum by the National Audit Office sets out the findings from our reports on widening participation<sup>359</sup> and student retention<sup>360</sup> in higher education relevant to the Committee’s inquiry into students and universities. Both of these reports relate to the position in England.

2. The two reports provide substantial evidence under the *Admissions* and *Student Support and Engagement* themes to be covered by the inquiry. This memorandum follows the ordering of the Committee’s invitation for evidence.

3. Access to higher education and success within it will provide most students with greater opportunities for the rest of their lives. Over their working life graduates have been shown to earn, on average, over £100,000 more than similar non-graduates with A levels.<sup>361</sup> Employers, the economy, and society as a whole benefit when students complete their studies. The Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills has overall responsibility for public spending on higher education in England and had, at the time of the studies, the objectives of raising and widening participation while bearing down on rates of non-completion. Progress on each of these objectives between 1999–2000 and 2005–06 was not linear (Figure 1).



<sup>358</sup> Not published.

<sup>359</sup> National Audit Office (2008) *Widening participation in higher education*, Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, HC 725, Session 2007–08

<sup>360</sup> National Audit Office (2007) *Staying the course: the retention of students in higher education*, Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, HC 616, Session 2006–07

<sup>361</sup> Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills , unpublished analysis, and PricewaterhouseCoopers/Universities UK (2007) *Research Report: The economic benefits of a degree*, Universities UK: London

4. There is a balance to be achieved between these priorities, as increasing and widening participation brings in more students from under-represented groups who may need more support to complete their courses.

## ADMISSIONS

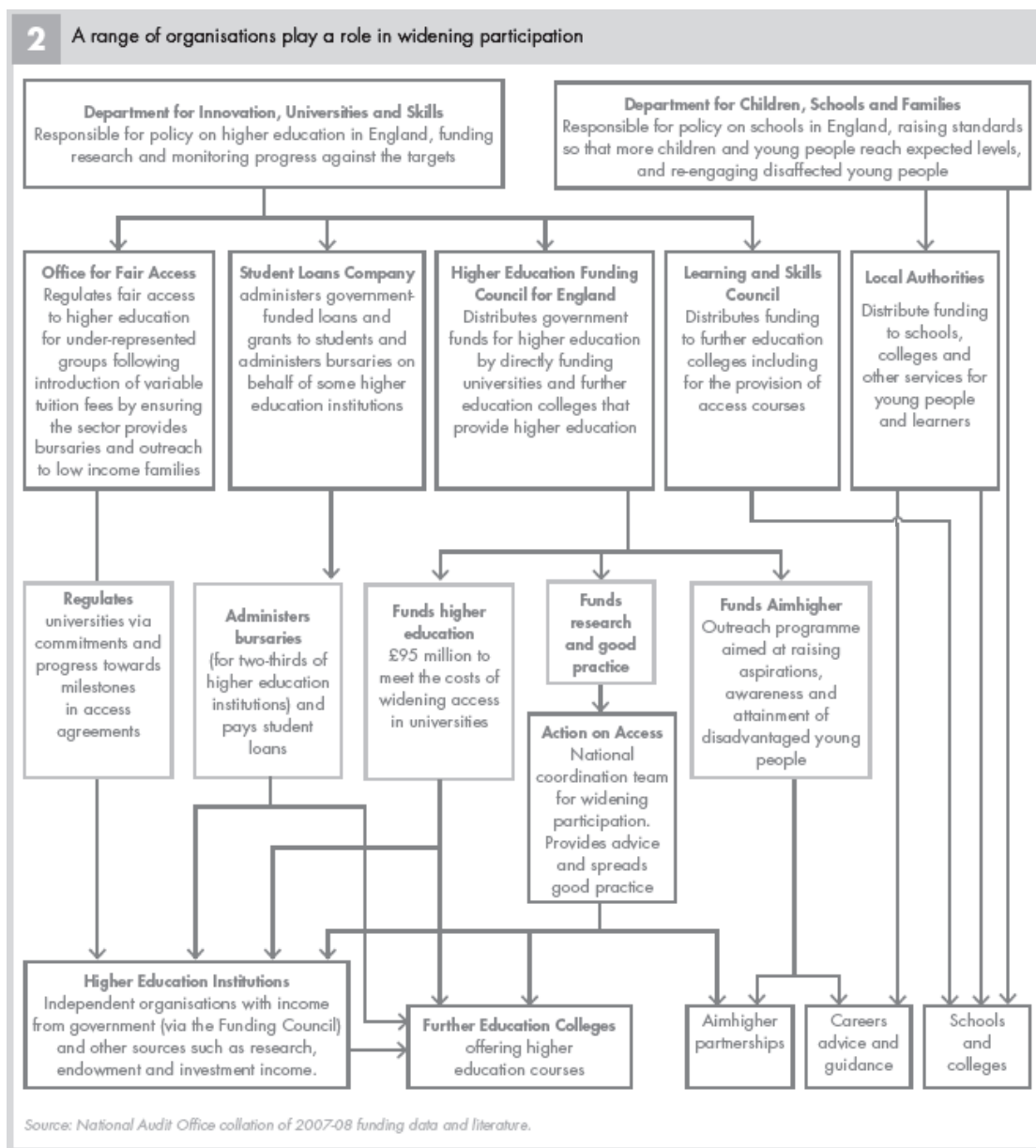
### *Study remit*

5. For the widening participation report we assessed the progress of the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (the Department), the Higher Education Funding Council for England (the Funding Council), the Office for Fair Access and higher education institutions in England on whether:

- participation of under-represented groups in higher education had increased;
- initiatives taken by the Department, the Funding Council, the Office for Fair Access and higher education institutions to widen participation had been effective; and
- higher education provision was delivered in a way that addressed the barriers to widening participation.

### *Admissions to higher education*

6. A large number of organisations play a role in widening participation (Figure 2).



7. Between the academic years 1999–2000 and 2005–06, participation in higher education increased from 39% to 43% of people aged between 18 and 30 years.



8. When we reviewed progress over the previous five years there had been improvements in the participation of some groups in higher education, but not for all groups, and some remained significantly under-represented in higher education. We found that:

- White people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, both men and women, were the most under-represented group.
- The participation rate for men was 10 percentage points below that for women.
- Socio-economic background remained a strong determinant of higher education participation with the participation of young, full-time students from lower socio-economic backgrounds having improved by two percentage points over the previous four years. People from lower socio-economic backgrounds made up around one half of the population of England, but represented 29% of young, full-time, first-time entrants to higher education.
- Young people living in deprived areas had experienced an increase in participation of 4.5 percentage points since 1998 compared with an increase of 1.8 percentage points in the least deprived areas.
- Those from non-white ethnic groups were better represented than white people.
- There were other groups for whom it was difficult to assess participation because of incomplete data.

9. Gaps in the data provided by students reduced the reliance that could be placed on some measures of participation, particularly in relation to socio-economic background and for part-time students. The Department had developed a new measure of participation of young people by social class<sup>362</sup> and was linking pupil data with higher education student records and admissions data.

10. The attainment of qualifications by students at secondary school or college played a critical role in gaining access to higher education. Low achievement was the principal reason for the difference between rates of participation in higher education for different groups. Notably, all applicants with the necessary qualifications were equally likely to accept a higher education place as others with the same level of attainment, regardless of their family background.<sup>363</sup>

11. Each institution has individual benchmarks representing the expected participation for each group, given particular characteristics (such as subject of study, age and entry qualifications) of the students it recruits.<sup>364</sup> On average, post-1992 institutions performed at or significantly above their benchmarks, while the English Russell Group institutions (16 of the most research intensive institutions) performed on average at or significantly below their benchmarks.

12. Performance indicators published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency<sup>365</sup> showed that there was variation across higher education institutions in recruiting students from under-represented groups.<sup>366</sup> For example in 2006–07, around one fifth of institutions performed significantly better than expected in recruiting young people from areas with low participation, while a similar proportion performed significantly worse than expected.

13. A range of new qualifications, modes of delivery and entry support were enabling students from under-represented groups to achieve success in higher education. Some institutions were making use of new practices in learning and teaching, such as foundation degrees and part-time provision, to diversify the way higher education is delivered and widen opportunity. Institutions were working with further education colleges to offer a greater range of higher education opportunities.

14. People from lower socio-economic backgrounds and older applicants not applying directly from school or college were less likely to have access to advice and assistance when applying to higher education. At the time we reported, higher education institutions had recently moved the deadline for applications back by a month, allowing teaching staff more time to advise and produce references for students they may have taught for a relatively short period. This development in the admissions process was of particular benefit to applicants from under-represented groups who attend further education and sixth-form colleges.

<sup>362</sup> “Full-time Young Participation by Socio-Economic Class” (FYPSEC)

<sup>363</sup> National Audit Office analysis of UCAS 2006 data, presented in Figure 7 of *Widening Participation in Higher Education*

<sup>364</sup> A benchmark is the institution’s expected performance taking into account the average of institutions of similar type, the profile of entry qualification of its students, the subjects they studied, and their age. For each institution a range around the benchmark is calculated, which accounts for the size of the institution and the random variation in performance that is expected. If an institution’s performance is within this range then its performance is similar to that expected and not significantly different to its benchmark. Annual performance of institutions is presented in relation to each institution’s benchmark.

<sup>365</sup> The Higher Education Statistics Agency is the official agency for the collection, analysis and dissemination of data about higher education. It is a company limited by guarantee and its members are the two representative bodies for higher education institutions in the United Kingdom—Universities UK and GuildHE.

<sup>366</sup> <http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php/content/category/2/32/141/>, Table series T1 and T2

*Targets for participation*

15. The Government's 2003 White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education*, included a commitment to widen participation in higher education, by helping more people from under-represented groups, particularly lower socio-economic backgrounds, to participate successfully in higher education. This commitment sat alongside a policy to increase participation of those aged 18 to 30 towards 50% by 2010.

16. Institutions additionally set their own targets or milestones for widening participation. Since 2006 the Office for Fair Access has approved an "access agreement" for each institution wishing to charge variable tuition fees, setting out what actions the institution will take to promote and safeguard access for low income groups. If there is a serious and wilful breach of an access agreement by an institution, the Office for Fair Access can impose financial sanctions. This may include refusing to renew the institution's access agreement, thus denying it permission to charge tuition fees above the basic level, or instructing the Funding Council to suspend part of an institution's grant. When we reported, access agreements had been in place for two years and the Office for Fair Access had not yet identified any breaches of access agreements.

*Widening participation initiatives*

17. In general, the long-term nature of widening participation activities makes evaluating their effectiveness difficult for institutions and policy makers.

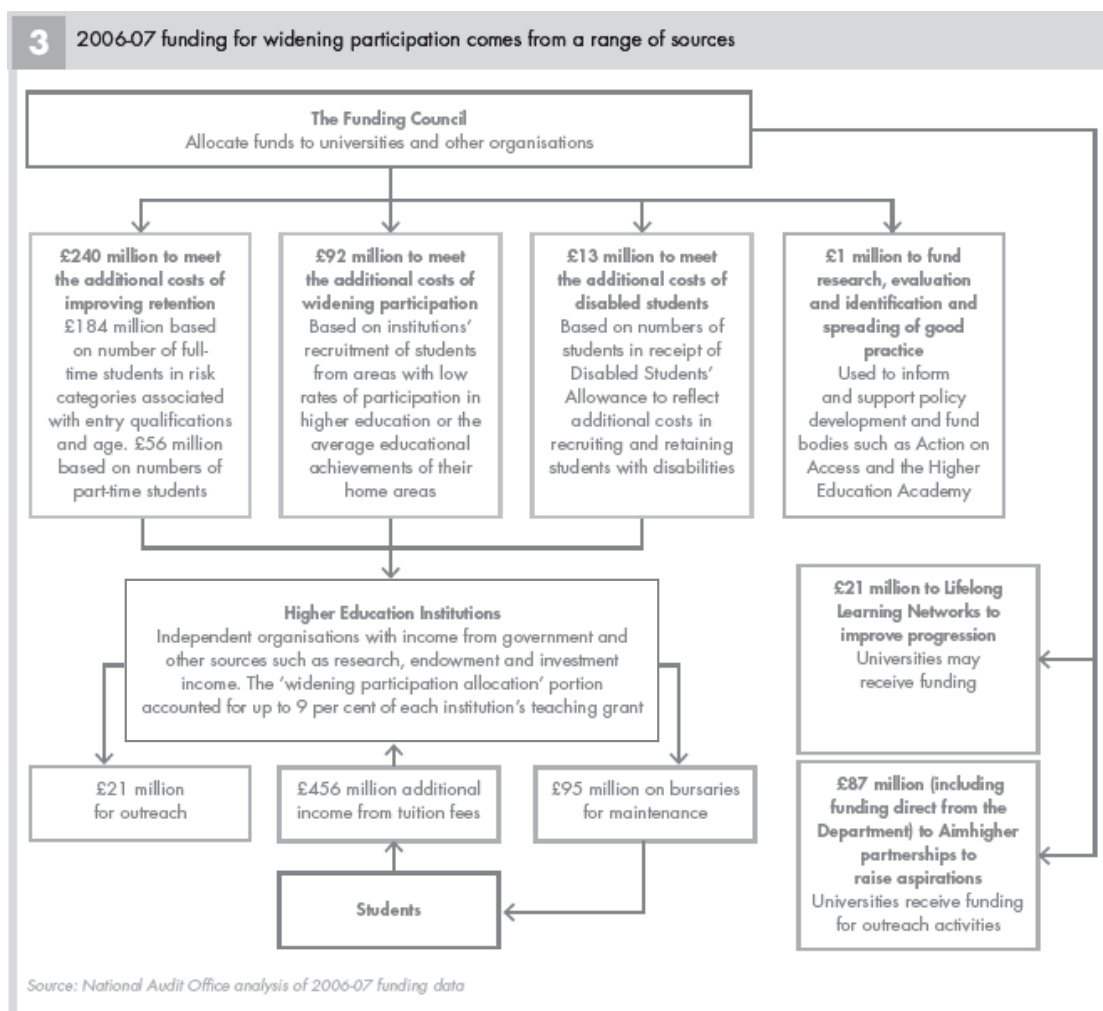
18. The Funding Council had plans to assess the effectiveness of the two national programmes with widening participation aims, and our surveys suggested that both programmes were well received by participants, schools and institutions.

- The Department and the Funding Council fund the Aimhigher programmes of outreach activities broadly aimed at increasing young people's aspirations to study in higher education. The Funding Council had recently introduced measures to improve evaluation and all Aimhigher partnerships were required to submit an evaluation plan for 2008–11.
- The Funding Council also funds the Lifelong Learning Networks which were set up from 2004 to improve progression for vocational learners. When we reported it was too early to determine if they were meeting their objectives but interim evaluations and our review indicated progress was being made. The Funding Council was planning a full evaluation to start in 2009–10 or 2010–11.

19. Institutions were working with schools to improve pupil progression. In 2007 the Funding Council issued guidance on how institutions and programmes could target activities at low participation areas and people from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

20. Family expectation or tradition of higher education involvement was particularly significant in encouraging young people to undertake higher education. Some families had inaccurate perceptions of higher education and its benefits and may not have supported young people's aspirations to higher education. We found some examples of institutions working with communities, parents and children of primary school age to address attitudes towards higher education.

21. Generally the Funding Council did not directly fund widening participation activities in institutions. Instead since 1999–2000, the Funding Council has allocated a proportion of its teaching grant based on the types of students recruited, recognising that students from under-represented groups or with lower entry qualifications were likely to cost more to teach and retain, and counteracting a disincentive to recruit them. It allocated recurrent funding for widening participation to institutions in proportion to the number of existing students from under-represented groups and gave £392 million in recurrent funding to institutions between 2001–02 and 2007–08. Figure 3 shows the range of sources and amounts of funding for widening participation for 2006–07.



22. Nearly all institutions (103 out of 123) chose to use part of their variable tuition fee income to support additional outreach activities in schools or communities, with the aim of encouraging participants to consider higher education. These activities cost an average of £200,000 per institution and amounted to £21 million in total. There is no requirement for institutions to use tuition fee income to fund outreach activities and the Office for Fair Access regards such use as an indication of institutions' commitment to widening participation.

#### *Role of government*

23. In the interests of reducing bureaucracy, access agreements that institutions agree with the Office for Fair Access had superseded the requirement to report on widening participation strategy and objectives directly to the Funding Council. As a result, there was insufficient information about institutions' activities to widen participation, and the Department, the Funding Council and the Office for Fair Access were considering how institutions might bring together their widening participation, fair access and admission policies into a single strategic document which would be made public.

24. There were geographical areas with little or no local provision of higher education,<sup>367</sup> whereas increasing numbers of students wanted to study locally or live at home while attending higher education. There had been some progress in increasing provision in such areas, for example through satellite campuses or joint working with further education colleges. The Department had announced a new policy, the "new university challenge", recognising that more needed to be done to expand local and regional higher education.

<sup>367</sup> Tight, M (2007), *The (re)location of higher education in England (revisited)*, Higher Education Quarterly, Vol 61, No 3; Higher Education Funding Council for England (2008), *Exploratory analysis of geographical cold-spots of higher education provision and participation*

25. Information, advice and guidance on career options and pathways through education were of variable quality and lacked one-to-one engagement. Poor advice and guidance can lead to individuals making poor choices of qualifications to study at school and college, making unrealistic applications to higher education or not applying at all. In 2007, the Department for Children, Schools and Families published new quality standards for young people's information, advice and guidance.

26. Widening participation activities were embedded in some programmes aimed at older learners, such as Lifelong Learning Networks<sup>368</sup> and employer engagement programmes.

#### *Overall value for money conclusion*

27. We concluded that the Department's and the Funding Council's expenditure on widening participation cannot be directly related to changes in participation rates as there were other factors affecting participation, in particular the prior attainment of students. Existing analyses suggested that there had been some improvement in participation of some under-represented groups, but progress had not been uniform across the sector. Limited, often qualitative evaluations suggested specific activities were effective at widening participation. There was scope for improving the achievement of value for money through directing activities towards those individuals who would benefit the most, and building in evaluation measures when setting up widening participation initiatives.

### STUDENT SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

#### *Study remit*

28. In our examination of retention on higher education courses, we considered whether the sector was improving its already high level of performance in retaining undergraduates on their courses (foundation degrees, honours degrees, undergraduate credits, higher national diplomas, higher national certificates and other higher education diplomas). In particular we looked at whether:

- the sector's performance on retention had improved since it was reviewed by the Committee of Public Accounts in 2001–02;
- the Funding Council could do more to encourage the sector to improve retention of students; and
- higher education institutions could do more to improve retention of students.

#### *The university experience*

29. As autonomous bodies, most of the impetus and actions for sustaining and improving retention rest with higher education institutions.

30. Much of what an institution does is likely to affect the quality of the student experience and therefore student success and retention. There were two especially important areas where we concluded that an institution can target their work and make a difference. These were:

- getting to know their students and how, generally, they felt about their particular course of study and the culture and amenities offered in the institution; and
- developing a positive approach to retention-related activities that recognised how they could also improve student success, and so attract students to take up services who might otherwise not do so.

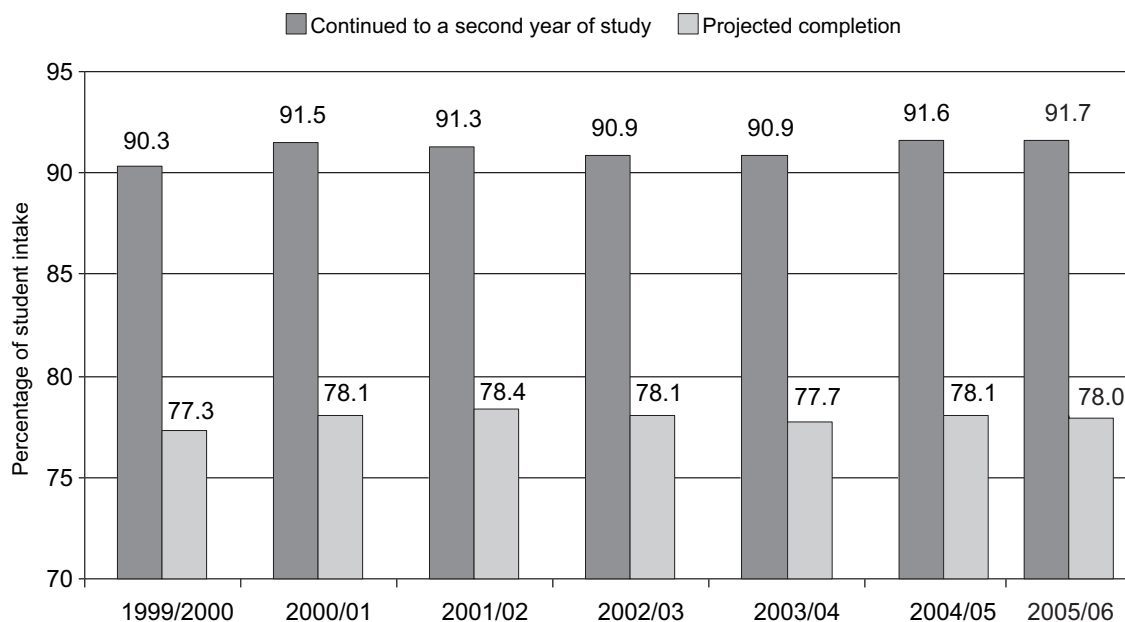
#### *Non-completion of higher education courses*

31. There are two measures of retention. The first is the "completion rate", which is the proportion of starters in a year who continue their studies until they obtain their qualification, with no more than one consecutive year out of higher education. But higher education courses take years to complete. A more immediate measure of retention is the proportion of an institution's intake which is enrolled in higher education in the year following their first entry to higher education. This is the "continuation rate".

32. Retention of full-time, first degree students since 1999–2000 is presented in Figure 4. While the rate of improvement was small, it needs to be placed in the context of the United Kingdom's higher estimated graduation rate than most other countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development<sup>369</sup> and the growth in participation in higher education over the same period.

<sup>368</sup> Lifelong Learning Networks are area, regional and national collaborations of universities and colleges which create opportunities for vocational learners. They aim to enhance the coherence, clarity and certainty of vocational progression into and through higher education, taking into account local economic context and regional skill priorities. Further detail is presented on page 27 of *Widening Participation in Higher Education*.

<sup>369</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2006), *Education at a Glance 2006*, OECD: Paris (Table A3.2 "Survival rates in tertiary education"). In 2004, Japan, Ireland, Korea and Greece reported higher "survival rates" than the United Kingdom. See Figure 10 in *Staying the Course: The retention of students in higher education*.



Source: National Audit Office analysis of Higher Education Statistics Agency student data

33. From the published performance indicators, of the 256,000 full-time, first degree students starting higher education in 2004–05, 91.6% continued into a second year. In terms of completion 78.1% were expected to qualify with a first degree with a further 2.2% expected to obtain a lower qualification, and 5.8% expected to transfer to another institution to continue their studies. From our analysis of the 50,000 part-time first degree students starting in 2004–05, 76.9% continued into their second year.

34. Our statistical analysis indicated that variations in continuation rates between subjects and types of institution were largely due to the characteristics of students, including their level of pre-entry qualifications. However, when all other factors are taken into consideration, the analysis showed that:

- a full-time, first-degree student was much more likely to continue their studies into a second year than a similar part-time student;
- a full-time student with three A levels at grade A was much more likely to continue than a similar student with two A levels at grade D; and
- a part-time student registered with a higher education institution but taught in a further education college was more likely to continue than a similar student in a higher education institution.

35. In 2002, the Committee of Public Accounts recommended that the Funding Council should continue to bear down on wide variations in performance between institutions, focusing on underperforming institutions. Our tests showed no statistically significant difference in the distribution.<sup>370</sup>

36. To inform the assessment of performance, the Higher Education Statistics Agency calculates a benchmark for each institution, which takes account of students' entry qualifications and subjects studied.<sup>371</sup> Because the benchmark is an average based on students in all institutions in the United Kingdom, some institutions will be above the benchmark and some below. For most institutions in 2004–05, actual continuation and benchmark figures were similar: 73% of institutions in the top quarter for continuation rates remained in the top half after adjustment for their benchmark, while 13% of institutions in the bottom quarter moved to the top half after adjustment.

37. The Higher Education Statistics Agency publishes a range of performance information on institutions, including the Higher Education Performance Indicators, listing institutions' retention of students. As well as helping make institutions accountable, publication of the performance information provided an external incentive for institutions to improve retention because it affected their reputation and hence their student recruitment.

38. The Funding Council and some of its partners also have a role in encouraging the sharing of good practice on retention and related issues, which they aim to fulfil primarily through additional funding of certain institutions to share good practice. The sector had access to a wide range of advice on good practice in retention, although we found that there was relatively little evaluation of the impact and transferability of practice.

<sup>370</sup> Based on Levene's Equality of Variance test, which is a reliable statistical test that compares variances in different sample groups.

<sup>371</sup> The Higher Education Statistics Agency does this on behalf of the Performance Indicators Steering Group, which represents the sector, including the Department and the Funding Council, and is responsible for overseeing the development of performance indicators.

*Student support and engagement*

39. Students leave their courses early for a range of reasons, but there is rarely one single reason why a student gives up their course. Reasons are likely to be a mix of personal (most common), institutional and course related, and financial (Figure 5).

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 5 Examples of early leavers
 

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**Leaving early because a new opportunity arose**

P chose his university because he had heard good things about the city. He had felt a degree would stand him in good stead for the future, but as his studies progressed he decided that he wanted to be a martial arts instructor. He did not feel the need to continue his course and made a positive choice to leave when an opportunity arose.

**Financial pressure**

L was a mature student, studying for a degree in the evenings at her local university while she continued to work full time. She was supporting two children. When L found out that she was not eligible for a grant or loan herself as her income was too high, she decided not to continue. L plans to re-start her studies once her children are older.

**Poor Choice of course**

G was a full-time science student, at a university recommended by his school. He found the first year much harder work than he had expected, and he had not realised the requirement to attend all laboratory sessions to pass the course or that the course included a physics element. He left after failing the first year, and intends to study a different subject at another institution.

**A difficult decision to leave**

M was a mature student studying at a university near home. Following a serious car accident she took a three-year leave of absence. Though the university was very supportive when she returned, M found that the course content had moved on and she withdrew as she expected to fail the exams. Because she felt that she had let everyone down, she did not consult anyone at the university about her decision to leave.

**Transferring between institutions**

Q chose her university because of its reputation. However, after the first few weeks the course was not meeting her expectations which were based on pre-course reading material. She also found her personal tutor unsupportive. Having made enquiries at another university, which she found very helpful, she transferred.

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*Source: National Audit Office telephone survey of early leavers*

40. We concluded that there were a number of specific activities that institutions were using to enhance retention, and important activities are set out in Figure 6 (overleaf).<sup>372</sup>

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<sup>372</sup> Our report *Staying the course: the retention of students in higher education* contains specific examples from a range of universities as Figures 20-24 on pages 29-32.

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 6 Actions to improve retention
 

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Action	Description
Management information	Most institutions collate and disseminate internal information on withdrawal rates at course and faculty level. Others also use student level information, for example on attendance, to identify students at risk of withdrawal. A minority of institutions conduct periodic exercises to contact early leavers to help establish the real reasons why they left, particularly where some common issue affecting retention is indicated.
Strategic commitment to retention	It is important for institutions to have a clear strategic commitment to retaining students that all staff understand buy into, so that they can see how commitment to high levels of retention should affect the way they work.  All the institutions visited were undertaking some activities to improve retention, but not all were based on a clear strategy for the whole organisation. Even at institutions where the strategy was clear, senior managers acknowledged that some parts of their institution were demonstrating greater commitment than others.
Commitment from students	Students need to commit to attending lectures and carrying out independent study. Universities can communicate clearly to students and follow up cases where commitment seems not to have been secured.
Support through academic provision	Properly resourced tutoring systems help individual students to identify the extra support and facilities they can use to improve their chances of success. Institutions often offer pre-entry courses and learning support opportunities, but many institutions find it difficult to get students to take up services that would help them to 'stay the course' and succeed. This can be because students and academic staff may regard the services being there to fill a 'deficit' in a student's ability, but institutions can increase take-up by promoting these services as positive options to take to improve the prospects of a good degree.
Broaden options for learning	Some institutions and in particular those with higher numbers of non-traditional students are being flexible in allowing students to choose learning options to fit their personal circumstances for example through comprehensive nodular systems.
Provides specialist support	All institutions provide specialist support services, such as welfare. They are increasingly organised as a 'one stop shop; and student unions usually have an important role in their provision.  Financial support, through bursaries and hardship funds, is available to assist students from disadvantaged backgrounds or in financial difficulty. Some institutions are more proactive in promoting financial support than others.

*Source: National Audit Office case study visits and literature review*

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41. From September 2006 institutions were able to charge new, full-time students tuition fees up to a maximum value of £3,000 in 2006–07 and £3,070 in 2007–08, subject to an agreement approved by the Office for Fair Access. Most institutions were charging the full fees when we reported, although a small number charged less than the maximum and some charged different fees for different courses. Institutions charging tuition fees of more than £2,765, the value of the full maintenance grant in 2007–08, had to offer additional financial help in the form of bursaries. Students eligible to receive a full maintenance grant had to be offered a bursary or other help that would at least make up the difference between the full maintenance grant and the tuition fee rate.

42. Institutions are required to determine what proportion of their additional tuition fee income they plan to spend on bursaries to support students from low-income families. In the first year of the new tuition fee regime (2006–07), institutions spent a total of £96 million (21%) of the total additional fee income on bursaries, although the proportion varied considerably by institution; out of 120 institutions which offered bursaries, 18 allocated over 30% to bursaries, and 32 allocated less than 15%.

43. As many as 12,000 students entering higher education in 2006–07 on full state support did not apply for a bursary although many were likely to have met the necessary criteria. The Office for Fair Access believed students either were not aware of bursaries or did not fully understand if they were eligible. Information on financial assistance is available from a range of sources: individual institutions are responsible for marketing bursaries and various organisations are involved in publicising loans and grants. It was planned that from 2009–10 the Student Loans Company will take over responsibility for administering all student financial information and plans to introduce an integrated on-line calculator to enable students to determine their eligibility for financial support.

44. The relationship between the higher education financial system and the number of applications is a complex one, but by the time we reported the introduction of variable tuition fees and more generous financial support for students did not appear to have reduced the number of applications to higher education. There was no early evidence of a correlation between the level of an institution's bursaries and applications. There was little research on the impact of tuition fees on those who may have considered but not applied to higher education and some students continued to have a poor understanding of the financial support available.

45. We found that part-time students in higher education (who are more likely to be mature students) had access to more limited student support, had to pay their tuition fees up front and were often not eligible for bursaries.

46. We identified a common issue across institutions relating to students with disabilities. Some students with disabilities are entitled to financial assistance (Disabled Students' Allowances). We found that students receiving an Allowance were much more likely to continue their course than other students self-declaring a disability and, indeed, than students who are not disabled.<sup>373</sup> Although the number receiving an Allowance had increased, at some institutions an Allowance was obtained by less than 10% of self-declared disabled students studying full time or at least more than half time, and at other institutions over 70% obtained an Allowance.

#### *Overall value for money conclusion*

47. We concluded that, compared internationally, higher education in England achieved high levels of student retention. The improvements, when reviewed in 2007, were considered a good achievement. However, the gap between higher education institutions with the highest and lowest levels of retention (taking account of their student and subject profiles), and a minority of institutions' worsening continuation rates<sup>374</sup> indicated that there was scope for some further improvements in retention.

## METHODOLOGIES

### *Widening participation*

48. To assess progress in increasing participation of under-represented groups we undertook a detailed analysis of data held by the Higher Education Statistics Agency. To determine the effectiveness of the widening participation initiatives and explore what barriers remain to participation, we carried out surveys of 2,900 unsuccessful applicants for higher education places and of 1,000 teachers in primary and secondary schools, visited seven institutions and met with representatives of key organisations.

### *Retention in higher education*

49. This report was based upon:

- analyses of the Higher Education Statistics Agency's student data and quantitative analyses of higher education performance indicators;
- case studies of selected higher education institutions including a telephone survey of early leavers;
- review of academic and other research;
- international comparison research; and
- consultation with stakeholder groups, reference to experts and discussions with staff of the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills and the Higher Education Funding Council for England.

March 2009

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## Memorandum 100

### Supplementary submission from ASKe

#### STUDENTS AND UNIVERSITIES

This supplementary submission draws on the uncorrected transcript of oral evidence on 9 February 2009.

1. Comments in the uncorrected transcript of student evidence to the Select Committee suggest that students share the concerns of some academics and others that a "football-like league of universities" (as suggested by Dr Iddon) does now exist in the UK. There is a view that "different institutions offer very

<sup>373</sup> While the Allowances make it easier for disabled students to study, it may also be the case that successful applicants for the Allowances display greater persistence generally and so are more likely also to succeed in their studies

<sup>374</sup> We examined how the continuation rate of each institution had changed between 2001–02 and 2004–05. Of the 117 institutions with data for both years the continuation rate of 30 institutions (26%) decreased by at least one percentage point.



different student experiences and offer actually quite different qualifications” [suggested by Mr Bols], and that employers “factor their perceptions based on the market and prestige” [Wes Streeting] when comparing students from different universities.

2. However, what is apparent from the student evidence is that misinformation and conjecture cloud the debate about academic standards in HE: for example some students giving evidence proposed normative methods of assessment, and others suggested that classification should partially depend on effort, rather than criterion-based assessment which is the commonly espoused practice in most, if not all, universities.

3. We would argue that none of this confusion over current practice can be sensibly discussed because of the lack of real empirical evidence about what—if any—differences there are between the standards of achievement of students from different universities in different subjects.

4. Until we have more evidence—and national communities of disciplinary assessment practice who can interpret the available data—any discussion or debate about standards is misguided as it can only be based on ill-informed conjecture.

5. We suggest that an important question still to be asked is: “how can national communities of disciplinary assessment practice be created?”

*March 2009*

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### **Memorandum 101**

#### **Submission from Dr Stephen Dearden**

- This submission argues that there is evidence of serious failures in the maintenance of the integrity of the current system of degree awards
- It has arisen from the creation of a competitive market in higher education, the marginalisation of academic staff with the shift to centralised management and the pursuit of the government’s widening access objective.
- The problem can be addressed through the strengthening of the system of external examiners or the adoption of external assessment of core units.
- The conflict between the need to raise the fee cap while limiting the burden upon public funds of loan subsidies could be addressed by targeting support to those students from low income households who also meet higher matriculation and performance criteria.

1. The available evidence on social and private rate of return to investment in higher education is challenged by a number of methodological problems and data limitations. Any conclusions drawn will also be compromised by the significant change in the UK’s medium-term economic situation. However the evidence does suggest that it is important not to focus upon average returns but to disaggregated results to take into account degree subject, classification and institution.

2. Drawing upon the limited quantitative and survey evidence there is some indication that a new binary divide is emerging in higher education. The post 92 institutions appear to have been the major destination for those students drawn into higher education by the widening access policies of the government. These institutions are becoming characterised by low relative entry qualifications, high dropout rates and poorer employment/pay returns. At the undergraduate level there are also suggestions that these institutions are most vulnerable to pressures to compromise academic standards to achieve recruitment and retention targets.

3. The maintenance of academic standards is central to the reputation of any institution. Evidence to the committee of a systemic problem has already been provided by other contributors and arises from three factors—the creation of a competitive market environment in higher education: the marginalisation of academic staff through the move from “collegiate” to “line management” organisational structures: widening participation targets achieved through the financial constraint of a fee cap.

4. The nature of the compromising of academic standards varies across the sectors. In the case of the old universities the pressures arise from concern with league table rankings or to maintain the flow of postgraduate overseas students. In the case of the post 92 institutions it is to ensure sufficient recruitment and retention of undergraduates.

5. Academic standards have been compromised by changes in degree regulations (eg “compensation criteria”), changes in the method of assessment—especially the greater weighting being given to course assessment—changes in degree course content and individual course syllabuses, management pressure on academic staff to “fully utilise the range of marks” and, in the extreme case, the threat of loss of teaching leading to staff priming students on exam content. Much of this is impossible to identify through formal monitoring procedures.

6. Although the introduction of continuous assessment has been justified as offering students the opportunity to demonstrate a wider range of skills, without a process of “standardisation” it undermines any inter-temporal comparisons of degree standards. I’m not aware of any such standardisation being undertaken in any institution.

7. The role of the QAA, focused upon organisational structures and bureaucracy, has failed to identify these problems and lacks the confidence of large numbers of academic staff. The contrast with its academic-led predecessor, the Council for National Academic Awards is stark.

8. I believe one solution lies in the enhancement of the role of the external examiner. But it is essential that external examiners are appointed from outside of the institution, from a national pool, and that their reports be given sufficient weight. A Council for External Examiners, perhaps as part of HEFC, would ensure their objectivity, enhance their role, ensure experience is shared across the university sectors and provide additional training. External examiners should also report directly to such a Council to ensure that institutional management give sufficient weight to their views. It is currently far too easy for senior management to ignore their comments. It would also be important that they were sufficiently remunerated in view of the current difficulty of attracting academic staff to these roles. The current system, exploiting an “old boys network” of friendly examiners compromises their integrity, especially where they are drawn from similar institutions. It is also crucial that they are drawn from amongst active “academic” staff, not management grades, with standing in their disciplines.

9. A more problematic alternative might be to move towards restoring externally set and marked examinations. Most degree courses include common elements that define their “discipline” base. These units could be externally examined, while allowing individual institutions to maintain the flexibility of offering their own particular course specialisms. Discrepancies in the marks between these externally assessed units and those offered internally would flag any problems in academic standards.

10. A more robust externally-monitored system of assessment would also allow consideration of the introduction of a performance threshold for access to student loans. The proposal to raise the fee cap presents problems of public funding to provide the necessary loan subsidy. Although adjustments can be made through the introduction of differing qualifying income thresholds or terms of loan repayments, including real interest rates, the focusing of financial support upon more adequately qualified and motivated students from low income households could be addressed. Widening opportunity is not achieved by dissipating limited public funds upon students who will not benefit from degree level studies as a result of their lack of motivation or preparation (the Robbins Principle).

11. A related issue that I believe the Committee needs to address is that of institutional governance and the adoption of the new ‘managerialist’ model. Although most acute in the post 92 institutions, the shift from collegiate to line-management organisational structures has been profound. A history of recurring financial and organisational crises, the suspension and resignation of university Vice-Chancellors/Directors and votes of no-confidence by academic staff, suggest the “training company” model for Universities encouraged by successive governments has been far from successful. The government’s proposal to allow a further reduction in the size of post 92 University Board of Governors, with the complete exclusion of academic staff, should be a major cause of concern.

12. The Committee should also urge the government to address the problem of student loan repayments by EU nationals and the qualifying period of residence in the UK for “home fee” payments.

13. Robust administrative arrangements also need to be put in place to identify what appears to be the increasing problem of bogus qualifications (forged or awarded by non-accredited colleges) presented by UK or EU passport holders born outside of the EU. As this involves access to subsidised student loans this would represent fraud. Universities should be clear in their responsibility to forward such cases to the appropriate authorities for investigation.

14. Universities are dependent for their success and their future upon the motivation and commitment of their academic staff. Institutions which are dominated by a new “management class”, are devoid of open debate and have compromised integrity are no longer “Universities”, whatever they may be called.

March 2009

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## Memorandum 102

### Supplementary submission from Mantz Yorke<sup>375</sup>

1. This Memorandum is a personal response to the outcomes of the meetings of the Committee that have so far taken place. It addresses some points which the Committee might wish to consider when preparing its report.

2. *Comparability of standards.* Discussion of the comparability of academic standards sometimes fails to differentiate between the standards set by institutions for students (“aspirational standards”) and those actually achieved by students (“achieved standards”). The evidence that I have presented to the Committee

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<sup>375</sup> Visiting Professor, Lancaster University.

shows that there is a broad correlation between achieved standards and institutional grouping: there is a generally higher percentage of “good honours degrees” in Russell Group universities than in post-92 universities, for example. Reports from HEFCE indicate that entry qualifications are positively correlated with honours degree classifications,<sup>376</sup> so it would be expected that there would be a gradation of achieved standards by institutional type. My evidence provides a partial answer to the questions that the Committee asked of vice-chancellors, and offers them a line of defence against any accusation that they are unable to comment on the relativities of achieved standards. However, the line is not conclusive, since a lot depends on what the institutions expect of their students. My analyses do not have anything to say about aspirational standards: statistics do not address these. It would require some detailed study of curriculum content, teaching approach and assessment methodology to enable a judgement to be made about the extent to which aspirational standards in University X correlate with those in University Y.

3. *Programme validation.* Validation typically involves external assessors in order to ensure that the aspirational standards are broadly equivalent to those of cognate programmes elsewhere. The QAA subject benchmarks provide a point of reference against which proposals for programmes can be appraised, but they are inevitably (and, in my view, desirably) open to interpretation. Institutions differ with respect to what programmes in similar subject areas intend their students to achieve: University P might give its programmes a distinctly academic slant, whereas University Q might give its programmes a more practical colouring. From a labour market perspective, such heterogeneity has advantages since graduates fill a variety of employment roles.

4. *External examiners.* External examiners can comment on the programme in operation and have a particular responsibility for addressing the standards achieved by students. However, as programmes have become modularised, the role of the external examiner has shifted from that of commentator on achieved standards (by looking at assessment tasks and a sample of student work) towards that of commentator on the assessment processes and procedures adopted by institutions (ie on matters of quality assurance). Modular schemes are often too complex for externals to deal in detail with matters at the level of the individual module. The stress on the external examiner system was noted more than a decade ago in *The Silver Report*.<sup>377</sup>

5. *Curricular change.* Over the years, the expectations regarding undergraduate education have changed. Graduate employability has become a policy objective, and this has led institutions to incorporate various aspects of employability (eg “soft skills”) into programmes. Student retention and completion have also become important in policy terms: with the bulk of non-continuation occurring in the first year of full-time study, attention has increasingly been focused on the first-year experience. Both policy initiatives, in their different ways, have influenced institutional assessment practices. The assessment of employability-related achievements is more complex than is generally appreciated, and is not best served by fine differentiation in grading practice. Some institutions offer, in respect of employability-related achievements, an award in parallel to the honours degree (which is focused on academic achievement).

6. *Retention and completion.* Some students, and particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, may take longer than a term or a semester to come to terms with the demands of study in higher education. As a consequence, there has been a shift back from semester-length to year-long modules. This should allow institutions more opportunity to provide formative feedback on student work. An issue that appears to have been given little attention in research is the impact of funding council policy (which can be construed as a mild variant of outcomes-based funding) on institutional policy and practice regarding student progression and retention.

7. *Student engagement.* Student engagement has become a focus of attention in US higher education during the present decade, with attention being given to the development and implementation of the National Survey of Student Engagement [NSSE]. The significance of the concept is being picked up elsewhere: Australia is developing its own version of NSSE. At the heart of this work is a concern for students’ commitment to learning. In the UK, the perceived importance of obtaining an upper second class honours degree implicitly presses students towards “getting the grade” rather than focusing on learning.

8. *Research into higher education.* The evidence submitted to the Committee’s inquiry has pointed, with varying degrees of explicitness, to gaps in research bearing on the student experience. Examples are: the variation in assessment regulations across the sector; the *reasons* for trends in honours degree classifications; the comparability of standards; the part-time student experience; and the relationship between funding policy and institutional action relating to student progression and continuation. Research into higher education is something of a Cinderella as regards its status, even though its position as regards the Research

<sup>376</sup> See HEFCE (2003) *Schooling effects on higher education achievement*, at [www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2003/03\\_32.htm](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2003/03_32.htm), and HEFCE (2005) *Schooling effects on higher education achievement: further analysis—entry at 19*, at [www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2005/05\\_09/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2005/05_09/).

<sup>377</sup> See Silver, H. *et al.* (1995) *The external examiner system: possible futures. Report of the project commissioned by the Higher Education Quality Council*. London: Quality Support Centre, The Open University.

Assessment Exercise has improved somewhat over the years. Much research into higher education is relatively small-scale and fragmented: more might be gained through the adoption of a more strategic approach in respect of issues of broad relevance to the sector.

April 2009

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### Memorandum 103

#### Letter dated 3 March from Mr Peter Williams, Chief Executive, Quality Assurance Agency, to Mr Phil Willis MP, Chairman of the Committee

When I wrote to you on 30 October last year, I informed you about the project that QAA is undertaking in response to last summer's media stories concerning quality and standards in higher education, which I discussed with you and your colleagues in July. I mentioned that we were analysing these stories in depth and were also undertaking enquiries into the five specific areas mentioned in the reports:

- student workload and contact hours;
- language requirements for the acceptance of international;
- students recruitment practices for international students;
- use of external examiners; and
- assessment practices.

I promised to keep you up to date on our progress. In the three and a half months since I last wrote to you we have been undertaking assessments and analyses of the matters raised last year and, specifically, the five areas listed above.

Our enquiries are drawing on and analysing the following sources of evidence:

- published and unpublished reports, papers, lectures and speeches;
- press and media broadcasts, articles, and comments from readers;
- notes of interviews with representatives of key bodies; and
- notes of focus group discussions with senior academic managers, students, programme leaders and heads of department.

The enquiries are accumulating material and information to allow us to establish an evidence base to inform the clear identification of *prima facie* cases where there are, and are not, areas of concern. The evidence will also be used to identify any areas that need to be addressed in order to safeguard the quality and standards of English higher education and will enable us to produce an evidence-based response to perceived concerns.

Following agreement with HEFCE in December about finance for the project, progress has gone according to plan. We have now completed the analysis of media articles and commentaries and carried out all the planned interviews with stakeholders; the focus groups are currently in train. This collation of material and analysis of new findings will provide an indication of whether areas of real concern exist and, if so, what the nature and extent of such concerns may be. A preliminary report on this work will be available during the second week of March and we shall, of course, send you a copy of it. These interim findings will be used to identify where additional evidence or information-gathering is needed. This further work will inform the identification of any new actions (whether remedial or preventative) required to address such concerns, should they exist.

We expect our final report, with our findings and any proposals for further action, to be completed soon after Easter. Again, we shall let you have a copy as soon as it is completed.

Although we have not yet reached the point of being able to offer conclusions to our enquiries, you may nonetheless be interested in some general points that have emerged from the analysis of media articles and commentaries. These show that a relatively small number of original sources of comment and opinion generated a large volume of secondary comment, reporting and response that in some cases relied solely on those original sources (and mostly took them at face value) and that in others added observations and claims said to be from the author's immediate personal experience; these may, or may not, indicate concerns that are reflected more widely.

We have also found what appears to be a pattern of 'interconnectedness', wherein media comments and articles link a range of matters that get carried forward together in discussions, but which only rarely question whether the matters are really connected. An example of this is the frequency with which references to international students appear in articles dealing with matters such as contact time; assessment; the standards of academic awards, academic malpractice; admission to higher education institutions; tuition fees; student support; and conflicts between teaching staff and managers.

A further point worth reporting is that there are many criticisms by commentators and respondents of individual institutions' external examining arrangements. Articles and responses then frequently go on to generalise about "the external examining system" on the unstated assumption that all external examining arrangements are identical and therefore share the same weaknesses. That there are some weaknesses in the external examining and assessment arrangements of individual institutions is confirmed by our own audits and reviews, but that does not yet amount to a finding of sector-wide weaknesses, other than in the area of assessment and, specifically, degree classification. We are also continuing to examine the collated information for concerns about the work of individual external examiners and their integrity. So far, we have found relatively few instances of critical comment.

A final point to note, highlighting again the problem of generalisation about higher education, is that the implications, for the student experience, of institutions working to different missions do not appear to be recognised or accepted; many commentators appear to assume that institutions of differing size, mission, background and student profile should have identical outcomes.

Our analysis is continuing. In the meantime I hope this account of our progress is helpful to your Committee and look forward to meeting you and your colleagues again on 9 March.

*March 2009*

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#### **Memorandum 104**

##### **Letter dated 26 March from Mr Peter Williams, Chief Executive, Quality Assurance Agency, to Mr Phil Willis MP, Chairman of the Committee**

Progress report on AAA's enquiries into public concerns about academic standards

Thank you for inviting me to the 9 March session of your Committee's inquiry into students and universities.

In giving my evidence I mentioned again the enquiries that QAA is conducting into five areas which emerged as possible matters of serious concern last summer. A progress report into these enquiries is now available, a copy of which I enclose. The final report should be finished after Easter, but I hope that in the meantime you find this a useful update to aid your inquiry.

As I said on 9 March, our enquiries so far suggest that while the UK has a fundamentally sound higher education system, there is evidence to support further exploration in the following areas:

- the range of contact hours appropriate to the student learning experience,
- guidance offered to international students about UK higher education the support arrangements that international students should expect from higher education institutions, including English language support and personal and academic support,
- processes used to identify, train and support external examiners, including re-opening the debate about whether there should be a nationally agreed set of minimum expectations for the role of all external examiners,
- a review of assessment and degree classification practices across and between institutions, and
- effective ways of informing the general public about academic standards and quality in higher education and the purpose and principles of external quality assurance processes.

The progress report is an update on the first stage of the project, which has involved a detailed analysis of media coverage, comments and blogs as well as in depth interviews and focus group discussions with people from across the higher education sector. QAA has also looked at published and unpublished reports, papers, lectures and speeches.

The aim of this stage was to identify any of the five areas in which there is evidence to support assertions made in summer 2008, using different methods from those used in QAA's regular audits of higher education institutions.

I also promised to send the Committee a clarifying note on other issues, and this will follow shortly.

*March 2009*

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## Memorandum 105

### Submission from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

In my letter of 26 March 2009, with which I enclosed a copy of the progress report on the thematic enquiries<sup>378</sup> we have been undertaking into media stories about higher education, I wrote that I would shortly be providing you with additional information, in the light of your Committee's questions to me at the evidence session on 9 March 2009.

This submission contains the following information:

- an answer to the specific request made by Dr Harris in respect of my remarks on primary and secondary evidence, together with comments concerning the possible future development of institutional audit (Annex A);
- our annual report to HEFCE explaining the work of QAA in England during the academic year 2007–08 (Annex B)(not printed);
- a paper with documentary evidence of the follow-up activity undertaken by institutions consequent upon the receipt of judgements of “no confidence” and “limited confidence” in their institutional audits (Annex C) (not printed);
- report on QAA by an independent panel including international membership (Annex D) (not printed);
- a guide to the Academic Infrastructure (Annex E) (not printed);
- a guide to the qualifications framework that now underpins all HE qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (the FHEQ) (Annex F) (not printed);
- a copy of the report on the Verification of the compatibility of the FHEQ with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher education Area (FQ-EHEA) (Annex G) (not printed);

I am submitting this additional material because I came away from the evidence session unsure that members of your Committee (or at least the small number present on that occasion) had as full an understanding as they might need, not only of the work of QAA but also of the general organisation of quality and standards in UK higher education as it currently exists.

In particular I wish to dispel the notion that QAA is a “toothless watchdog”, because it is not true.

As a number of your witnesses have made clear, QAA's institutional audits are no easy touch. Since 2002 we have interviewed more than 10,000 students and a similar number of staff in HEIs, to discover whether their institutions' views of themselves and the way they assure their own standards stand up to scrutiny. This contrasts markedly with the handful of individual complainants who have written to us since last summer and with the equally small number who have responded to your Committee's invitation to make submissions. Every audit has led to both commendations for good practice and recommendations for action, categorised as being either “essential”, “advisable”, or “desirable”, and these are almost invariably accepted and acted upon.

Annex C (not printed) provides excerpts (by way of illustration of our effectiveness) from QAA Board papers, which describe the specific responses and actions from those institutions that received judgements of “no confidence” and “limited confidence” in their institutional audits between 2003 and 2007. The information in respect of the American Intercontinental University London (AIUL) is of particular interest, as it is the only institution, so far, to which we have given a judgment of “no confidence”. You will note the way in which the University made root and branch changes to its provision and management in the light of our recommendations. You may also wish to note that the Senior Vice-President and Academic Dean of AIUL (the academic head) at the time of the audit was the author of a written submission to your Committee and has been a witness before you, one of the more critical voices in respect of QAA. I am pleased to say that following its wholesale restructuring, AIUL is now in good standing with QAA.

Annex D (not printed) is the report of an international panel which inspected QAA in 2008 to assess our compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ESG). While I would commend the whole report to you, as it provides much useful contextual information (paragraphs 8–16 offer a helpfully succinct account of the development of both quality assurance in the UK and QAA), the final paragraph is particularly relevant:

“QAA's overall performance against the standards of the ESG is very high. Where the Panel has made detailed comments on particular aspects of its work, these are designed to deliver further incremental improvement to an already strong organisation. QAA is fit for purpose, well-led and well-managed at both Board and Executive levels. The Panel has been consistently impressed by the calibre and professionalism of all those contributing to the work of QAA in maintaining quality and standards across HE in the UK.”

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<sup>378</sup> QAA, *Thematic enquiries into concerns about academic quality and standards in higher education in England*, Final report, April 2009 [www.qaa.ac.uk/standardsandquality/thematicsenquiries/finalreportapril09.pdf](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/standardsandquality/thematicsenquiries/finalreportapril09.pdf)

My reading of some of the lines of enquiry pursued by you and your colleagues in your evidence sessions suggests that there is surprise that the autonomous status of higher education institutions should allow them to set their own academic standards. Why there should be this surprise is not clear to me, as it has always been the case and does not represent some recent departure from established practice. Autonomy is inherent in the legal status of HEIs' degree-awarding powers, which gives each of them (118 with powers to award taught degrees) the right to award whatever qualifications they wish, so long as the students are following a course of instruction. That is the nature of their autonomy, and its virtues are that it gives them the freedom to experiment and innovate, allows them to respond quickly to local needs, and saves them from the deadening and ossifying effects of state direction and control. Autonomy, however, has to be exercised responsibly, because society needs to be confident that there is reasonable consistency in the way HEIs exercise their individual awarding functions. They need to be able to demonstrate that, collectively, they comprise an effective national tertiary qualifications system. This has been done through the development of the Academic Infrastructure (AI), which in its totality provides the necessary statement of UK-wide expectations of degrees. Annex E (not printed) explains how the AI provides all HEIs with a shared starting point for setting, describing and assuring the quality of their courses. Annex F (not printed) provides detailed information about one of the central elements of the AI—the Framework of Higher Education Qualifications in England Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ). The FHEQ has been verified as compatible with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher education Area (FQ-EHEA). A copy of the report is included (Annex G) (not printed).

The alternative to this moderated self-regulation (moderated, that is, by QAA, which checks that HEIs are managing their responsibilities effectively, by external examiners who oversee the standards achieved by students, and by the professional, statutory and regulatory bodies in those areas where the award of a degree confers entry to a profession) would be a centralised inspectorate which would judge the quality and standards of individual programmes and qualifications. In 2007 alone, 650,000 HE qualifications were awarded, covering about 50,000 different degree courses. They were taught by about 170,000 academic staff, leaders in their fields of research and scholarship. Although no detailed statistics exist on the numbers of external examiners currently in post, they are generally thought to number between 20,000 and 25,000. The costs of a national HE standards inspectorate, regulating in detail 118 awarding bodies (cf the five awarding bodies for secondary education qualifications) would be huge, and the benefits would be very unlikely to outweigh the costs. Not only would such an organisation have to check the assessment standards directly (an activity that would last for most of the year, given the variety and timing of assessments now prevalent), but a way of establishing and approving the appropriate standards across all 50,000 courses in the 118 institutions would have to be developed, and agreed with the academic community. Unless the idea would be to turn universities into state-controlled bodies and introduce a single national curriculum for higher education, which would put an end to the UK's distinctive, successful, and internationally admired system, then the current arrangements represent a very good balance of effectiveness, efficiency and economy that respects diversity, supports academic standards and promotes quality.

That is not to say that there is no room for change and improvement, both for HEIs and for QAA. As well as requiring those providers that are close to or below the acceptable threshold to improve, every institutional audit (whatever the auditors' judgement) results in recommendations for improvement in the institution concerned, and the audit reports collectively provide a wealth of information and intelligence to guide good practice across the higher education sector. During the past year, we have been considering how effective the current institutional audit process is in delivering the sort of reassurance that the changing profile of students and employers is now expecting. We discuss this further in Annex A, and our early thoughts are to offer more information on the areas of recent public interest, while not losing sight of the other fundamental elements that underpin the quality and standards of HE programmes and awards. This could require longer audit visits, however, or more documentation, and we are always properly conscious of the considerable pressure on us from the "better regulation" interests, not to add to institutional burdens. The balance between "light touch" and "right touch" has to be struck carefully.

I hope this additional information may help your Committee to a better understanding of the complexities surrounding matters of quality and standards in higher education. As I have said in previous correspondence, we continue to stand ready to assist your Committee in any way we can.

*March 2009*

**Annex A**

### **The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)**

*Note for the IUSS Select Committee from the Chief Executive, Mr Peter Williams*

*31 March 2009*

At its evidence session on 9 March 2009, a member of the IUSS Select Committee, Dr Evan Harris, asked me to provide a note on a comment I made to the effect that QAA, in considering the future development of Institutional audit, might wish to look at more primary, rather than secondary, evidence.

In their early days (1991–2001), academic audits scrutinised directly the policies and procedures that HEIs themselves used to assure their own academic standards and quality. This involved an analysis of the documents used internally for the purpose, such as policy statements, procedural requirements or guidance,

and monitoring reports, as well as evidence of the policies and procedures in action, through individual case studies involving the random (or targeted) sampling of departments. Audit teams would “trail” a variety of themes through the selected departments, asking staff and students about their experience of the different procedures, and reviewing additional documentation (such as external examiners’ reports) of the auditors’ choosing.

With the maturing and increasing effectiveness of institutions’ own internal quality assurance mechanisms, and the advancement of both national and international approaches to quality assurance, the institutional audit process has evolved to place more emphasis and reliance on institutions’ own self-evaluation of the effectiveness of their policies and procedures in providing reliable assurance of quality and standards. The task of external audit in these circumstances has been to investigate institutions’ own claims, as put forward in their self-evaluations. While this has undoubtedly paid dividends in forcing institutions to reflect carefully on their own practice, it has nonetheless shifted the focus of audit enquiry from showing policies in action, to one where the institution’s own narrative is the subject of the scrutiny.

I believe that this movement has probably now gone as far as it usefully can, and take the view that the next sequence of institutional audits should look once again at practice on the ground, using the “primary” evidence of “live” documents and focused interviews at all levels, as well as institutions’ own accounts of their practices (the “secondary” evidence).

We have also begun to think through what should be the key areas for scrutiny in the next form of external review of quality and standards. If we adopt the more direct approach described in the preceding paragraph, then we could concentrate on, for example, the way in which institutions use the Academic Infrastructure (see Annex E)<sup>379</sup> to calibrate their academic standards against national norms; the way in which external examiners ensure comparability of outcome with other institutions; and the way in which the areas we have highlighted in our current thematic enquiries are being tackled by institutions.

There are, of course, disadvantages in scrutinising intensively a small number of areas, albeit important ones. Given the limited time and money that are available to QAA to carry out its reviews, depth of enquiry would lead to the sacrifice of breadth in the coverage; we already have to decline requests from many interest groups who want us to include their particular specialism in our audit enquiries. The alternative would be longer and more burdensome reviews, which would, I have no doubt, give rise to complaints based on the expectations created by the many proponents of “better regulation”, that external watchdogs should adopt a more risk-based approach and target their activities on “weaker” organisations (however these are identified).

External quality assurance in higher education aims to provide a kind of “assay office” service, “hallmarking” institutions that are considered to be meeting the necessary standard. Thus, one can speak of QAA “assaying” all UK degrees at the minimum threshold nine carat gold level (less bullion content but more serviceable and useful than purer gold), while recognising that some institutions may be offering 18 or 24 carat products. At present we believe that all degrees meet the necessary minimum standard, but that does not prevent some institutions from awarding degrees at a standard above the minimum. The limitation of this system, as we have said on many occasions, is that currently only one set of simplistic descriptors (degree classes) exists to cover the academic achievements of a diverse and ever-changing student population undertaking a huge and heterogeneous range of studies.

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### Memorandum 106

#### Supplementary submission from Anand Raja<sup>380</sup>

An Engineering Student in X University posted the following comment on the e-consultation run by our Committee. “I am very happy with my course. I have 30 hours of contact time. The coursework is gruelling and I am enjoying my time. I wish I had some opportunity for placements.” Even a cursory look at the posted comments would reveal that among other things, students want two things out of their University Experience: intellectual challenge and training to face the world. Although the Engineering student could wait for June to enter a placement, he is lucky enough to get intellectual challenge and it will serve him well.

The vast majority of us are not so lucky. A lot of students are complaining that contact hours are less than enough. Quite a few lecturers are teaching with extreme distaste for the job, also reflected in negligible contact hours outside the lecture and poor feedback on written work. A lot of teaching is outsourced to postgraduates who often miss the mark. Group Tutorials are extinct.

Teaching is a no priority in most departments because a department’s sheen comes from its research performance, not the happiness of its undergraduates. In academic circles, rankings from the Research Assessment Exercise-which does not take into account student satisfaction, have far greater currency than rankings from Times Higher. In extremely competitive environments, individual promotions are also based on research output. I would find it strange if departments and individuals went all out to teach well. Is that

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<sup>379</sup> Not published.

<sup>380</sup> Student, University of Birmingham.



why all the Vice Chancellors appearing before the committee were reluctant to directly answer the question Honble Chairman so frequently asks: would it not be wise to advertise how many contact hours a course would provide, who will teach and how.

I think the task before us is to make teaching rewarding for departments and individuals. Opening more Universities and employing more teachers is also an answer. Why should students such as the Engineering Student at X University be a lucky minority?

April 2009

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### Memorandum 107

#### Supplementary evidence from Lucy Davidson<sup>381</sup>

##### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

My peer group at Anglia Ruskin University in Chelmsford consists of 14 female students aged between 26–46 years of age most of whom have small children. The flexible extended nursing course has enabled some of us to be able to access higher education for the first time. After I had attended the above meeting I sought the opinion of my peer group in relation to the questions raised.

##### RELEVANT FEED-BACK

Q122. (Chairman): *What makes a good university experience?*

It was felt that several factors influenced our university experience such as site resources, course delivery, teaching staff, peer group support and financial support (Davidson, 2009).

Q130. (Chairman): *How much information did you have about your course before starting and were you particularly interested in the course content?*

All students were sent information on their initial application specifying course content, delivery and available resources and following acceptance on to our course this information was reiterated again in writing and verbally (Davidson, 2009).

As a group we were very interested in what we were committing to (Davidson, 2009).

Q232. (Mr Marsden): *Was it the course or the university that attracted you?*

It was agreed that it was the course that attracted us to Anglia Ruskin University (Davidson, 2009).

Q233. (Mr Marsden): *Different levels of education.*

Educational qualifications vary amongst my student group and range from degree level to GCSE level and this has resulted in a diverse group with different learning needs (Davidson, 2009). However, all students have successfully passed all required elements up to this point and received teaching that is appropriate to their learning needs (Davidson, 2009).

Q237. (Mr Boswell): *Contact hours.*

All students on the extended nursing course are required to attend university or placement for 3–4 days every week (excluding school holidays) for relevant lectures, specific study days or group review meetings (Davidson, 2009).

Outside of these normal university days students are able to arrange contact time with lecturers for further support and all of the students on my course have been encouraged to seek extra contact time regardless of their previous educational qualifications (Davidson, 2009).

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<sup>381</sup> Nursing Student, Anglia Ruskin University, Chelmsford, following the oral evidence session on 9 February 2009.

Q250. (Dr Iddon): *Should lecturers be actively researching their own topic?*

All students agreed that lecturers should be interested in the topic they are teaching and aware of current research (Davidson, 2009).

Q268. (Ian Stewart): *In the current economic climate is it still worth going to university?*

All students were in agreement that the current climate would not deter them from going to university in fact it probably highlighted the need for higher qualifications (Davidson, 2009).

Q269. (Ian Stewart): *Should there be a national bursary scheme?*

It was felt that more information was required before reaching a decision as many students were dependent on the nursing bursary in order to pay for childcare and travelling costs (Davidson, 2009).

#### REFERENCES

Davidson, L. 2009. A Discussion between Bluebell Group Nursing Students and Lucy Davidson at Anglia Ruskin University in Chelmsford, at 09.30 on 10 February 2009.

*April 2009*

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#### Memorandum 108

##### Supplementary evidence from Dr Gavin Reid<sup>382</sup>

Many thanks for the opportunity to address the select committee this morning. There were one or two matters that I did not get the opportunity to raise given the time available and the manner in which the particular questions were put. Please do not take that as a criticism, your enquiry probably establishes a new record for the breadth of its remit!

If I may I would like to add that I am especially concerned about the polarisation of science teaching at 14–19 level away from the state sector and especially away from the FE colleges. This is evidenced by students' practical skills or the lack thereof at entry—it is quite common that students have only ever seen the teacher demonstrate many of the key experiments. This is a travesty in my view. Simply put, the economy needs more scientists than are being taught and trained at the present time.

The other is about the impact of the fall in the unit of resource that Professor Arthur described. I was impressed with his somewhat candid statement as it is extremely unusual (unheard of?) for such views to be expressed in public by a sitting Vice-Chancellor. For sure it impacted adversely on the student:staff ratio but also unevenly. In the sciences, where student numbers did not expand at the same rate as other parts of the sector many departments, as you know, were closed or downsized. More detrimental, however, has been the closure of the science infrastructure within our universities as labs have been turned over for alternative usage. The cost of replacing these facilities when fashions change is vast and has never been taken in to account. I believe strongly that the Visitors, who usually have powers of inspection of the buildings and laboratory facilities in Pre 92 University Charters have failed in their duty here. I might be wrong but I do not believe that the Visitor has inspected a single University laboratory at any time in recent history. The old UGC space norms have been torn up without debate and those who helped to established the new norms are the same as those who implement space policy and they are certainly not academic...

*May 2009*

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#### Memorandum 109

##### Submission from Trevor Mayes

#### SUMMARY

My evidence is based upon my appalling experience at the University of Wales Lampeter as a mature student in 2002–03. I have two professional qualifications with 16 years experience in social work, and to my cost got myself involved in an argument in defence of the disadvantaged. In return for doing what I considered to be a public duty I was falsely accused of plagiarism, intimidated during an examination and falsely accused of malicious harassment.

Using my life experience and professional training, I have for the last six years attempted to seek a remedy for a situation that the University of Wales Lampeter considered routine and that an expert has informed me is a typical case. I have used all conceivable means of seeking a remedy but while procedures are in place, there is no regulatory body to ensure that they are complied with.

Here is a summary of the main issues.

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<sup>382</sup> UCU, National Executive Member, following the oral evidence session on 6 May 2009.

- Academic independence used to hide maladministration and financial irregularities.
- No jurisdiction for the financial regulators the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) to intervene in financial mismanagement, despite claims to the contrary. The disregard demonstrated by HEFCW for its statutory duties has led to a situation whereby unlike its English counterpart HEFCE it will be the Charity Commission that will undertake the role of regulator for Welsh Universities under the Charity Act 2006.
- No brief Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) to intervene in institutionalised abuse, and quote have “no locus in these matters”. Despite claims its job is to reassure the public about standards in higher education.
- The failure of the Welsh Assembly to implement the Higher Education Act 2004.
- The Visitor and OIA replacing the courts without the same safeguards for what is a course of public justice for students.
- The connection with the Church in Wales that is more concerned with politics than religion, to the point whereby its charitable status is now in question.
- The refusal of the University of Wales to implement any complaints procedures.
- No right of any complaint to University auditors concerning financial irregularity.
- The removal of the power of intervention by the Auditor General under the Local Government Act 2000 by the Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004.
- Failure of the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 to offer any protection to student whistleblowers.
- Secrecy concerning student complaints and offending universities.

#### MAIN POINTS ARISING FROM THE ISSUES ABOVE

1. A combination of the above factors has led to a situation whereby the truth about what really goes on inside our Universities is kept from the public domain. Positive change resulting from any form of wrongdoing or structural failure can only take place if the public knows what is going on. Unlike other forms of public service there is no public accountability, consultation, or inquiry of what went wrong at the University of Wales Lampeter.

2. Given recent much publicised criticisms of public services, the public are being misled into thinking that higher education institutions are regulated according to the public’s understanding of the concept. The fact is that these institutions are accountable to nobody and the old adage that power tends to corrupt is true, as these institutions have been corrupted by absolute power.

3. I have been advised by an expert on the management of universities that the only way to bring this sort of maladministration to light is by publishing it in a newspaper or journal. While this has happened and the QAA have made criticisms of Lampeter based upon my complaints it does not tell the true or whole story

4. Together with this false perception of regulation, the public like to think that our universities are beyond reproach and they must know best. Therefore, it is impossible for any student to get any story published, as they are not going to be believed. There is of course publishing to the internet and having done that I was subjected to threats of legal action and a high court injunction from both the University of Wales Lampeter and the Federal University of Wales to conceal maladministration, gross misconduct, perverting the students’ complaints procedures and financial irregularities etc. This use of public money to conceal your own corruption is a nice perk if you can get it, unfortunately we are all banned from complaining about it.

5. Having failed to silence me that way I am now subject to being discredited over the Internet on certain sites that have a connection with the University of Wales or a Welsh University. While technically this may be a breach of the Public Order Act and libellous, I cannot take action as nobody is going to believe me in the first place. Therefore, the lack of regulation leads to a situation whereby these issues pervade the Internet without being resolved to the detriment of all concerned.

6. The introduction of tuition fees and student loans with additional help for the disadvantaged has opened up access to higher education for those who would have otherwise been subjected to the social class gatekeeper system, whereby mainly middle and upper class students gained entry to university. I suggest that the reported 75% drop out rate for this category is down to the Universities of finding some way of getting rid of those who are not wanted or who complain.

7. What better way of doing this than a fabricated accusation of plagiarism, after all Universities UK held a week long conference of this very important issue. Once an accusation of cheating has been made, then students can say goodbye to their career and university education for nobody is going to believe that the university has got it wrong let alone fabricated the results. That is why I have attached evidence of how anti plagiarism software is being used by universities to discredit students who complain or who they want to get rid of, safe in the knowledge all they need to do is tell lies as nobody is going to question their academic judgement; least of all the regulators.

8. The suggestion by Gordon Brown for mature professionals to return to university to top up their qualifications with a degree needs to be carefully considered and accommodation. The admissions and induction of mature students with professional qualifications and life experience needs to be treated with due respect. Single parents or those with family commitments and specifically women who are the main managers of the home must also be shown due consideration. This does not mean preferential treatment but the institutionalised practice of making life difficult must stop. At Lampeter, I witnessed the deliberate setting of unrealistic time scales for the completion of assignments to make life difficult for the above disadvantaged groups.

9. The Students Complaints Scheme under the Higher Education Act 2004 not only requires an independent adjudicator it also needs to be regulated to prevent maladministration, perversion and obstruction by those responsible for its implementation and management. Universities should not be able to simply make up the rules as they go along, make false accusations, add extra requirements or tell lies concerning compliance to protect themselves from liability.

10. Legal loopholes in the Higher Education Act 2004 need to be closed, the findings of the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA) must be made binding and penalties for perverting what is a public course of justice must be introduced. Moreover, the regulators must guard against Universities carrying out any act of retribution such as marking down assignments against students who complain.

11. The Federal University of Wales must be required to comply with the requirements of the Higher Education Act 2004, HEFCW guidelines for HEI's and the Nolan Committee to implement complaint procedures for students and the public to use. I have written to the HM Queen as Visitor but as her duties have been taken over by the OIA she cannot intervene. The OIA cannot intervene as they have no complaints procedures, this not only guarantees an unblemished record it also obstructs my legal right to pursue the matter with the OIA. HM the Queen has however, written to the first Minister of the Welsh Assembly on this issue, his response was to place her letter on file as it said nothing new. I have also written to the Chancellor HRH the Prince of Wales but unfortunately he cannot get involved in personal issues, quite how the failure of the University of Wales to comply with the law is a personal issue is something he failed to explain.

12. The OIA is itself not wholly independent being four fifths owned by the Universities and does not meet the standards set by other independent organisations such as the Charity Commission. Having said that I do not wish to discredit any good work they have done and my comments should be seen as ways the OIA could be improved and other models of independence should be adopted to improve the image of impartiality.

13. Whistle blowing, legal loopholes and failure to comply with the requirements of the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998. The Act with regard to trainees under section 47k is flawed as it applies to nobody. Moreover, the law needs to change to include students blowing the whistle on these sorts of issues, and Universities such as Lampeter must be made to comply with the law by having a policy for public display.

14. The market dominance of legal giant Eversheds in representing around 100 of the 133 or so universities in England and Wales should be referred to the Office of Fair Trading. In my opinion, it acts against the interests of students as consumers as it may have lead to a culture of bullying to prevent complaints being made to the OIA. Moreover, it may also serve to prevent what academia fears most and that is the introduction of OFSTED style inspections the loss of academic independence and state run education. However, my concerns are more to do with accountability and whatever regulation it takes to stop this from happening to anyone else.

15. Eversheds were instrumental in setting up the OIA which may account for the procedure of requiring a "Letter of Completion" stating that the students complaints procedures were fully complied with. Although Lampeter produced such a letter that was a blatant pack of lies with impunity in the knowledge that Eversheds would threaten legal action to keep this fact from being made public. That leads to the fact that unlike its Scottish counterpart the OIA has not as yet named and shamed English and Welsh Universities. It has also lead to the belief that the OIA is a panacea for all complaints whereas in fact its criteria make any complaint of this nature extremely difficult.

16. The University of Wales Lampeter is a failed institution and in keeping with recent comments from government ministers on these sorts of issues the public have a right to know why things went wrong, and that the people should be held accountable for their failings. This should apply to Lampeter before any merger with Trinity University College Carmarthen goes ahead to avoid a repetition of the same mistakes. Were the University of Wales Lampeter a school, a FE College or Social Services Department it would have been taken over, a police investigation would have been carried out and those responsible for this sort of corporate incompetence and maladministration would be summarily sacked.

17. The Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004 that took away the power of the Auditor General for Wales to intervene in an HEI with regard to financial mismanagement under the Local Government Act 2000 should be repealed. New legislation should prevent the fraudulent use of public funds to pay solicitors to threaten students with legal action in order to conceal individual and corporate maladministration, contrary to the Company Act 2005 and relevant Charity Acts. Clearly, this relates to staff and officers of a university telling lies with regard to compliance with procedures so they can then come under the protection of the university

and receive free legal assistance to conceal their own corruption. Moreover, I have evidence that University Councils or the Audit Committee are deliberately lied to by officers obtain funding to defend legal action or a tribunal to conceal maladministration. As the law stands, there is nothing to stop this blatant act of fraud from happening or hold the offenders to account.

18. The role of the Church in Wales regarding the governance of Higher Education Institutions and its involvement in political activity needs to be reviewed. The involvement of the Archbishop of Wales in the political pressure group Tomorrows Wales to change the way we are governed is not illegal. The issue is that political activity is not a charitable purpose, and should such a political pressure group be involved in the management of any form of education, which demands 100% compliance with charity law. Politics was in my opinion one of the reasons why the then Visitor to the University of Wales Lampeter Carl Cooper dismissed my complaint after three years of pressure, which included the absurd act of taking out a claim against him in the county court for Malfeasance in Public Office to force him to hear my complaint. Many people like myself feel very strongly that as we are a secular country the Church should stay out of politics.

19. Going to university is a very big undertaking and given the structural disadvantage students face with regard to any redress for being victimised, or subject to predatory behaviour, they should be designated as “vulnerable consumers” for a variety of reasons. The main one being that the average student leaves university with an average debt is around £15,000 this in itself is a big inducement not to rock the boat in the knowledge of ending up with a large debt for nothing. Moreover, it is quite common for students to owe their university in excess of £750, what is frightening is the use of threats of bankruptcy or financial inducement by universities to conceal maladministration. In this situation a student cannot make a counterclaim as the courts will not deal with any issue that comes under the remit of the OIA and the required undertaking by the student not to repeat any allegations in return their “reasonable offer” would rule out any future claim being made.

20. University Councils, its members and officers should be introduced to the concept of public accountability in accordance with the 7 principles of public life, guidelines issued by the Funding Councils and the Committee of University Chairmen. The University of Wales Lampeter is a case whereby the University Council does not work as they do not know what their duties are or pass the buck to avoid taking any form of action. The supervisory role of Council lay members does not work if only because they cannot rely on officers to tell them the truth.

21. The suicide risk to students where there is institutionalised abuse, serial bullying and blatant concealment of maladministration by university officers and council is unacceptably high. It is common knowledge that such tragic actions are more likely when the rules and procedures are perverted, lies are told, evidence fabricated and destroyed, the complainant is subjected to character assassination, threats are made, legitimate concerns are dismissed as wild allegations and any form of investigation is obstructed by those in authority.

22. There was an inquiry carried out a few years ago that concluded the student suicide rate was average for the population, what I did not see was an assessment of the risk as required by any health and safety issue. Common sense tells us that as Universities are social institutions and that students have a purpose in life, it puts them in a low risk environment and group, therefore an average suicide rate would suggests that it is too high.

23. The former head of the OIA Baroness Deech said that Universities have no sense of natural justice, various newspaper articles have reinforced this view, which maybe partly responsible for the “radicalisation” of vulnerable students as there is no lawful remedy to the issues that I have raised from my personal experience. Following the recent raids under the anti terrorism act and the connection with John Moores University in Liverpool my information website has received a number of visitors using the search term “Lampeter Terrorists”, clearly there are a number of people asking the same question.

24. For all the above reasons we need for a University Commissioner to oversee a network of university ombudsman to protect students as vulnerable consumers, ensure universities play it by the rules, and that the overall reputation of our universities is not damaged by the events at the University of Wales Lampeter.

25. Please see

Appendices I,<sup>383</sup> a fabricated allegation of plagiarism of 25% generated by Eve 2.4. Appendix II<sup>383</sup> Page 1 of a fabricated allegation of plagiarism of 19% generated by Eve 2.3 a different version of the same software four minutes earlier. It took a three year battle to obtain evidence of their allegation.

Appendix III<sup>383</sup> the correct result which demonstrates that the software is inaccurate and with the removal of the inaccuracies of a quote and title removed the plagiarism is zero.

May 2009

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<sup>383</sup> Not published.

## **Memorandum 110**

### **Supplementary submission from the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA)**

Since SEDA submitted its original Memorandum of Evidence to the Select Committee in December 2008, its policy has changed in one significant respect.

In the original memorandum SEDA stated that it preferred to maintain the current model of voluntary training and qualification for established teaching staff (3.7).

Through decision at its Executive, SEDA now holds the view that, while it is preferable to achieve such change through voluntary means, it is so important for the quality of student learning that, as soon as possible, all staff who teach should be expected to achieve Standard Two of the National Professional Standards Framework. It also takes the view that those who manage the educational process should achieve this Standard. Other staff who support student learning in a variety of ways should be expected to achieve Standard One.

Established teaching staff are those who have been in post longer than the opportunities for pedagogic development have been available and who may need support to be able to make a successful claim to have reached Standard Two. The same condition usually applies to those who manage the educational process.

SEDA would also like to take this opportunity to draw the Committee's attention to SEDA's Professional Development Framework. This has been designed to make it possible for those who work in higher education to engage in an appropriate development process which strengthens their professional capacity and which leads to SEDA Recognition. It was this process which SEDA used to develop the programmes for new staff which are now widespread across the sector. Within this Framework, for example, SEDA has already been supporting institutions to develop and then recognise External Examiners. There are 16 Awards within the Framework, and they cover a comprehensive range of development opportunities for many different staff at different points in their careers.

*May 2009*

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## **Memorandum 111**

### **Submission from Dr Garth Ratcliffe**

1. The subjects of this letter are:

- (a) the structure of HE
- (b) the management of universities
- (c) the inadequate responses of universities in educating and training graduates for the low carbon economy/green jobs/future sustainability of UK.

2. My qualifications for expressing views on these issues are (a) my nearly 40 years lecturing in HE in maths, physics and environmental science predominantly at Manchester Polytechnic/Manchester Metropolitan University (b) subject qualifications plus professional qualifications as a trained teacher, educational research and educational management plus expertise in sustainable energy, low carbon economy, sustainability and departmental careers adviser in these areas and green careers.

3. THE STRUCTURE OF HE

The structure of HE needs to return to the pre 1992 pattern which featured a binary system of universities and polytechnics. In that era the universities focussed on research and restricted their student entry to those with evidence of academic ability and potential. The Polytechnics focussed on vocational courses and these were particularly appealing to part time students and mature students.

The Polytechnics were an unprecedented success. The majority of today's university students are not academic because most do not study academically challenging subjects at A level. Unfortunately many of these students enrol for academic courses for which they are not suitable. Consequently the courses become diluted in academic rigor and the students become disillusioned. In particular students are certainly not interested in doing research as a career or being enlightened about the latest research findings, however they are very interested in securing a career especially in this economic recession. But what evidence is there that universities are preparing students for a career by teaching work related personal skills and providing work experience? In USA and Canada, internships are arranged by the universities for all students. Why not in the UK?

Many developed countries with a major commitment to HE have a structure of specialised elite universities which focus on research and others which focus on teaching for the needs of the majority of students. This system seems to deliver HE more efficiently and more effectively than the present UK system which leaves many universities financially unsound and most students dissatisfied with their university experience. Even the top universities seem dissatisfied with their ability to fund a world ranking status.

Surely a system that is not fit for purpose needs changing radically? Logically a review of the causes of the present inadequacies needs to be undertaken first.—here is my analysis.

#### 4. MANAGEMENT OF UNIVERSITIES

The universities have currently no control over the quality of the ability of the student intake because they have no control over A level syllabuses or assessment. Although today's students are the subject of much criticism and complaints by university lecturers I take the view that students are victims of a poor UK education system and inadequate career advice.

First the national curriculum introduced in 1986 or so is a complete failure because it has led to a lowering of standards in every direction and in particular GCSE study does not prepare students adequately for A level study. Specifically GCSE science and maths have brought enormous damage and caused the problem of insufficient STEM students. In addition the forms of assessment involved with GCSE and A/S and A levels have led to narrow understanding of subjects caused by focussing towards assessment rather than a holistic approach to subjects.

But universities should recognise these deficiencies and take remedial actions ,rather than just complaining, by increasing class contact hours and doing more teaching beyond a few hours per week for two terms. An initial assessment of all new students on all courses should easily identify those students in need of urgent assistance and help provided until satisfactory standards have been attained. When a university accepts a student onto a course they must accept responsibility for ensuring that the willing and able student passes, otherwise they are failing to deliver at a fundamental level.

In one of your views on your website you state that you were appointed as a head after an hours interview and put in charge of a large budget with no training. This is typical of the appointment of heads of department and vice chancellors of universities. These people are appointed on the basis of completing an application form and performing at an interview. They lack teaching qualifications, educational research qualifications or management qualifications but they do posses research qualifications. It is not clear to me how research qualifications and the ability to promote one's own career qualifies anyone to manage the delivery of educational programmes.

The present system selects those individuals to positions of authority in universities who are best at managing their own careers. Consequently, concern about the careers of lecturers and students is not on the agenda of these pseudo managers and this is why the UK HE system is a failure.

#### *Remedies?*

In Australia, applicants for promotion must qualify to apply by serving a required minimum period at the lower level, doing the required training and constructing a portfolio of their work and providing authenticated evidence of support from students, colleagues and line managers.

A similar system could be adopted in the UK but I would also introduce a three year contract with annual reviews and renewal subject to support from academic staff. Currently many heads of department do no teaching, so how are they qualified to manage teaching and judge standards of education?

#### 5. PREPARING STUDENTS FOR FUTURE CAREERS

The UK government has embraced the need to adapt to climate change by constructing a low carbon economy and this is an integral part of a need for the UK to become progressively environmentally and economically sustainable throughout this century. In particular schools, colleges and universities need to teach sustainability and prepare students for careers in the new green economy and the new green market. In fact there have been substantial achievements as a result of the development of ecoschools programmes, new schools incorporating energy efficiency features and renewable energy and universities are actively trying to reduce their carbon footprints. Additionally, the newly formed institute for energy technologies will make a valuable contribution to research into new sources of energy generation.

Currently many UK multinational corporations are concerned about the development of talent intended to become the new future leaders who will have to take the companies into this new green marketplace. They will need to be able to drive corporate social and sustainable responsibility in the context of the low carbon economy.

But how are universities educating and training such graduates? They seem to be preparing many people for research careers when there are limited opportunities in that field.

HEFCE have "advised" universities that sustainability should be taught on every undergraduate course, but this is not being done.

There are few undergraduate and postgraduate courses in sustainability and little evidence that traditional courses are including modules on sustainability. But universities are supposed to maintain up to date curricula—why isn't this being done?

#### CONCLUSIONS.

1. A great deal of taxpayers money is being wasted by an inefficient and ineffective UK higher education system. I object to my taxes being wasted and I want something done about it.

A few years ago a head of the Department of Environmental and Geographical Sciences was appointed at MMU. In three years he did no research, no lectures, no tutorials, no project or research supervision. This was a complete waste of taxpayers money orchestrated by the management of MMU.

2. I have written to DIUS ministers expressing views on HE a couple of times but with disappointing responses. The replies give me a case number and explain why they can't reply in detail. I have more experience and qualifications in HE than anyone at DIUS, why haven't these people the sense to make use of these qualities?

3. I understand that DIUS is planning a revision of HE shortly. Hopefully this will include some of the points that I have made.

4. DIUS and university vice chancellors must be made more accountable to stakeholders, the UK taxpayer, the student, the lecturer, employers. These two must provide evidence that they are delivering what stakeholders are paying for. Currently this evidence doesn't seem to exist.

5. This paper that I have written provides arguments that demonstrate failure on all these counts.

6. What to do about it? I suggest that before DIUS rushes into print about a revision of HE, your select committee should interview the secretary of state and minister of HE to establish what they are proposing to do about the present inefficiencies and ineffectiveness of universities that are wasting taxpayers money.

7. Subsequently a meeting with the university vice chancellors committee which explored what they intended to do about improving the quality of HE being delivered and the employment prospects of graduates and post graduates. In particular, what are universities doing about the teaching of sustainability on all courses and providing education and training for careers in the low carbon economy. The UK government has been promoting the low carbon economy for years without planning for the manpower needed to deliver such eg the shortage of scientists and engineers to work in the nuclear power industry has led to reliance on French and USA designed nuclear reactors. Is the same pattern to be repeated with the low carbon economy?

8. The formal remit of the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee is to examine the administration, expenditure and policy of the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, including further education, higher education, skills and the Government Office for Science which has responsibility for science across all Government departments.

The issues that I have raised clearly fall within the remit of your select committee and therefore I hope that you will find an opportunity to address them.

May 2009

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#### Memorandum 112

##### Supplementary evidence from Professor Roger Goodman<sup>384</sup>

When I gave oral evidence to the Committee on 30 March, the Chairman asked me (Q260) whether the University of Oxford ever goes outside the Russell Group for our external examiners. At the time, my reply was: "I am pretty sure we do go outside the Russell Group for our external examiners but I could not give you a case here and now, and I myself have been an external examiner in non-Russell Group universities, including in fact this university here". I have asked my University for further information on this point, so that I can provide a fuller response to the Committee. I am now writing to provide this information, in the hope that it is of help to the work of the Committee.

In the past year, Oxford University has used 284 external examiners across its undergraduate and postgraduate taught courses. Of these, 120 have been from Russell Group universities, and 164 came to us from outside the Russell Group. Those from outside the Russell Group included: academics employed by the 1994 Group, the University Alliance, and Million +; a number of medical doctors who work primarily in NHS hospitals; and several academics from learned institutions or who otherwise have no current higher

<sup>384</sup> University of Oxford, following the oral evidence session on 30 March 2009.



education institution affiliation. Ten of our external examiners are from overseas universities, in the EU, other European countries, and North America. Oxford University therefore recruits its external examiners from a diverse range of universities.

May 2009

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### Memorandum 113

#### Letter from Professor Michael Arthur, Vice-Chancellor, University of Leeds to the Chairman following the oral evidence session on 6 May 2009

I am writing to you as chair of the Innovation, Universities, Science & Skills Committee to put the record straight with respect to oral evidence given by Dr Gavin Reid on 6 May 2009.

Dr Reid's evidence included the following (taken from the uncorrected transcript):

“Where in my institution it falls down is that the QAA only sees what the university management puts in front of it. I will give you an example: my university runs what has been described as a very perverse model for classifying degree schemes, and it was my external examiner who called it perverse. What happens is that low marks between 0 and 20 are rounded up to 20 and high marks from 80 to 100 are rounded downwards, and then they are averaged together, so you have this non-linear average before making a classification. That comment about this being perverse was fed through the system up to what they call the Learning and Teaching Board, but then it reached a dead-end. I know for a fact that the QAA never saw these comments from the external examiners.”

Dr Reid seems to be suggesting that the University of Leeds deliberately kept the QAA in the dark about the comments made by an external examiner in Chemistry. This is simply not the case.

The facts are as follows.

During our institutional audit the QAA auditors were given access to all external examiners' reports and the University and school responses to them, including relevant minutes. We would emphasise in particular that the QAA auditors were sent—in advance of their visit, and at their own request—copies of the minutes of our Learning and Teaching Board and of our Senate. It is our assumption that these minutes would have been read in full by the auditors.

The minutes of the Board's meeting on 31 October 2007 include the following:

“The Board noted the concerns raised by the Faculty of Mathematics and Physical Sciences relating to the University's classification system and grading scales, following comments by three External Examiners in the School of Chemistry. Following a lengthy discussion and a specific proposal from a member of the Board it was agreed that the current arrangements for classifying students and the use of University grading scales should continue to be used by all Schools for the time being at least: the process of degree classification and associated grade scales would be considered as part of a wider debate assessing the ramifications of the Burgess Report.”

The minutes of the subsequent Senate (on 21 November 2007) in turn included the following:

“The [Learning and Teaching] Board had noted the concerns raised by the Faculty of Mathematics and Physical Sciences relating to the University's classification system and grading scales, following comments by three External Examiners in the School of Chemistry, a matter which had also been raised at the Senate (see SM 07/15). Following a lengthy discussion and a specific proposal from a member of the Board, it had been agreed that the current arrangements for classifying students and the use of University grading scales should continue to be used by all Schools for the time being at least. The process of degree classification and associated grade scales would be considered as part of a wider debate assessing the ramifications of the report of the Universities UK Steering Group on Measuring and Recording Student Achievement (known as the Burgess Report).

The matter was raised again by a member of the Senate. In response, reference was made to the necessity of having in place a system which ensured parity across all disciplines; reassurances were given that students were not disadvantaged by the current system; and emphasis was placed on a review of this matter taking place as part of the wider debate and a comprehensive review envisaged following the publication of the Burgess Report.”

There was therefore complete transparency and integrity in the University's approach to the audit; we did not seek to hide anything from the auditors.

I should be grateful if you could make copies of this letter available to all members of the select committee and also ask that it forms part of the formal record of your proceedings.

I am copying this letter to Dr Reid for reasons of transparency.

If you require any further information or clarification, I would be more than happy to provide it.

May 2009

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#### Memorandum 114

### Supplementary evidence from the University and College Union (UCU) following the oral evidence session on 6 May 2009

#### PLAGIARISM

“A 2002 study by Patrick Scanlon & David Neumann, based on a survey of 698 undergraduates in the US and Middle East, suggested that students think much more plagiarizing is taking place than they actually report doing.

16.5% reported having “sometimes” appropriated text without a citation; 8% of students reported having done so “often” or “very frequently.” 50.4% of students reported that their peers “often” or “very frequently” cut and pasted text from the net without proper citation.

The study also found that the amount of online plagiarism reported by students is comparable to the amount of offline plagiarism from books or other printed sources that has been reported in studies since the 1960s.

24.5% of students reported “often,” “very frequently,” or “sometimes” having lifted text from the net without proper citation, 27.6% reported having done the same with printed texts. Over 90% reported their peers “often,” “very frequently,” or “sometimes” copied text from offline sources without citation.

A 2002 study from CAVAL Collaborative Solutions claimed that essays by 8.85% of a sample of Australian university students featured large amounts of unattributed text lifted from the web. The study, on behalf of six Australian universities, used Turnitin software in an examination of 1,751 randomly selected undergraduate and postgraduate essays—from the social sciences, business, computing, education, health sciences and engineering.

In around 9% of the sample a quarter of the essay matched other sources, although it is unclear whether that figure reflects plagiarism. 1.54% of the essays contained greater than 50% of copied material. Two were copied in their entirety.

In the UK Coventry University reported in 2006 that it had identified 237 students lifting text from online, expelling seven students. Nottingham University disciplined 53 students but expelled only one. Oxford, Edinburgh, Durham, Newcastle and Warwick reportedly did not identify any instances warranting expulsion.

A 2001 study by Donald McCabe of Student Cheating in American High Schools covered 4,500 students from twenty-five high schools. 54% had used the net to plagiarise. However, the research suggested that most of those cheating would have plagiarized without the net and only 6% of the plagiarists had relied solely on the net. 22% had submitted work done by their parents.

Many students did not see anything wrong with cheating (or were merely feeling frisky when completing the questionnaire): around 50% said they didn’t think copying questions and answers from a test was cheating.

Educause (PDF) notes that 66% of students (and parents) in another survey said that cheating “didn’t seem like a big deal.” That is consistent with the report of Penn State Uni’s 1999 PULSE survey on academic integrity. In US focus groups involving high school students there was widespread agreement that

Many of our teachers are clueless when it comes to the Internet, the material you can find on the Internet is of sufficient quality to submit on your assignments, and paper topics are usually so broad that your teachers are not at all likely to recognise a source you might use.

Scanlon & Neuman however notes that student practice is context sensitive, affected by the example of peers, assessment of risk, and understanding of what’s involved. Educause refers to a Berkeley neurobiology professor who found that 45 of 320 students had plagiarized at least part of their term paper from the net; 15% plagiarised after warnings that he would use anti-plagiarism technology.

McCabe suggests that attitudes are changing:

High-school students who are growing up with the Internet, they’re having real difficulty distinguishing what is and is not plagiarism. Many of them are developing an attitude that anything on the Internet is public domain, and they’re not seeing copying it as cheating.”—<http://www.caslon.com.au/ipguide17.htm> last accessed 7 May 2009).

*Intimidation and bullying at work*

The following is a press release with regard to bullying at work. It is directly related to an individual's capacity to "speak out" with regard to either areas of research that are prioritised, the university's reputation or more general questioning of management policy.

Thursday 6 November 2008: "The University and College Union (UCU) today (Thursday) names and shames the universities with the worst reported levels of bullying, ahead of Friday's national Ban Bullying at Work Day. The union said the deep-seated problem of bullying at work had to be tackled by universities and attacked organisations in the sector for failing to get to grips with the issue".

The UCU survey of 9,700 members working in higher education revealed that 6.7% of members said they were "always" or "often" bullied at work and 16.7% said "sometimes". Only half (51%) said they were fortunate enough to "never" be bullied at work.

Less than half of all respondents in higher education (only 45.1%) said they were "never" subjected to personal harassment at work. 7% said they were subjected to it "always" or "often" and nearly one in five (18.8%) said they "sometimes" suffered from personal harassment.

The university with highest percentage of staff who said they are "always" or "often" bullied was the University of East London with 16.7%. In an alarming 19 institutions (table below) at least one in 10 respondents to the UCU survey reported being "always" or "often" bullied.

<i>Higher education institution</i>	<i>"Always" or "often" bullied</i>	<i>Number of respondents*</i>	<i>Academic staff among respondents</i>	<i>Survey sample academics as % of institution's total academic staff**</i>
University of East London	16.7%	36	33	4.9%
Kingston University	15.9%	69	51	3.0%
De Montfort University	14.3%	77	70	5.7%
University of Lincoln	13.6%	44	37	5.6%
University of Salford	12.8%	86	53	4.3%
University of Glamorgan	12.5%	48	41	3.6%
University of Ulster	11.9%	143	103	5.7%
Bangor University	11.8%	51	36	5.3%
Manchester Metropolitan University	11.7%	77	68	3.4%
Birmingham City University	11.5%	52	33	2.0%
University of Greenwich	11.4%	35	32	3.0%
University of Westminster	11.3%	62	56	3.0%
Oxford Brookes University	11.1%	45	40	3.4%
University of Gloucestershire	10.9%	46	40	6.8%
University of Hertfordshire	10.9%	46	45	2.7%
University of Dundee	10.6%	94	61	4.4%
University of Portsmouth	10.5%	38	29	2.8%
University of Bradford	10.5%	124	80	12.1%
Queen's University Belfast	10.1%	148	124	7.7%

UCU general secretary, Sally Hunt, said: "Bullying at work can take many forms and all of them create stress for the victim. Everybody has the right to expect to work in a safe environment free from bullying. Good institutions are ones that are aware of the problem and proactively trying to tackle it. Poor ones are those who refuse to accept there may be a problem or try to place the blame elsewhere.

"We believe bullying to be a deep-seated problem in higher education and we want to know what organisations such as the Universities and Colleges Employers' Association (UCEA) are doing to tackle the problem."

The results are part of a wider stress survey conducted by UCU that will be released later this month. The union is hosting a Tackling Bullying conference on Thursday 27 November.

## NOTES

\* In its survey UCU used the questions from the Health and Safety Executive's (HSE) Management Standards Indicator Tool questionnaire. In its Management Standards Analysis Tool User Manual the HSE sets a minimum of 10 people for a group that is being analysed. UCU chose to triple the minimum number of respondents required from an institution to 30 to give a more reliable response rate.

\*\* Source: HESA staff record 2006-7.

*Leeds Met conducted a survey on bullying in 2007. NB this answer:*

Q. 12 Asked—. Do you feel inhibited about criticising constructively the policies of Leeds Metropolitan University?

<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
96%	

Q. 12 Respondents were invited to comment further—Do you feel inhibited about criticising constructively the policies of Leeds Metropolitan University?

- 132 respondents provided further comment
- Here are two examples of institutional responses
- “ANALYSIS THAT INDICATES A PROBLEM IS SEEN AS UNHELPFUL.”
- “THERE IS AN ATMOSPHERE OF FEAR AND A FEELING THAT DECISIONS CANNOT BE CHALLENGED CONSTRUCTIVELY—IT IS TANTAMOUNT TO TREASON

#### POSTGRADUATES

The committee also inquired about postgraduates and recognised a major piece of work should be undertaken with regard to their experiences.

The committee is no doubt aware of the Hefce report from this year which shows a large increase in numbers.

[http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09\\_04/#exec](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09_04/#exec)

UCU and NUS published both an employment charter and a good practice guide for postgraduate employment:

[http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/0/5/pg\\_employmentcharter\\_1.pdf](http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/0/5/pg_employmentcharter_1.pdf) and there’s also a good practice guide:

[http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/8/5/pg\\_goodpracticeguide\\_1.pdf](http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/8/5/pg_goodpracticeguide_1.pdf)

May 2009

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#### Memorandum 115

##### **Supplementary evidence from the Department for Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills following the oral evidence session on 11 May 2009**

The Department and HEFCE welcome this opportunity to provide additional data and to clarify the points raised in the evidence session on 11 May 2009

Q531—the exact quote from NCEE report;

In its report to Ministers in October 2008, the National Council for Educational Excellence made a range of recommendations including

“HEIs should continue to use, and where possible expand the range of, all the information available to them to identify the best students with the greatest potential and ability to reach the highest academic achievement. In the interests of openness and fairness, institutions should publish their admissions policies and make them easily accessible to applicants, and equip all those involved in admissions to implement the policy consistently.”

Q544—figures on numbers of first and 2:1s, I think the Chairman may have had in mind the increase from the early 1990s;

Due to the increase in the numbers of students participating in Higher Education, the actual number of firsts awarded by UK HEIs has risen from 19,470 to 41,150 (up by 111%) between 97/98 and 07/08. This compares to a rise in the total number of degrees awarded of 29% (258,755 to 334,890). The increase in 1sts appears much more dramatic because the percentage increase is based on a smaller number.

However the increase in the proportions of graduates awarded a 1st class or 2.1 degree appears much smaller: an increase between 1997/98 to 2007/08 from 8.2% to 13.3% for firsts, and 45.5% to 48.1% for upper seconds.

The attached Annex gives a time series.

The 2003 White Paper acknowledged increasing numbers of 1st and upper-2nd class degrees being awarded and asked HEFCE to convene a review group with the sector to consider possible alternative methods for presenting the overall achievement of students. That led to setting up the 'Burgess Group' which proposed the HE Achievement Report (HEAR). The HEAR will provide a more detailed academic record for students alongside their overall degree classification.

Q568—*is there research evidence established the relationship between research and good teaching.*

The Government established a Higher Education Research Forum which met during 2004. In addition to acting as a sounding board for research reforms, the Forum was asked to advise on two specific issues, one of which was the relationship between teaching and research.

The Forum concluded that the evidence base supporting a link between research activity and teaching quality is limited. <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/hegateway/hereform/heresearchforum/index.cfm>

In response to Mr Marsden's request to Sir Alan Langlands, information is attached from HEFCE about recent reports on the subject of research informed teaching.

1. The link between research and teaching has been of increasing interest to researchers over the last 20 years, with the balance of the evidence ebbing and flowing. The evidence is not strong in demonstrating a direct link between research and the quality of teaching. However, studies also note that there are many tangential and ephemeral aspects that impact on teaching that are hard to pin down.

2. To summarise, early studies generally concluded that there is no necessary relationship between teaching and research. However, studies focusing on student perceptions have shown that students value learning in a research environment. Hattie and Marsh (1996, 529) conducted a large meta analysis of research studies in this area and concluded that there was no inextricable link between research and teaching, but that purposeful action by universities could bring about that linkage, through actions such as better training for staff in teaching, through curriculum change, and by being explicit about good teaching at university level being about more than imparting information.

3. The Higher Education Academy has published two documents on this area, and is about to publish a third. The two published reports will be sent to the committee in hard copy and can also be downloaded; they have extensive bibliographies.

*Institutional strategies to link teaching and research, Jenkins, A and Healey, M—October 2005* <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/research/teaching>

and

*Linking teaching and research disciplines and departments, Jenkins, A, Healey, M and Zetter, R—April 2007* [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/research/Institutional\\_strategies.pdf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/research/Institutional_strategies.pdf)

4. Paul Ramsden, the Chief Executive of the Higher Education Academy, has published, with others, evidence on academics' experience of research and its relationship to their experience of teaching. This is also available (Prosser *et al* 2008).

5. Much of the evidence focuses on two areas: the experience of academics and perceptions of better teaching because of connection to research; and improved undergraduate curricula that include areas more traditionally associated with research. These studies tend to suggest that students are reporting better experiences, or believe their work is more up to date, because teachers are either (a) research-active or (b) engaged in some level of scholarship. Changes to teaching to better link it to research include: introducing more and longer supervised student projects, more courses on research methods and techniques, coursework assessment that promotes student enquiry, approaches that draw students into examining and questioning knowledge, and harnessing the enthusiasm for their subject of experienced researchers and those engaged in scholarship.

6. HEFCE's funding has recognised the value of connecting teaching and research, and that research studies had shown that links between the two are not automatic (see Hattie and Marsh above). Thus, drawing on the evidence then available, as part of the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund, institutions that received low or no QR funding received an allocation to support research informed teaching.

7. The Higher Education Academy, in congruence with its quality enhancement role has been supporting this funding initiative. It has produced the reports mentioned above and held various events to assist, firstly, institutions in strategic development of links between research and teaching and, secondly, to help departments and individual academics develop their skills and curricula to enhance the synergies between research and teaching.

8. Similarly, experiences reported by Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning suggest success in offering university teachers small amounts of developmental funding to allow them to engage in scholarship.

May 2005

## REFERENCES

Hattie, J and Marsh, H W (1996) 'The relationship between research and teaching: a meta analysis', *Review of Educational Research*, 66(4), 507–542.

Prosser M, Martin E, Trigwell K, Ramsden P, Middleton H (2008) 'University academics' experience of research and its relationship to their experience of teaching', *Instructional Science*, 36, 3–16.

## Annex

## DEGREES AWARDED BY UK HE INSTITUTIONS BY CLASS OF DEGREE

	<i>1st</i>	<i>Upper second</i>	<i>Lower second</i>	<i>3rd/pass</i>	<i>Total classified</i>	<i>Unclassified</i>	<i>Unknown</i>	<i>All</i>
1997–98	19,470	108,590	89,490	21,205	238,755	18,160	1,840	258,755
1998–99	20,730	111,750	92,050	20,830	245,355	18,315	0	263,670
1999–2000	21,770	113,740	90,300	20,110	245,920	19,350	0	265,270
2000–01	24,095	118,460	89,750	21,150	253,455	19,205	0	272,665
2001–02	26,455	121,240	86,650	19,620	253,965	20,470	0	274,440
2002–03	28,635	123,800	88,260	20,670	261,365	21,010	0	282,380
2003–04	30,175	127,935	90,470	20,785	269,365	22,725	0	292,090
2004–05	32,465	132,770	92,610	22,290	280,135	26,235	0	306,365
2005–06	34,825	137,235	94,265	22,845	289,170	26,815	0	315,985
2006–07	36,645	138,745	92,795	23,195	291,380	27,880	0	319,260
2007–08	41,150	148,265	95,145	23,990	308,550	26,260	80	334,890

<i>Proportions</i>	<i>1st</i>	<i>Upper second</i>	<i>Lower second</i>	<i>3rd/pass</i>	<i>Total classified</i>
1997–98	8.2%	45.5%	37.5%	8.9%	100.0%
1998–99	8.4%	45.5%	37.5%	8.5%	100.0%
1999–2000	8.9%	46.3%	36.7%	8.2%	100.0%
2000–01	9.5%	46.7%	35.4%	8.3%	100.0%
2001–02	10.4%	47.7%	34.1%	7.7%	100.0%
2002–03	11.0%	47.4%	33.8%	7.9%	100.0%
2003–04	11.2%	47.5%	33.6%	7.7%	100.0%
2004–05	11.6%	47.4%	33.1%	8.0%	100.0%
2005–06	12.0%	47.5%	32.6%	7.9%	100.0%
2006–07	12.6%	47.6%	31.8%	8.0%	100.0%
2007–08	13.3%	48.1%	30.8%	7.8%	100.0%

The figures have been taken from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) student record which is collected annually. The figures are on a HESA Standard Registration Population (SRP) basis and has been rounded to the nearest five.

## Memorandum 116

## Supplementary submission from UCAS (Universities Central Council on Admissions)

## STATEMENT FOR IUSS SELECT COMMITTEE

## CONFIRMATION AND CLEARING 2009

The number of applicants for 2009 entry in the main undergraduate scheme operated by UCAS, ie that for full-time, undergraduate students, stood at 567,840 on 8 June compared with 519,902 at the same point for the 2008 entry cycle. This represents an increase of 9.3% across the UK; for England only the figures are 522,550/477,324 respectively and an increase of 9.5%.

This constitutes a significant increase in applications, and growth which is very much higher than the year on year trends evidenced over the last ten years. This needs to be considered against a backdrop of an effective cap on further growth of student intake numbers for England imposed by government via HEFCE.

HEFCE has informed us that, in practice, for 2009 additional student numbers in respect of full-time, under-graduate, programmes translate into the number of last year's intake (around 419,000), plus an additional 3,000 places (ie an increase of less than 1% compared to the intake for 2008 entry). These figures suggest that there will be a projected reduction in places available during Clearing for 2009 entry (< 18,000 places compared with c 44,000 last year) of > 25,000. UCAS has been monitoring the situation carefully and has determined that although there is some evidence of management of the position by HEIs in that the rate of offer-making has only increased by around 5.5%, applicants are accepting offers at a similar rate to that evidenced for 2008 entry. Offers are not, in general, markedly higher than those made last year.

In addition to the above, a new procedure, initiated by the Delivery Partnership Steering Group, and named the “Adjustment Period”, has been introduced for Confirmation and Clearing 2009. This provides applicants who meet and exceed the conditions of their firm choice to have the opportunity to reconsider their choice and make a fresh application based on their higher level of achievement. In consulting about this change the Delivery Partnership determined that less than 1,000 applicants would be eligible to use this new service; however, analysis by UCAS suggests that, while in theory, this figure could be as high as around 50,000 a figure of 4,000 is more likely based on those who, last cycle, declined unconditional offers and entered Clearing. Of course, it is impossible to predict with any complete certainty the behaviour of a different group of students encountering a new procedure.

All the above suggests a rather more uncertain situation for Confirmation and Clearing 2009 in comparison with recent years. There are likely to be disappointed applicants who are unable to find a place in Clearing, and any space for allowing for Adjustment may be even more narrow than the somewhat cautious view adopted at the beginning of the cycle.

In the light of these uncertainties UCAS has taken measures to strengthen its technical and operational infrastructure and is working with its member institutions to ensure the provision of comprehensive information.

*June 2009*

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### Memorandum 117

#### Supplementary memorandum submitted by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)

##### ADDITIONAL STUDENT NUMBERS (ASNs) FOR 2009–10

###### *Numbers*

HEFCE allocated 9,953 ASNs for 2009–10, of which 4,805 were full time and 5,148 part time. The full time figure of 4,805 includes an estimate of 3,000 additional first year entrants. The balance will accommodate second or subsequent cohorts to new or expanded courses that we have supported in earlier years. For example, if an institution is supported to develop a new three-year degree course, we would expect an increase in new entrants in the first year. If entrant levels are to be maintained, the institution is likely to need additional places in years two and three to support subsequent cohorts until student numbers across all three years of study reach a steady state.

###### *Policy and Priorities*

*As you will know, the Government determines the number of places that can be allocated by HEFCE on a year by year basis and confirms this number in the grant letter. As part of our advice to the Government for the Spending Reviews, we provide intelligence on student demand and the needs of the sector in specific priority areas. However it is for the Government to decide what is affordable, taking account of student support costs. The cost of student support is of course a significant consideration for the Government in determining decisions on the number of places that can be made available in higher education.*

In February 2008, in planning for the allocation of the ASNs which were then available for the spending review period, our Board determined that these should be focused on five priority areas, reflecting the priorities set out in the Secretary of State’s grant letters:

- the sustainability of existing Strategic Development Fund (SDF) projects;
- foundation degrees;
- health;
- strategic subjects including science, technology, engineering and mathematics; and
- higher education centres linked to “New University Challenge” funds.

The Board also agreed at that time to take account of the implications of the Government’s Equal and Lower Qualifications (ELQ) policy in allocating ASNs, and to continue to pursue its objective of widening participation as part of considering ASN proposals.

You will be aware that two part-time providers, the Open University and Birkbeck College, were particularly affected by the ELQ policy, and we received early proposals from both institutions for ASNs to help restructure their provision. ASNs allocated to the OU and Birkbeck were for part-time provision. This reduced the availability of numbers for full-time entrants.

In the letter sent to HEFCE on 29 October 2008 by the Secretary of State, we were asked to reduce the number of ASNs to 10,000 for 2009-10 and to consider ways of constraining recruitment in the sector. The HEFCE Board revisited the priorities for ASNs and agreed that we should not invite further proposals but should inform the sector that there would be no further ASNs to allocate for 2009–10 beyond those already

allocated or already logged with the Council as future requirements. The Board also agreed that we should consider allocating the few remaining ASNs against the proposals logged with us (all of which met the original priorities), guided by the following principles:

- bids for growth to support existing large capital investments where HEFCE;
- funding—or that of other funders—would be put at risk if ASNs were not allocated;
- bids for growth to support other HEFCE investments where our funding would be;
- put at risk if ASNs were not allocated (this included Lifelong Learning Networks);
- bids for growth in Strategically Important and Vulnerable Subjects (SIVS);
- particularly STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics); and
- bids for growth in other priority areas (healthcare and foundation degrees).

The Secretary of State re-iterated his concerns about over-recruitment in the Council's grant letter in January 2009 and asked us to bear down on over-recruitment to minimise or preferably eliminate this for 2009–10. As a result, the Council asked HEIs to review their planned recruitment for the year and to ensure that they did not over-recruit.

The Council is aware that there is considerable demand for ASNs and has adopted sensible rationing criteria, adjusting them as necessary to respond to the changing availability of funds.

#### *Process*

You asked about the process we use for allocating ASNs. We now allocate places through our Strategic Development Fund taking account of priorities determined from time to time by the Government and the Council—the priorities for the current period are set out above. Final decisions on the number of ASNs to be awarded can be taken by me (with advice from the HEFCE directors and institutional teams), by the Council's SDF Panel, or the full HEFCE Board, depending on the level of ASNs requested. A full description of our processes is set out in Circular Letter 05/2008 (See annex<sup>385</sup>).

#### *HEIs' allocation of resources to courses and places*

As you will know, HEIs have a great deal of autonomy to determine their own provision. The Council allocates a block grant to enable HEIs to use resources flexibly and effectively in the light of demand. HEIs then determine their use of the block grant to support their chosen mix of higher education courses and to allocate places to each course, in response to demand.

#### *Scope for expansion*

I wanted to reply to your letter promptly and there has not been time to put together a detailed response to the questions you raised about whether or not the sector has the scope for further expansion and where additional numbers might be allocated. The intelligence I have from the HEFCE institutional teams is that most parts of the sector could probably accommodate more students, although institutions are now moving quickly towards entry decisions for 2009–10. If it would be helpful I would be happy to provide a follow up note on this issue based on ASN proposals currently logged with us and our intelligence from the sector.

June 2009

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### Memorandum 118

#### **Letter from the Rt Hon Lord Mandelson, Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills to Phil Willis MP, Chairman of the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee, 20 July 2009**

Thank you for your letter of 17 June about the funding of Higher Education about the allocation of additional student numbers (ASNs) for 2009–10 which was discussed again today at the Liaison Committee.

I must apologise for the delay in responding but as you know we have been considering how best to respond to the very real demand for higher education in the current climate. We have now announced that we will provide financial support to around 10,000 additional students who want to go into higher education this summer. This is a measured and positive response to a real demand from both institutions and students.

As John Denham explained when he came before the Committee on 11 May, we have provided significant funding for Higher Education over the last ten years—an increase of around 25% in real terms. Higher Education student numbers will now be at a historical high. There will be a significant increase in the overall student population this year due to previous years' entrant growth and the announcement we have just made.

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<sup>385</sup> Not printed.



Through HEFCE, we provide a teaching grant as a payment towards the costs of teaching students. The amount of grant that Government pays for each student fell sharply in the 1990s as universities were asked to expand on an unsustainable basis. Since the introduction of variable fees, we have kept the unit of funding per student relatively constant, whilst expecting appropriate back office efficiency savings. The students we have announced funding for today are fees-only, they do not attract teaching grant, and of course it will be entirely a matter for universities to judge whether they want to offer places to students on a fees-only basis: not all will choose to do so. But we know from discussions with the sector that there are institutions who will be able to recruit such students without compromising the quality of their offer.

Of course, as we look to the future, we need to ensure that increases in student numbers are managed in the interests of students, the economy and the universities themselves. In recent years, there has been faster growth in the student population than planned. Unplanned growth places extra pressures on student support budgets. The balance that we must strike is not allowing so much unplanned expansion that student support costs to the public purse exceed expectations.

I recognise the points you have made about achieving the Leitch targets. We remain committed to increasing the skill levels of the nation in order to help us compete internationally and to be ready for the upturn. But I hope you will also agree that it is right that as the nation tightens its belt in the face of real pressures, that we manage public finances responsibly.

July 2009

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### Memorandum 119

*[Manchester Metropolitan University, Mr Cairns submission and correspondence]*

#### Submission from WJ Cairns<sup>386</sup>

#### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The author of this submission is critical of the terms of reference of this investigation.
- Nevertheless, he hereby presents his evidence to the effect that, not only in his own area, but in most other academic fields of study, there are many forces at work which inevitably lead to a reduction in standards.
- These relate mainly to the need to retain student numbers, which if they were allowed to fall because of high failure rates would have dire economic consequences for the institution in general and probably for the individual tutors in particular.
- The alleged safeguards in place, in the shape of internal and external second assessment, are totally inadequate for the purpose of countering this trend.
- He illustrates this sorry state of affairs by a case study which is based upon his own experience in organising, teaching and assessing various law courses on the International Business degree at his University.
- This involved an exercise in distortion of the results which, in the author's view, amounts to blatant cheating.

#### INTRODUCTION

1. Because of the relatively short notice received for the submission of evidence, as well as a combination of heavy teaching, research and administrative duties, my observations are less complete than I would like them to be. However, I was extremely keen to participate in the debate, which is highly necessary even if, as I mention below, the terms of reference on which this inquiry is based are not beyond criticism.

2. First of all, I wish to state that the framework for this investigation as set by the Committee is extremely unsatisfactory, largely because of its omissions—the most glaring of which relate to (a) course level and content and (b) methods and levels of assessment. Even the headings laid down by the Committee are tightly circumscribed in such a way as to obstruct a thorough examination of the underlying issues.

3. Let us take as an example the “Admissions” heading. Here, surely two of the main issues to be examined in the context of the general theme of the inquiry are (a) have admission criteria widened to the point of including students who are not equal to the intellectual challenge of higher education, and (b) have the admissions criteria kept pace with the manner in which the qualifications at secondary education level have evolved, mainly in relation to A levels and GCSEs. In other words, do admissions criteria take account of the possibility that a reduction in standards has also taken place as regards these qualifications, even if nominally they are the same as those which were awarded 20 or 30 years ago?

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<sup>386</sup> School of Law, Manchester Metropolitan University.

## ASSESSMENT—THEN AND NOW

4. To those of us who have been involved in the assessment of law subjects taught at the level of higher education, it is obvious that standards have dropped substantially. This is not only the case, as is generally believed, because of the incidence of course work and of “seen” examination papers. It also has to do with the manner in which the various assessed elements—whether in the form of examinations, tests, essays and other items of coursework—are evaluated and marked. More particularly it relates to a tacit understanding amongst university staff that assessment levels and methods shall be geared mainly, if not exclusively, to the need to retain as many students as possible for the subsequent years and for graduation.

5. Because this is a tacit understanding it is very difficult, if not totally impossible, to supply hard documentary evidence of any such trend. However, there are a number of indicators and official statements of policy which very much point in that direction. A telling example of this is the requirement, now made of all courses at my University, that assessors should “use the full range of marks”. This is a coded way of instructing tutors to include more students in the top evaluation brackets. This does not necessarily involve the distortion and subsequent changing of marks—although this too frequently occurs, as can be seen elsewhere in this paper—but manifests itself in the form of awarding higher marks than before in order to meet target numbers. Any course for which this is not done will face the danger that (a) the throughput to the subsequent years of the course will drop, raising possible question marks over staffing levels and therefore the possibility of redundancies, and (b) the University’s authorities, faced with a higher than average failure rate or a lower than average percentage of students in the higher evaluation brackets (ie 2(1) and Firsts), will exercise heavy pressure on the departments concerned to “see the error of their ways”.

6. This process is also aided and abetted by the “internal market” system. In the vast majority of Universities, individual departments and/or faculties have become “cost centres”, in other words, independent budget-holding units. If they teach students outside their departments and/or faculties, they charge the other department and/or faculty for services rendered on the basis of a costing formula known as “FTE” (full-time equivalent”). This means that the department providing the service has every interest in maintaining numbers at a high level—and therefore to be as generous in their marking as possible.

7. This is particularly the case with departments which are traditionally felt to be “overstaffed” and whose subjects are on the wane in popularity terms. Languages departments are particularly vulnerable to such pressures. Languages degrees as such are in numerical decline, and ever fewer courses which used to offer the possibility of a combination with languages (eg international/European business studies, Law and French/German/Spanish, etc) are currently inclined to do so. This trend has already caused the closure of several university languages departments (including, devastatingly, at Bradford University, once regarded as a prototype institution for this kind of course). Faced with these dramatic trends, language departments will be extremely reluctant to fail any students—whether on their own degrees or on those which they service.

## THE ROLE OF SECOND MARKERS AND EXTERNAL EXAMINERS

8. It is often maintained that adequate safeguards exist for the maintenance of standards—in the face of the trends mentioned above—in the shape of double marking procedures and the watchful eye exercised by the external examiners. Sadly, this pretension is frequently no more than a snare and a delusion.

9. In the first place, internal second markers are subject to the same constraints as those facing their colleagues in terms of the need to retain sufficient student numbers for the sake of their own survival. This is the case even where the second markers form part of a different department. They are also subject to the same policy of “using the full range of marks” and therefore will act and mark accordingly. In most cases, the only adjustments made will be upwards, particularly when it comes to second-marking assignments and scripts which the first marker has failed.

10. The role of the external examiner is, in principle, supposed to be that of a supervisor and guarantor of certain standards of quality and probity. Sadly, this lofty aspiration is met more in the breach than in the observance because of two main factors. In the first place, many universities have succeeded in severely restricting the scope for action by the external examiner by the manner in which they circumscribe his/her duties in the relevant regulations. In many cases, the external examiner does not monitor the general level of the marks or is given the opportunity to change individual grades, since all he/she is called upon to do is to arbitrate between first and second markers and/or make a decision in borderline cases. (Even within this limited scope their room for manoeuvre is even narrower, since internal examiners are now instructed not to issue borderline marks of 39, 49, 59, etc!)

11. However, there is another way in which the external examiner is unable fully to exercise his role as guardian of standards, in that he/she cannot possibly know what has passed between tutor and student prior to the assessment, or the input which the tutor has had in it (in the case of coursework). For it is the worst-kept secret in the academic world that, for unseen examination papers, most tutors provide their students with the contents of the paper beforehand, or at least give them a list of topics from which the questions will be drawn. The role of the external examiner is therefore predicated on an assumption of academic integrity which, for the most part, does not exist.

12. However, there is another side to the external examiner’s role which connives at the current reduction in academic standards in higher education. At the Board of Examiners, which they are entitled to attend as of right, it will often be they who will pass adverse comment if they feel that internal examiners have been

“less than generous”. This is particularly the case in relation to first-class degrees. At my own University, this happens very frequently—if I owned a “blue note” for every occasion on which I have heard the words “why don’t you give more Firsts” at a board of examiners’ meeting I would be a rich man indeed. In fact, external examiners can play an even more insidious role in the present trend of lowering standards—as will be apparent from the case study featured below.

#### THE BUSINESS IN EUROPE/INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS DEGREE AT MMU—A CASE STUDY

13. My experience as a tutor for this course over the entire 20 years of its existence represent a microcosm of all the ills which I have cited in the paragraphs stated above.

14. My association with this course started when I was a member of the Languages Department of Manchester Metropolitan University (then Manchester Polytechnic) in my capacity of lecturer in law and languages (Law and French/Law and German). Because of a dispute between the course organisers and the then Department of Law, I was called upon to organise and teach, entirely by myself, the Business Law and Comparative Business Law course in Year One, and the EC/EU Law course in Year Two. For the first 10 years, the results were reasonably satisfactory. Even though the level of preparation on the part of the students was generally on the minimal side, and the level of the examination questions was kept as low as possible—even taking account of the fact that these were not specialist law students—the students showed a certain level of commitment and most were able to weather the examination thanks to reasonable preparation. There certainly was no question of “tipping off” the students about the contents of the examination paper, or restricting the examination to certain topics only, as seems to be standard practice in the present-day world of higher education. However, matters have taken a considerable turn for the worse over the past decade.

15. During the last 10 years or so, the students have seemed to be increasingly incapable of committing any sizeable piece of information to memory, and to do so in a structured and reasonably grammatical way. This gave rise to increasing levels of low grades and failures and was giving the course organisers a good deal of concern. At a certain point, it was decided to change the entire profile and dimension of the law content of the course. The first-year element was incorporated into a broader course called “Business Environment”, to be taught on a wide variety of programmes. The second year course was to stand alone and be called “International Business Law”.

16. The first-year course came on stream in the academic year 2003–04. Even though the Law questions were straightforward, including as they did such questions as “Describe the conditions for the validity of a contract under English law” and “Explain the relevant of the law of torts to business activity”, the results were devastating, with an 85% failure rate. Naturally this caused consternation among the authorities. I was called to a meeting with various Business School course administrators, and subjected to nothing less than a kangaroo court as to why failure rates were so high. At the various boards of examinations that followed, the marks were all increased by 20 (not 20%, but 20 in absolute terms) in order to achieve reasonable pass levels.

17. The next year, the Year Two course came into operation. Assessment was based on 30 per cent coursework, 70% unseen examination. Even with the help of a higher average coursework mark, the overall failure rate was 85%, as can be seen from Appendix 1 attached (to the paper version of this submission).<sup>387</sup> These marks were all confirmed by the internal second marker, [\*\*\*]<sup>388</sup> (see Appendix 2). At the preliminary exam board held on 2 June, it was agreed that these marks were very low, but that the verdict of the external examiner was still awaited. The external examiner was [\*\*\*],<sup>389</sup> a lecturer at [\*\*\*] who had no recognised expertise in international business law, and whose appointment therefore contravened the relevant QAA rules.

18. When [\*\*\*the external examiner\*\*\*] provided his report (Appendix 3), he expressed concern at the low level of the marks and suggested—predictably enough—that “the full mark range should be reflected”, by increasing the average mark by 10%. However, by some strange turn of events, further discussions took place between the course leaders and [\*\*\*the external examiner\*\*\*] (myself not being involved) as a result of which the marks were increased by 20 (once again, not 20% but 20 in absolute terms). The marks, thus increased, were presented to the full Board of Examiners in such a way as not to give the slightest indication as to the manner in which the marks had been altered.

19. At the full Board, held on 10 June, I requested that those present should be informed of the true course of events. An explanation was duly given by one of the course leaders, whereupon I expressed my disagreement with such goings-on and left the room. (Contrary to what the Course Leaders later reported (see Appendix 4), I did not level any abuse at the External Examiner—or anyone else for that matter). The Board subsequently confirmed the altered marks (see Appendix 5).

<sup>387</sup> Appendices not printed.

<sup>388</sup> Details not published.

<sup>389</sup> Details not published.

20. I subsequently protested about this process in an email addressed to the parties involved, as well as the University Vice Chancellor and Secretary (Appendix 6). As can be seen from Appendices 7, 8, 9 and 10, my objections were overruled—but, in the process, the correspondence in question fully reveals the degree of distortion and downright cheating which had occurred by raising the marks in question. In his final report to the University, the external examiner, who earlier had stated that my own teaching and organisation of the course was not to blame for the high failure rate, completely altered course and suggested, in a manner which can fairly be described as defamatory, that the entire affair was virtually entirely to be blamed on my incompetence (See Appendix 11).

21. As a result of this fiasco, the rules were changed. The unseen examination was replaced by a seen examination—the questions remaining as easy as they were in the unseen paper—but still horrendous failure rates were recorded at the first diet of examinations. For the reassessment, an attempt was made by the course leaders to remove me from this process—on this occasion, however, my protests were heeded by the University authorities and I was reinstated. Since then, the examination has been made even easier, with the students even being given the main points to put in their answers! However, I have now been informed that, as from next year, International Business Law is to be axed from the Year Two curriculum . . .

#### CONCLUSION

22. The findings of the case study set out under the previous section cannot be dismissed as merely anecdotal evidence, in the light of the general points and issues highlighted under items 1 to 3—which I am confident will be reflected in many other submissions from different institutions. They point to a general and calamitous reduction in academic standards, by means which include downright cheating, across the board which we ignore at our peril.

*January 2009*

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#### **E-mail from Mr Cairns to Mr Phil Willis MP, Chairman of the Committee, on 18 March 2009**

This is to inform you that, at a meeting held this afternoon, the Academic Board of Manchester Metropolitan University passed a motion of no-confidence in me as a member of that Board, thereby causing me to be expelled. The reason for this was my submission to the IUSS enquiry into Students and Universities.

I believe that this is an outrageous contempt of Parliament, and would like some action taken on this matter.

*March 2009*

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#### **E-mail from Committee staff to Mr Cairns on 20 March 2009**

Professor Cairns

Thank you for your e-mail to Mr Willis. You raise a serious matter and I think the Committee will wish to discuss it. I should be grateful if you could let me have a comprehensive note setting out what has happened. It would be useful to have the note by the close on Monday (23 March), if possible please. I cannot anticipate the Committee's deliberations but it may publish your note.

If you want to discuss the matter I shall be at my desk this afternoon and on Tuesday. (I am out of the office on Monday.)

*March 2009*

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#### **E-mail from Mr Cairns to the Committee on 23 March 2009**

In response to your email, I hereby relate the circumstances in which I was formally expelled from the Academic Board of the Manchester Metropolitan University at its meeting of Wednesday, 18/3/2009.

The question of the Select Committee submissions made by Susan Evans and myself arose during the Vice-Chancellor's Report (Agenda item 3). He expressed his disquiet and disappointment, repeated the disgraceful slur that the contentious mark increase for International Business Law was largely due to the poor standard of my teaching, and invited comments.

I immediately raised my hand, to be met with an icy stare from the Vice-Chancellor coupled with the question "Can I ask you to speak last?" I complied, taking this to mean that I would be given an opportunity to respond to all the flak—including that thrown by the V-C himself—that would be cast in my direction from various other Board members. The latter duly complied. This included Dennis Dunn, a senior Academic Board member who falsely claimed that he had been part of an Academic Board Panel of Enquiry

organised to investigate this matter—and Stuart Horsburgh, who was the Chair of the Board of Examiners relating to the 2005 International Business Law results. The Dean of my own Faculty, Ann Holmes also weighed in heavily against me.

The Vice Chancellor then said: “These contributions fully confirm my own views on the subject. I therefore propose a vote of no-confidence in Mr Cairns which, if it succeeds, will cause him to leave this Board”. The motion was duly seconded, the members of the Board (with one exception) duly raised their hands, and I was asked to leave—which I did.

I therefore find myself expelled having had no opportunity to defend myself, and having been misled into the belief that I would be given that opportunity. This, I believe, amounts to unwarranted and vicious retaliation by the University’s authorities. I hereby request the Select Committee on IUSS, more particularly its Chair, to take appropriate action.

March 2009

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**Letter of 26 March 2009 from Mr Phil Willis MP, Chairman of the Committee, to Professor J S Brooks, Vice-Chancellor of Manchester Metropolitan University**

You will be aware that Professor Walter Cairns made a written submission to the Select Committee’s inquiry on students and universities and that his submission was accepted as evidence. Professor Cairns has informed the Committee that following publication of his evidence he was expelled from the Academic Board of the University on 18 March 2009.

On the basis of the information supplied by Professor Cairns I have concerns that he may have been punished for sending written evidence to the Committee. The University may not have been aware but molestation of or threats against those who have given evidence before the House of Commons or a committee may be treated by the House as a contempt. The relevant sections of Erskine May are at pages 78, 128 and 150 (Erskine May *Parliamentary Practice* 23rd Edition).

I would be grateful if you, in your position as Vice-Chancellor, could supply a note setting out your response to Professor Cairns, in particular explaining the actions taken by the University on 18 March. This should reach the Committee’s office by 5pm on Friday, 3 April. The Committee will meet in the week beginning 27 April and I shall put this matter on the agenda for consideration. If the Committee concludes that there is prima facie a case that contempt may have taken place it can decide to make a Special Report to the House recommending that the matter be referred to the Standards and Privileges Committee.

I should advise you that your note may be published.

March 2009

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**Letter of 3 April 2009 from Professor J S Brooks, Vice-Chancellor of Manchester Metropolitan University, to Mr Phil Willis MP, Chairman of the Committee**

Thank you for your correspondence regarding Mr Walter Cairns and for the opportunity to engage with the Committee in respect of this matter.

In this letter I would like to deal with the rationale for the actions of the University’s Academic Board on 18 March 2009. I will also be providing you with a brief report of the University’s position in respect of the submissions made by Mr Cairns.

As Chair of the Academic Board, I would like to express regret for the fact that our actions may have been perceived as punishing Mr Cairns who, we now appreciate, enjoys certain privileges as a result of acceptance by the House of Commons Select Committee of the evidence he submitted, albeit after the Committee’s deadline. It was by no means my intention, nor that of the Academic Board, to act in contempt of the House.

On 18 March 2009 Academic Board took a vote of no confidence in Mr Cairns and decided that his Academic Board membership should be discontinued. There were various motivations for this decision:

1. Mr Cairns had failed to engage with the Academic Board who had been thoroughly and correctly investigating and deliberating this matter long before the date of the submission to the Select Committee;
2. Mr Cairns failed to engage in the Academic Board processes (or other University processes, which include a whistle-blowing procedure) and to accept their outcomes; and
3. Mr Cairns chose to conduct a press campaign in which it appears that he provided additional quotes and information to various media outlets, particularly newspapers, as they have reported information and quotations that go beyond that which the Select Committee has published as evidence which it has accepted. This has caused serious damage to the Academic reputation of the University.

I can assure you that no molestations or threats have been made to Mr Cairns, (or indeed to Ms Sue Evans who also provided evidence to the Committee), because of the submissions that they made. No action has been taken or is proposed by the University against either individual, in relation to their contracts of employment or disciplinary action, arising from those submissions.

The Academic Board members were not provided with a copy of the submission to the Select Committee. However, Board members were aware of the issues and of the views expressed in numerous press articles by Mr Cairns.

It was the publication of these views that caused serious concern to members of Academic Board as only one side of a complex story was being presented, in a way that courted negative publicity. Academic Board members, including the Programme Leader for the course taught by Mr Cairns, discussed at length the academic issues raised. The strong feeling of the Board was that Academic Board routinely, through its normal processes and systems, as well as specific investigations into issues and concerns, takes appropriate actions to protect and maintain Academic Standards. The Board felt strongly that this had been ignored and by-passed by Mr Cairns, himself a member of the Board, by taking the story to the press. In so doing Mr Cairns had demonstrated that he had no regard for the processes of Academic Board and was not acting in the best interest of the University—a condition which is a requirement of all members of Academic Board.

It was on this basis that a vote of no confidence was taken. At that time we did not believe Mr Cairns' privilege to extend to what appears to us to be the additional material placed in the public domain prior to the Board's meeting on 18 March 2009.

If the Committee consider that the Academic Board has violated the privilege enjoyed by Mr Cairns, and you consider that we may be at risk of being in contempt of the House as a consequence of the Academic Board decision, I am willing to reconvene the Board to reconsider this issue.

I would be grateful for your view as to the appropriateness and efficacy of this course of action and would be pleased to meet with you to discuss any of these issues in far greater detail, should that be considered appropriate and helpful.

*April 2009*

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#### **Memorandum dated 3 April 2009 from Metropolitan University**

With reference to my letter of 3 April, 2009, I enclose a brief Report to the Select Committee regarding the University's position in respect of the submission made by Mr Cairns.

I should be pleased to provide a further account, should the Committee so desire.

*April 2009*

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#### **Report to the Select Committee from Manchester Metropolitan University**

This is a brief description of the University's position in respect of the submission made by Mr Cairns.

#### **BACKGROUND**

1. Academic Board is the most senior deliberative committee of the University, charged with maintaining the academic quality and standards of all of the University's provision. The Board approves academic policies and processes and throughout each academic session, considers a wide range of information relating to the setting and maintenance of academic standards. As a member of the Board Mr Cairns has been party to the University's confirmation that academic standards are being maintained, throughout his two membership periods, 2000–03 and 2007–09. During this latter membership period he has not seen fit to raise within the Board for discussion and action as appropriate, the matters which he has placed in the public domain via media articles and interviews, during recent weeks.

2. It was under the auspices of the Academic Board that changes were made to assessment following the extremely high failure rates in three successive years on the module taught by Mr Cairns, which formed the basis of his submission to the Select Committee. Investigations into the matter were undertaken in 2004, 2005 and finally in 2006, when a Panel, Chaired by the then Deputy Vice-Chancellor, acting as a sub-group of the Academic Board, was constituted at the request of the Chair of the Academic Board. The Panel's very thorough investigation made its report to the Chair of the Academic Board in October 2006. The report recommended a range of remedial actions which were put in place. All the changes to the assessment outcomes were approved by all of the External Examiners. You may also wish to note that the unit concerned is being discontinued, after this academic session, following a major review of provision in the area.

3. A brief summary of the chronology of issues and actions is attached for information, as Appendix 1.<sup>390</sup> A summary version of the 2006 Report of the Panel, Chaired by the then Deputy Vice-Chancellor is attached as Appendix 2.<sup>391</sup> You will note both the thoroughness of the Panel's review and the balanced nature of its report, which is at pains to demonstrate fairness and address the complainant's concerns. Also attached as Appendix 3<sup>392</sup> is a brief statement of the University's quality and assurance procedures and standards which are robust and carefully considered.

*April 2007*

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**Letter of 17 April 2009 from the Committee Staff to Professor J S Brooks, Vice-Chancellor of Manchester Metropolitan University**

Thank you for your letter dated 3 April to Mr Willis, the Chairman of the Committee.

Mr Willis has asked me to reply.

You state in the final paragraphs of your letter that, if the Committee considers that there is a "risk of being in contempt of the House", you are "willing to reconvene the [Academic] Board to reconsider this issue" and you seek the Chairman's view on the "appropriateness and efficacy of this course of action".

Until the Committee has considered the matter again it is not possible for the Chairman to offer such advice; but if you and your advisers conclude that a contempt may have taken place, even if inadvertently, a possible reversal of the Board's decision would no doubt be an important factor for the Committee to take into account.

Please let me know what you intend to do as soon as possible. This matter will be on the agenda of the private part of the Committee meeting scheduled to take place on 6 May. Once the Committee has considered the matter, I shall write to you. Your attendance on 6 May is not required.

*April 2009*

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**Letter of 7 May 2009 from Mr Phil Willis MP, Chairman of the Committee, to Professor J S Brooks, Vice-Chancellor of Manchester Metropolitan University**

In your letter of 3 April responding to mine of 26 March about Professor Walter Cairns you stated that, if the Committee considered that there was a "risk of being in contempt of the House", you were "willing to reconvene the [Academic] Board to reconsider this issue" and you sought my view on the "appropriateness and efficacy of this course of action". On my instruction the Second Clerk replied on 17 April. He explained that, if you and your advisers concluded that a contempt might have taken place, even if inadvertently, a possible reversal of the Board's decision would be an important factor for the Committee to take into account. No reply has been received.

The Committee discussed the matter on 6 May and have asked me to write to establish whether the Academic Board has or will re-consider the matter of Professor Cairns' expulsion. If it does consider the matter, it would assist the Committee to be informed of the outcome. I should be grateful if you would clarify the position by 20 May.

The Committee will consider your reply when it considers the matter further, which is expected to be at its first meeting in June. I should add that any reply from the University is without prejudice to the Committee's deliberations or decision, which could include asking the House of Commons to refer the matter to the Standards and Privileges Committee.

I should advise you that your reply may be published.

*May 2009*

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<sup>390</sup> [Not published.]

<sup>391</sup> [Not published.]

<sup>392</sup> [Not published.]

**Letter of 20 May 2009 from Professor J S Brooks, Vice-Chancellor of Manchester Metropolitan University, to Mr Phil Willis MP, Chairman of the Committee**

Re: *The Select Committee and Mr Walter Cairns*

Thank you for your letter. I am sorry that we did not respond to the letter from the Second Clerk which we interpreted as a holding response awaiting the outcome of the Select Committee.

Mr Cairns term of office on Academic Board completes at the end of this session. The process to re-appoint for the new session has now been completed and Mr Cairns will be appointed for a further term of office. I hope that the Select Committee feels that this addresses any issues of contempt that may have unintentionally occurred.

I understand that this note may be published. I would welcome the opportunity to speak to the Select Committee should this be considered necessary.

*May 2009*

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**E-mail dated 21 May 2009 from the Committee Staff to Mr Cairns**

The Committee has been informed by Manchester Metropolitan University that your “term of office on [the] Academic Board completed at the end of this session” and that the “process to reappoint for the new session has now been completed and Mr Cairns will be appointed for another term of office”.

Can you confirm that you have been re-appointed to the Board?

*May 2009*

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**E-mail dated 21 May 2009 from Mr Cairns to the Committee**

I can confirm that I have been elected by my Faculty to serve for a new two-year term on the Academic Board. I would, however, add the following:

- (a) this in no way alters the unacceptable manner in which I was humiliated and given no right to reply to all the lies and distortions cast in my direction at the Academic Board meeting of 18 March, some of which were defamatory in the extreme;
- (b) my Faculty has remained unrepresented for two consecutive Board meetings, since the University did not even organise a by-election
- (c) there is no guarantee whatsoever that the Vice-Chancellor will not repeat his little trick at any future meeting of the AB at which I am present.

*May 2009*

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**Letter of 14 June 2009 from the Committee Staff to Mr Cairns**

Thank you for your e-mail of 21 May commenting on the letter of 20 May from Manchester Metropolitan University.

The matter will be considered at a meeting of the Committee in July and I shall write to you when the Committee has completed its deliberations.

*14 June 2009*

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**Letter of 14 June 2009 from the Committee to Professor J S Brooks, Vice-Chancellor of Manchester Metropolitan University**

Thank you for your letter of 20 May concerning the allegations made by Professor Cairns. The Chairman is grateful for your letter. The matter will be considered by the Committee at a meeting in July and I shall write to you when the Committee has completed its deliberations.

*June 2009*

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## Memorandum 120

Submission from Susan Evans,<sup>393</sup>

## SUMMARY

I describe below some of the practices and procedures that, I believe, have resulted in the devaluation of degrees. I believe some students, from their university experience, also feel that degrees have been devalued. Last week a student (from Slovakia) said to me that this university is like high school in Slovakia and that universities in Slovakia are of a higher standard than the UK, another commented as part of a degree review “students who can’t do maths shouldn’t do Economics. Don’t dumb down the subject any more than you already have!”

All the information given below relates to work in an Economics department.

More information relating to the following issues can be provide if required.

1. *Pressure on staff in relation to marks awarded*

I feel under continual pressure in relation to marks I award to students. One example of the kind of pressure exerted occurred in 1997 when a member of the management claimed that there had been a complaint (this was untrue) about my marking of a test on a third year unit. He tried to make me remark it in accordance with a marking scheme he devised that would have increased the lowest marks and potentially reduced the highest marks. He had never seen the test and had no specialist knowledge of the subject area. I did not remark it but offered to refer the matter to the External Examiner, an offer ignored by management. I was subsequently removed from this unit, my specialist area. Another example of management action in relation to a unit where some students attained low marks is given below. A member of staff was subsequently removed from teaching on the unit, his specialist area.

In the summer of 2004, between the announcement of degree results and the awards ceremony, the Examination Board for Economics was reconvened. Staff understood this was to discuss a third year unit, however, at the start of the meeting the Chairman announced that a new set of marks was to be assigned to this unit and allowed no discussion of this matter. He only reluctantly, when asked, provided the Board with the new marks assigned to the 24 students who had studied the unit. However, he read them out so fast that I was unable to record them (it was a week before I managed to acquire all the marks). The Board lasted about ten minutes and as it was ending I commented that I considered the conduct of this Board was a threat to academic standards. I asked for this comment to be recorded in the minutes, with my name. In my experience (26 years in higher education) it was unprecedented for a Board of Examiners to be conducted in this way. The staff who taught the unit and marked the scripts were not consulted on the mark changes and the new marks (given below) bore no relation to the academic achievements of the students on the course. They also completely changed the students’ ranking. It was unclear how these new marks had been determined.

<i>Student</i>	<i>Assessed work (%)</i>	<i>Exam (%)</i>	<i>Overall mark* (%)</i>	<i>New Mark +</i>	<i>Position in distribution</i>	
					<i>old</i>	<i>new</i>
<i>A</i>	23	7	<b>11</b>	<b>49</b>	24	13
<i>B</i>	50	9	<b>19</b>	<b>38</b>	23	23
<i>C</i>	30	18	<b>21</b>	<b>39</b>	22	21
<i>D</i>	34	16	<b>21</b>	<b>46</b>	21	16
<i>E</i>	18	26	<b>24</b>	<b>56</b>	19	8
<i>F</i>	26	23	<b>24</b>	<b>50</b>	19	12
<i>G</i>	30	23	<b>25</b>	<b>39</b>	18	21
<i>H</i>	46	19	<b>26</b>	<b>41</b>	17	18
<i>I</i>	43	23	<b>28</b>	<b>53</b>	14	11
<i>J</i>	36	25	<b>28</b>	<b>43</b>	14	17
<i>K</i>	52	20	<b>28</b>	<b>40</b>	14	20
<i>L</i>	65	19	<b>31</b>	<b>41</b>	12	18
<i>M</i>	45	26	<b>31</b>	<b>37</b>	12	24
<i>N</i>	21	36	<b>32</b>	<b>54</b>	11	10
<i>O</i>	43	33	<b>36</b>	<b>59</b>	10	5
<i>P</i>	35	39	<b>38</b>	<b>48</b>	9	14
<i>Q</i>	40	43	<b>42</b>	<b>47</b>	8	15
<i>R</i>	52	43	<b>45</b>	<b>55</b>	7	9
<i>S</i>	60	55	<b>56</b>	<b>61</b>	6	3
<i>T</i>	62	56	<b>57</b>	<b>65</b>	3	1
<i>U</i>	49	60	<b>57</b>	<b>57</b>	3	6
<i>V</i>	60	56	<b>57</b>	<b>57</b>	3	6

<sup>393</sup> Manchester Metropolitan University

<i>Student</i>	<i>Assessed work (%)</i>	<i>Exam (%)</i>	<i>Overall mark* (%)</i>	<i>New Mark +</i>	<i>Position in distribution</i>	
<i>W</i>	57	62	<b>61</b>	<b>64</b>	2	2
<i>X</i>	60	63	<b>62</b>	<b>63</b>	1	3

\* Mark agreed at Board of Examiners on 8 June 2004.

+ New mark assigned at the reconvened Board held on 1 July 2004.

Consequent on these mark changes nine students who at the original Board were not awarded a degree, received a degree in July 2004.

I contacted the Academic Registrar about the way this Board had been conducted. When I eventually got a response, it referred me back to the Board Chairman. It was over ten weeks after the Board before staff received the minutes which misrepresented what had occurred. My comment was recorded as if it had been part of a discussion, and was anonymous despite my request. I objected to the minutes as incorrect. No member of staff present at the reconvened Board disagreed that my comment was made at the end of the meeting, but the Secretary did not produce an amended set of minutes. She also refused to allow me to be named in the minutes. Consequently no correct record of the meeting exists. The amendment was noted in the minutes of the subsequent Board and when staff received these minutes nine months later the agreed amendment was not recorded correctly. A correction to it was therefore noted in the minutes of a Board held nearly a year after the reconvened Board had met. Since July 2004 all Examination Boards in the Economics Department have been recorded on tape. However, when I asked for a copy of the recording of one such meeting the Chairman refused to provide it.

## 2. Progression of students who achieve a mark of less than 35% in a unit

Under University regulations applying in 2003–4 to 2005–6 first and second year students could not be compensated in a unit where the aggregate mark was less than 35%. However students in this situation were allowed to progress (i. e. were compensated). Numbers are given below.

### September 2004

Four students with marks between 21% and 30% progressed to year 2.

### September 2005

Eleven students with marks between 16% and 33% progressed to year 2.

Eight students with marks between 22% and 34% progressed to year 3.

### September 2006

Seventeen students with marks between of 14% and 33% progressed to year 2.

## 3. Appeals

Until the early 1990's I can only recall one appeal and the Examination Board was reconvened to consider it. Since then the number has escalated. They are dealt with under Chairman's action. However the Board Chairman provides Board members with no information about the grounds of an appeal or the reasons for his decision on it. In 2007–8 two decisions of the Summer Board were changed without the students even following the Appeals procedure. My understanding is that University regulations do not permit this. I understand that the University has not collated data on the number of appeals and decisions taken under Chairman's action.

### NUMBER OF APPEALS 2001–02/2004–05

	2001–02		2002–03		2003–04		2004–05	
	<i>No</i>	<i>Upheld</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Upheld</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Upheld</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Upheld</i>
Summer	3	3	7	4	9	5	15	10
September	3	3	10	8	2	1	5	4
Total	6	6	17	12	11	6	20	14
		(100%)		(71%)		(54%)		(70%)

Appeals upheld resulted in, for example, students progressing to the following year rather than resitting, or a higher degree classification. In 2002–3 a second year student who had obtained 2% in a unit where they attended 21% of tutorials was allowed to progress to the third year.

## 4. Changes in Examination regulations

In 2007–8 a new method to determine a student's degree classification was introduced. For all students in Economics the degree classification that this new method yielded was at least as high as under the previous method. For five students a higher degree classification resulted.

### 5. Assessment- information available to students

Students are sometimes given detailed information about questions on “unseen” examination papers. For example in the academic session 2007–8 on one unit they were told to revise “The choice between consumption and savings using indifference analysis; income and substitution effects; savers and borrowers. The question on this topic was:

- (a) Explain how indifference analysis may be applied to an individual’s choice between consumption and saving.
- (b) Examine how the impact of a change in the interest rate differs between a saver and a borrower.

In some statistics assessments students are allowed to bring any material they like to the assessment. These assessments are not described in the unit outline as “open book”.

In a computer based statistics assessment that I invigilated the lecturer had already put some of the questions, together with the answers, on a common drive. Students could access the answers during the assessment and copy them into the document that they submitted for marking.

In the past no assessments in mathematics or statistics units were “open book” assessments.

### 6. Attendance

In the past there were attendance requirements, students who did not meet them were withdrawn from the course and their local authority informed. Now, apparently, there is no attendance requirement, at least not in the Economics Department, and I have been told that students cannot be withdrawn without their agreement, irrespective of their attendance. Average attendance at first year tutorials (approximately 80 students) in a mathematics/statistics unit from 2002–3 to 2007–8 was between 45% and 55%. On a second year unit in 2007–8 attendance at lectures was 61% and at tutorials, 35%.

### 7. Examples of tutorial work and assessments given in 1996–97 and 2007–08

In 1996–7 and 2007–8 all students (note: some are enrolled on BSc degrees) in the Economics Department had to take a first year unit in mathematics/statistics. The structure of the unit differed between the two years, in particular in 1996–7 there were two parallel units running, one harder than the other. The material given relates to the harder unit but if the students who took the harder unit in 1996–7 had enrolled in 2007–8 they would have been given the material below.

#### THE FIRST AND LAST QUESTIONS ON THE FIRST TUTORIAL SHEET

2007–8

1. Calculate the following: (a)  $10 - 3 + 5 + 4 - 6$     (b)  $8 \times 3 \div 2 \times 4$     (c)  $5 + 3 \times 4$   
 (d)  $7 \times (2 + 5)$     (e)  $8 - 6 \div 2$     (f)  $12 \times 3 \div 4 - 5$     (g)  $(14 - 2) \times 4 \div 2$     (h)  $7 \times 3 \times (5 - 2)$
5. Calculate the following: (a)  $5^{-3}$     (b)  $4^3 \times 4^{-4} \times 3^2$     (c)  $(-2)^7$     (d)  $(-1)^{10}$   
 (e)  $8^4 \times 8^{-4}$     (f)  $16\frac{1}{4}$     (g)  $(5^4)\frac{1}{2}$     (h)  $3^{-3}$

1996–7

1. Represent the following relations graphically:

- (a)  $\{(x,y) | y = 3x, x \text{ is a real number}\}$
- (b)  $\{(x,y) | y \leq 3x, x \text{ is a real number}\}$

Is either relation a function?

7. A bus company has adopted the following pricing policy for groups wishing to charter its buses. For groups of up to 40 people, a fixed charge of £2,400 is made. For groups of between 40 and 80 people, the fare per person is £60 minus 50p multiplied by the number of people in excess of 40. Thus, for example, if there are 41 passengers, the fare per person is  $\pounds(60 - 0.5(1)) = \pounds59.5$ . For groups of 80 or more passengers, the fare is £40 per person.

- (a) Express revenue,  $R$ , for the company as a function of the number of passengers.
- (b) Graph  $R$ .

## THE FIRST ASSESSMENT (TAKEN IN THE MIDDLE OF THE AUTUMN TERM)

2007–8

*Time: 50 minutes*

This was a seen test, computer based. Each time the test was accessed the form of each expression remained the same but the numbers differed. Students could access and practice it as many times as they liked before the formal assessment date. It was completed in a lecture and, if students asked, again in a tutorial. If a student got eight or more questions correct they received a mark of 100%, otherwise 0%. If at the first time of assessment they received 0%, they had three more opportunities before the summer examinations to achieve 100%.

1. Calculate the value of  $4 + 5 \times 4$
2. Determine the value of  $y$  in  $7y = 28$
3. Determine the value of  $w$  in  $68 - 6(9 + w) = -40$
4. Calculate the value of  $cb^a$  where  $a = 5$ ,  $b = 1$  and  $c = 10$
5. Determine the value of  $x > 0$  where  $4x^2 - 37x - 30 = 0$
6. Solve the following simultaneous equations  $3y + 3x = 51$  and  $y = 2x - 28$
7. Calculate and simplify where possible.  $\frac{14}{30} + \frac{1}{18}$
8. Calculate the following and simplify where possible.  $\frac{3}{6} \times \frac{6}{12}$
9. Given the supply and demand functions  $d = 480 - 4p$  and  $s = 3p - 17$ , calculate the equilibrium price,  $p$ .
10. Given the supply and demand functions  $d = 242 - 8p$  and  $s = 7p - 13$ , calculate the equilibrium quantity traded

This, together with three similar assessments contributed 25% of the final mark for the unit. The remaining 75% came from two end of year examinations, one in mathematics, the other, statistics. In 2007–8, of the students who completed all assessments and sat the final examinations in this unit, 49 (62%) obtained a mark of 100% on the assessed tests while in the final examination the average mark in mathematics was 45%, and in statistics it was 27%. Of the students who resat this unit, 27 (64%) obtained a mark of 100% in the assessed tests with average marks of 32% and 27% on the final examinations. Students were allowed to proceed to the second year with marks as low as 4% on the mathematics examination and 9% on the statistics examination.

1996–7

*Time: 1 hour*

This test was unseen and could be taken only once. The marks awarded ranged from 16% to 89% (1st – 20%, 2(i) – 15%, 2(ii) – 8%, 3rd – 24%, fail – 36%)

1. A firm has a total revenue function given by:

$$R = f(q) = 10q + 120q^{\frac{1}{2}}$$

where  $q$  = output  
 $R$  = total revenue

Fixed costs are 2,944 and total variable costs are given by:

$$C = g(q) = 6q$$

where  $C$  = total variable costs

Find the level of output the firm should produce to break even, that is, where total revenue equals total cost.

2. A Cournot model of duopoly results in the following reaction functions for the firms operating in the market:

$$q_1 = 15 - \frac{1}{2}q_2$$

$$q_2 = 19 - q_1$$

where  $q_i$  = output of firm  $i$ ,  $i = 1, 2$

Find the equilibrium outputs for the two firms operating in this market.

3. For each of the following relations:

- State the range.
- State whether the relation is also a function.
- State whether the variables are discrete or continuous.

(i)  $\{(x,y) | y = -1 + xx = 1,2,3, \dots\}$

(ii)  $\{(x,y) | y = x^3 - 4 - 1 \leq x \leq 1\}$

(iii)  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} y = 4 + 6x - 2 \leq x \leq 1 \\ (x,y) | y = x^2 + 2x = 51 \leq x \leq 4 \\ y = \log_2 x \ 4 \leq x \leq 8 \end{array} \right\}$

4. A firm believes that its costs are growing at a continuous rate of  $r$  per annum. It is of interest to the firm to calculate the rate of growth of costs over the last five years. Information is available on costs in years 2 and 5, leading to the following equations:

$$\begin{aligned} 20 &= Ce^{2r} \\ 25 &= Ce^{5r} \end{aligned}$$

Find the value of  $r$ .

5. A perfectly competitive market is described by the following functions:

$$\begin{aligned} q^d &= f^{(p)} = 58 - \frac{1}{3}p \\ q^s &= g^{(p)} = 4 + \frac{2}{3}p \end{aligned}$$

where  $q_d$  = quantity demanded

$q_s$  = quantity supplied

$p$  = price

- Find the equilibrium price and quantity traded.
- If, following an increase in the income of households, the equilibrium quantity traded is 44 units and the new demand function takes the form:

$$q_d = h^{(p)} = x - \frac{3}{4}p$$

Find the value of  $\alpha$ .

(iii) How does revenue to producers change following the change in market conditions in (ii)?

Three other such tests contributed 40% towards the final mark for the unit with the remaining 60% from a final year examination. The average mark on the tests was 43% (17%–74%) and on the examination, 42% (10%–96%) The correlation between the test marks and the examination mark was 0.91. On the parallel unit the average mark on the tests was 55% (0–93% and on the examination 44% (0–80%) with a correlation of 0.74. The lowest examination mark with which a student progressed to the second year was 29%.

8. *Performance of students who were educated outside the UK prior to entering university*

It has become apparent that the students with the best technical skills have often been educated outside the UK prior to entering university. The following information relates to a first year mathematics/statistics unit.

	2007–08		2006–07		2005–06		2004–05	
	UK	Non UK	UK	Non UK	UK	Non UK	UK	Non UK
Number	78	17	71	16	83	24	81	35
Average	39%	51%	43%	59%	32%	40%	24%	39%
Pass rate	53% (41/78)	76% (13/17)	61% (43/71)	94% (15/16)	40% (33/83)	63% (17/24)	19% (15/81)	51% (18/35)
	<i>Top 2 students non-UK educated</i>		<i>Top 2 students and 4 in the top 6 non-UK educated</i>		<i>4 of the top 5 students non-UK educated</i>		<i>Top 2 students non-UK educated</i>	

9. *Admissions*

I am concerned about admissions procedures for students who do not apply through UCAS. Some are admitted without providing referees and even if the name of a referee is given references are rarely taken up. Applicants who were in an educational institution the previous year often do not give the name of an academic referee. Students have been accepted as direct entrants into the second year when they have not passed a university first year and I am aware of one student who had not passed the second year of a degree and was accepted on the third year. Students who have not passed the Foundation Year have been taken onto the first year (in the cases of which I am aware they failed the first year). Students whose first language is not English often do not have the required IELTS qualification or equivalent. About 30% of the students are now admitted do not have “A” levels.

10. *Final comments*

I have raised many of the above issues, and others, for example financial issues, with the higher management. Often they do not respond. If there is a response it invariably supports the actions of management. I consider that there are serious issues of accountability in universities.

It is claimed, by some, that the system of External Examiners has maintained standards. In my view it is under the aegis of this system that standards have fallen.

December 2008

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**Memorandum 121**

*[Manchester Metropolitan University, Ms Evans: submission and correspondence]*

**Letter of 2 June from Ms Susan Evans to Mr Phil Willis MP, Chairman of the Committee**

I am writing to you regarding the Students and Universities Inquiry that is currently being undertaken by the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Select Committee, and to which I made a submission. I would like to point out that in making a submission I felt severely restricted by the short length of time that individuals were given in which to respond, the Inquiry was announced on 30 October 2008, reported in the THE on 6 November, and submissions had to be made by 11 December, five weeks later. I also found the maximum length of 3,000 words limited the evidence that I could provide. I am writing to you now on two specific issues relating to this Inquiry.

The first issue that I would like to raise is the number of individuals who made submissions to the Inquiry. There are about 170,000 academic and 195,00 non-academic staff, over 360,000 (2006–07) staff in total, working in universities in the UK yet there were only about 25 individual submissions.

I believe the reason there were so few individual submissions is that many people were not aware of this Inquiry in time to make a submission. After information I submitted to the Inquiry was published in the press I had a number of people contacting me. I think it is fair to say that all of these people in essence support the view that academic standards have fallen.

I was contacted by three ex-members of the Economics Department at Manchester Metropolitan University, the department in which I work, and a ex-member of another department, all of whom I had known previously. I received two letters from staff who had worked at Manchester Metropolitan University in the Science Faculty, one for 36 years and the other for 16 years, who I had never met.

Both had raised the issue of falling academic standards while employed at Manchester Metropolitan University, internally, and also outside the University, one with HEFCE and the other with a professional body. One of them wrote to me that between 1991 and 2007 “The extent of the dumbing down there was quite horrific”.

I received a telephone call from a member of staff at Staffordshire University who complained about how standards had fallen. Two ex-members of Manchester Metropolitan University staff wrote to a local newspaper, the Manchester Evening News, describing their experiences (a photocopy of the report is enclosed). A current member of my own department said to me that what was reported in the press was only what many staff were saying in private but were too cowardly to say in public.

I would also like to point out, incidentally, that many comments made to the *Manchester Evening News* online apparently supported the view that standards have fallen (a photocopy of an editorial comment from the *Manchester Evening News* is enclosed).<sup>394</sup>

I do not think that any of the people who contacted me had known about the Inquiry prior to 11 December, the date by which submissions had to be made. I therefore think that the Select Committee should provide another opportunity for evidence to be submitted. I believe that university Vice-Chancellors should be asked to inform all staff and students of this Inquiry. I also believe that the protection against retaliation by employers, afforded to individuals who make submissions, should be made explicit. If the Committee did this I believe that there would be much more evidence forthcoming to inform the current Inquiry and I think it may give a very different perspective to that given by much of the evidence provided so far.

The second issue that I would like to raise with you is the response of my employer, Manchester Metropolitan University, when information from my submission was published in the press.

In an article in the *Sunday Times* (8 March 2009) that included information from my submission, the reported response from Manchester Metropolitan University was “We are extremely disappointed that a colleague has chosen to raise these issues externally”.

A similar response was reported in an article again concerning my submission that was published in the *THE*, 19–25 March 2009 edition (photocopies enclosed).<sup>395</sup> Since a Parliamentary Committee requested the information, I would like to know how it is acceptable that a public sector employer responds in this way. If this is an acceptable response are people in future going to provide evidence, when so requested, to a Parliamentary Committee?

I hope the Select Committee will raise this matter with the management of Manchester Metropolitan University.

June 2009

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**Letter of 18 June from the Committee to Ms Susan Evans**

Thank you for your letter of 2 June to the Chairman of the Committee, Mr Phil Willis MP, which has been put before the Committee.

The matters you raise will be considered further at a meeting of the Committee in July and I shall write to you when it has completed its deliberations.

June 2009

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<sup>394</sup> [Not published.]

<sup>395</sup> [Not published.]