November 2010/31
Policy development
Consultation

Responses should be made online by Monday 7 March 2011.

This is a joint consultation by HEFCE, Universities UK and GuildHE on proposals for: giving prospective students useful information about higher education courses; developing the National Student Survey; and improving accessibility to the information that higher education institutions publish about their courses and which is used for quality assurance.

November 2010/31

Public information about higher education

Consultation on changes to information published by institutions

Free

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Foreword

The UK higher education sector contains a rich diversity that is something to be celebrated – from the character of our institutions, to the nature of what they offer, to the students with whom they engage. But to make the most of what we have, and to ensure that our prospective students make the best choices for them, good-quality information is key.

Whatever their preferences are, it is difficult for students to make the right choices if they do not have relevant, useful information at their fingertips. And sometimes the differences between courses are subtle, and prospective students find it difficult to discriminate between them. In this consultation we seek to resolve these problems.

The role of public information is a live topic, indeed it was a central concern in the Browne Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance. However enhancement of information is not a new ambition in the sector; it is something that institutions have striven to do for many years. In these difficult times, with more pressure on places and less public funding, it is more important than ever for students to have straightforward access to good, relevant information.

That is why this consultation proposes that, rather than create a whole new raft of information sources, we gather together existing information that has been identified as useful by students themselves, in the places they tell us they expect to see it. Such a simple principle could go a long way to ensuring that students feel confident about the substantial personal and financial investment they are making when they undertake higher education study, and that the choices they make are the right ones for them, now and in the future.

This consultation also looks at the public data set used by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education to assure the quality of our institutions, and considers future developments of the National Student Survey. These are significant areas of work and I hope that your positive engagement will enable us to enhance them further.

Improving the role of public information in the higher education sector is vital and I encourage you to submit the kind of constructive response to our consultation that will enable us to demonstrate an ongoing commitment to its improvement.

Janet Beer

Chair, Higher Education Public Information Steering Group

Vice-Chancellor, Oxford Brookes University

Public information about higher education:
Consultation on changes to information published by institutions

To	Heads of HEFCE-funded higher education institutions Heads of HEFCE-funded further education colleges Heads of DEL-funded further education colleges Heads of SFA-funded further education colleges Heads of universities in Northern Ireland Heads of non-publicly funded institutions in England and Northern Ireland that subscribe to QAA
Of interest to	Student union officers and student representatives Staff responsible for quality assurance Staff responsible for admissions, liaison with schools and colleges, widening participation and marketing Funding councils and institutional representative bodies in Scotland and Wales Other bodies with an interest in quality assurance of higher education, including employer bodies and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies Other bodies and individuals with an interest in providing information, advice and guidance to prospective higher education students, including careers advisers and schools, sixth form colleges and their representative bodies
Reference	2010/**31**
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Executive summary

Purpose

1. Universities and colleges are required to publish certain details about their higher education courses. This consultation proposes changes to those requirements and invites comments on those proposals. It is a joint publication by HEFCE[1], Universities UK (UUK) and GuildHE[2].

Key points

2. We would like comments on proposals for:

a. Providing prospective students with information about the higher education experience that we know they find useful, in places we know they look for such information. We propose that this is done through a Key Information Set (KIS) for each course, which would be published on universities' and colleges' web-sites.

b. Making it easier to access the existing, wider set of information that higher education institutions must publish about their courses, which the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)[3] examines as part of quality assurance and which is of interest to a wider audience.

c. Future developments relating to the National Student Survey (NSS)[4].

3. Most of our proposals are based on evidence and recommendations from two pieces of research[5] commissioned by HEFCE, which involved consultation with prospective and current students.

4. We propose that this information should be published by all higher and further education institutions that are subject to QAA review, including all those funded by HEFCE and the Department for Employment and Learning (in Northern Ireland)[6], and private higher education providers that subscribe to QAA. It will then be subject to judgement in QAA review from the 2012-13 academic year (and will inform 2013 entrants).

5. The full list of consultation questions is set out in Annex A.

6. The Higher Education Public Information Steering Group (HEPISG)[7] will consider the responses to this consultation and make recommendations to the Boards of HEFCE, UUK and GuildHE on how the published information set should be developed, taking the responses into account.

7. The outcomes of the consultation and the way forward, agreed at Board level by HEFCE and UUK and at the GuildHE Executive, will be published as early as possible in summer 2011. Institutions will then develop their information sets.

8. We propose that the deadline for publishing KISs should be the start of academic year 2012-13 to help inform entrants in 2013, although we would encourage publication at the earliest possible date.

9. At the same time as this consultation we will discuss the development of the KIS proposals with expert working groups, and run pilot schemes in a

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1 HEFCE distributes public money for higher education in England. For more information see www.hefce.ac.uk.

2 UUK and GuildHE are representative bodies for higher education institutions in the UK. For more information see www.universitiesuk.ac.uk and www.guildhe.ac.uk.

3 QAA is responsible for safeguarding quality and standards in UK higher education, checking how well universities and colleges meet their responsibilities and suggesting ways they could improve. Institutions pay a subscription to QAA to help fund its work. For more information see www.qaa.ac.uk.

4 The NSS asks final-year students about their course and the institution at which they studied. The survey results are published each year at www.unistats.com.

5 'Understanding the information needs of users of public information about higher education: Report to HEFCE by Oakleigh Consulting and Staffordshire University' (August 2010) and 'Enhancing and Developing the National Student Survey: Report to HEFCE by the Centre for Higher Education Studies at the Institute of Education' (August 2010), both available at www.hefce.ac.uk under Publications/Research & evaluation.

6 The Department for Employment and Learning (in Northern Ireland) distributes public money for higher education in Northern Ireland. For more information see www.delni.gov.uk.

7 HEPISG advises the UK funding bodies, and other relevant bodies sponsoring and implementing cross-sector projects on the provision of information about higher education, on the management and ongoing development of this activity. HEPISG's membership and terms of reference can be viewed at www.hefce.ac.uk under Learning & teaching/Assuring quality/Public information.

sample of institutions. We hope this will help respondents give informed consideration to the KIS proposals, and provide further information about the resources that will be needed to develop them.

10. We will share updates on this work via a dedicated page on the HEFCE web-site, www.hefce.ac.uk under Learning & teaching/Assuring quality/Public information about HE/revised information set and at two consultation events on 18 February in London and 3 March in Birmingham (details of the events will be published on the web-page and via the admin-hefce mailing list; to join this list see www.hefce.ac.uk under Receive updates by e-mail).

11. This consultation was developed by HEFCE, UUK and GuildHE with advice and guidance from HEPISG, the Quality in Higher Education Group[8] and QAA. The National Union of Students, Association of Colleges and representatives of employer-related organisations such as the Confederation of British Industry and the UK Commission for Employment and Skills were included in discussions on its development.

12. The proposals in this consultation relate only to institutions providing higher education in England and Northern Ireland. However, HEPISG has a UK-wide remit, and we recognise the benefits of a UK-wide information set, allowing prospective students to access comparable information wherever in the UK they are thinking of studying. We therefore welcome responses from Welsh and Scottish institutions. The funding councils and representative bodies in Wales and Scotland will be informed about the results of this consultation.

13. We will publish a summary and analysis of consultation responses as part of the outcomes document in summer 2011.

14. Additionally, all responses may be disclosed on request, under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act. The Act gives a public right of access to any information held by a public authority, in this case HEFCE. This includes information provided in response to a consultation. We have a responsibility to decide whether any responses, including information about your identity, should be made public or treated as confidential. We can refuse to disclose information only in exceptional circumstances. This means responses to this consultation are unlikely to be treated as confidential except in very particular circumstances. Further information about the Act is available at www.informationcommissioner.gov.uk.

Action required

15. Responses to this consultation should be made online by **Monday 7 March 2011** using the response form which can be accessed alongside this document at www.hefce.ac.uk under Publications.

16. This is an open consultation and we welcome views from anyone with an interest in information about higher education.

17. As discussed in paragraph 10, respondents are advised to check www.hefce.ac.uk under Learning & teaching/Assuring quality/Public information about HE/revised information set for updates and information about the consultation events that we will hold on 18 February/3 March.

8 The Quality in Higher Education Group includes students, and representatives from HEIs, an FE college, a secondary school, the Royal Academy of Engineering, QAA and the Higher Education Academy. For more information on the group, its membership and terms of reference, see www.universitiesuk.ac.uk under Policy and research/Policy areas/Quality and standards/Quality in Higher Education Group.

Introduction

Background to this consultation

18. This consultation on the information that higher education institutions (HEIs) and further education colleges (FECs) must publish about their courses is part of continuing work by HEFCE, Universities UK (UUK), GuildHE and the Department for Employment and Learning (in Northern Ireland) (DEL) to revise and enhance the system for assuring the quality of higher education in England and Northern Ireland. We are committed to a quality assurance system that is accountable, rigorous, transparent, flexible, responsive and public-facing. We want to tackle concerns about quality and standards, and make real improvements to the student experience and the reputation of higher education (HE).

19. Information that the HE sector provides for the public is increasingly significant and is a key concern for the current Government, which has asked us to work on this as a priority. By 'public', we mean people who are not employed in HE or professionally associated with it, but have a strong interest in it, notably current and prospective students, their parents and advisers, schools, colleges, employers and the media. Public information should be robust, easy to find and easy to compare between institutions, wherever in the country they are.

20. Access to robust, reliable information is particularly important for prospective students, who are making decisions about where to apply amid greater demand for places and the expectation that they will pay more for their education. The sector has acknowledged this and has responded to the growing need for clearer, more accessible information for prospective students by getting involved in the National Student Survey (NSS) and adding employability statements[9] to all HEI web-sites in August 2010.

21. Public information has three purposes:

a. To inform people about the quality of higher education and, in particular, to give prospective students information that will help them choose what and where to study.

b. As evidence for quality assurance processes in institutions.

c. As information that institutions can use to enhance the quality of their higher education provision.

22. The proposals in this consultation are intended to contribute to all these aims and therefore improve the provision, use and impact of public information about HE.

What is discussed in this consultation?

The Key Information Set

23. The key impetus of this consultation is the proposal that it would be beneficial to prospective students for the HE sector to provide the HE-related information they find most useful, in the places we know they look for such information. This is addressed through the development, and publication on institutions' web-sites, of a standardised (and therefore easy to compare) set of key facts for each course. This would be called the Key Information Set, and an example of what it might be like is at Annex E.

24. The KIS will be a significant development that seeks to fulfil current government and public expectations on the publication of information about HE.

25. We propose that the KIS carry the information items that were identified as useful in research HEFCE commissioned in spring 2010, undertaken by Oakleigh Consulting and Staffordshire University[10] (the recommendations from that research are set out in Annex B of this document). Current and prospective students identified 16 key

9 See paragraphs 94 to 97 for more information on employability statements.

10 'Understanding the information needs of users of public information about higher education: Report to HEFCE by Oakleigh Consulting and Staffordshire University' (August 2010), available at www.hefce.ac.uk under Publications/Research & evaluation.

pieces of information as 'very useful', most pertaining to costs, satisfaction and employability. Students also indicated that they look for information on institutions' web-sites and prospectuses, and on the UCAS[11] web-site.

26. We recognise that information identified as useful is likely to change over time; in particular the Oakleigh research did not mention fee information, which is likely to grow in significance. Now that the government has announced its intentions for the overall shape of the fee regime from 2012-13 onwards[12], we shall add fee information to the KIS. In future, we intend to keep the information set under regular review to ensure it remains relevant.

27. Although most of this information is already published, the KIS would bring it together in a standardised format, looking similar for all courses at all institutions, making the information potentially more useful, comparable and accessible. We are discussing with UCAS how KISs might link to the UCAS web-site.

28. At the same time as this consultation, we are working to ensure that, in practical terms, the English and Northern Irish HE sectors are in a good position to make the changes proposed. We are taking expert advice from sector colleagues during each stage of this process. For instance, although most of the items identified as 'very useful' already exist, there are a few that are not currently collated or held in an easily comparable format, so we are establishing expert working groups to find a way of tackling this. We will also run a pilot process with a small sample of institutions. The results of the pilot and of this consultation should help us to produce different versions of the KIS which can then be tested with various student groups.

29. We will publish updates on this work at www.hefce.ac.uk under Learning & teaching/Assuring quality/Public information about HE/revised information set, and plan to hold two consultation events in February/March 2011 (for details of the events see the web-page or join the admin-hefce mailing list at www.hefce.ac.uk under Receive updates by e-mail).

30. In making suggestions for a revised published information set that includes the KIS, we recognise that there is a huge range of published and unpublished information that institutions use in quality assurance and enhancement. We recognise therefore that the information set proposed in this consultation is part of a broader context.

The role of the NSS

31. A second piece of research commissioned by HEFCE considered how the NSS might be developed and enhanced[13]. Accordingly this consultation also sets out proposals for management of the NSS and use of NSS results. The report's recommendations are set out in Annex B of this document. It did not recommend many substantial changes, but does propose that student unions should be able to choose a bank of optional questions, and we are consulting on that.

Other information used for quality assurance of HE courses

32. Institutions are currently required to provide information for publication on the Unistats[14] web-site (www.unistats.com). This forms part of the quality assurance system for HE in England and Northern Ireland. They also publish a wide range of course and institutional information on their own web-sites, some of which is also considered as evidence by QAA in audit and review.

33. The quality assurance system applies to HEFCE- and DEL-funded institutions, and to private providers that subscribe to the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA).

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11 UCAS is the organisation responsible for managing applications to higher education courses in the UK. For more information see www.ucas.com.

12 'Statement on higher education and student finance' by David Willetts, Minister of State for Universities and Science, 3 November 2010 is available from www.bis.gov.uk under News & speeches/Speeches/Speeches by David Willetts.

13 'Enhancing and Developing the National Student Survey: Report to HEFCE by the Centre for Higher Education Studies at the Institute of Education' (August 2010), available at www.hefce.ac.uk under Publications/Research & evaluation.

14 Unistats is a web-site aimed at potential students where information about institutions, such as NSS results, course entry requirements and graduation results are published, at subject level where possible.

The system includes audit and review by QAA, institutions' internal reviews, the Academic Infrastructure (this provides good practice and guidance on academic standards) and external examining arrangements[15]. When QAA audits an institution, it comments on how accurate and complete the institution's published information is, and considers how the institution uses that information, such as survey responses (including the NSS). During an audit or review visit, auditors also talk to students and staff about how they use the information and how accurate they think it is.

34. Annex C provides more background to the development of the quality assurance system and the associated published information set, and includes a list of the items currently published on Unistats or by institutions.

35. In July 2010, we published the outcomes of a joint HEFCE/DEL/UUK/GuildHE consultation on the future of the quality assurance of higher education in England and Northern Ireland[16]. Those outcomes included an agreed set of overarching principles and objectives for the quality assurance system (set out in Annex D) and outline characteristics of a revised method for quality assurance in HEIs. These included QAA making a formal judgement on published information during audit, rather than a comment as is currently the case, subject to the HE sector agreeing on the data that an institution publishes about the quality of its courses and the standards of its awards. In this consultation, we seek that agreement.

36. In revising the information set that is published, we will adhere to the principles and objectives for quality assurance in England and Northern Ireland listed in HEFCE 2010/17 (and in Annex D of this document). We will:

- recognise that institutions are autonomous bodies responsible for their own admissions and quality management systems
- keep the quality assurance system flexible and responsive
- seek to maximise the benefit to information users, while avoiding disproportionate burdens of effort and resource from institutions and bearing in mind the constrained financial climate in which we are operating.

37. This consultation also takes into account wider discussions between the funders, representative bodies, QAA and other partners, as well as advice from HEPISG, on the nature, presentation and use of the information, including its use in quality assurance and enhancement.

Context of this consultation

38. Work is under way on other aspects of the quality assurance system, with a particular focus on prospective students, and this consultation should be considered within this wider context. The funding bodies (HEFCE and DEL), representative bodies (UUK and GuildHE) and QAA have led on different strands of this work, but all partners have been involved in all elements. We have also consulted the National Union of Students (NUS), Association of Colleges and UCAS, as well as corresponding bodies in Wales and Scotland, as appropriate.

39. QAA recently consulted on how a revised quality assurance method, to apply in HEIs from 2011-12, might work[17]. The Quality in Higher Education (QHE) Group and QAA will use the results from that and our consultation to determine how a formal judgement on published information will operate as part of QAA review. The judgement on published information will apply to all institutions in England and Northern Ireland that subscribe to the QAA and are thus subject to the process of institutional review, whether in the public or private sector. The QHE Group, with advice from QAA, will maintain an overview of how the production of information sets and their use in

15 For more details about the quality assurance system, see www.hefce.ac.uk under Learning & teaching/Assuring quality/Future of quality assurance.

16 'Future arrangements for quality assurance in England and Northern Ireland: Outcomes of consultation' (HEFCE 2010/17). All HEFCE publications are available from www.hefce.ac.uk under Publications.

17 'Institutional review of higher education institutions in England and Northern Ireland Operational description' (QAA, October 2010), available from www.qaa.ac.uk under Consultations.

QAA review are working in practice, and will advise the sponsor bodies of any issues that arise.

40. QAA also intends to consult on the future of the Academic Infrastructure[18].

41. UUK, QAA and GuildHE published a discussion paper in July 2010 reviewing external examining arrangements in the UK[19]; a final report will be submitted from the External Examining Review Group to UUK and GuildHE in January 2011.

The consultation

Why publish information about higher education?

42. The reviews and research outlined in the previous section suggest that public information on quality and standards should continue to have three key purposes:

a. To inform people about the quality of higher education and, in particular, to give prospective students information that will help them choose what and where to study.

b. As evidence for quality assurance processes in institutions.

c. As information that institutions can use to enhance the quality of their higher education provision.

Consultation question 1

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

43. Quality assurance processes, as carried out by institutions and reviewed by QAA, consider a wide range of information produced by the institution and nationally (see Annex C for the list of information items). Institutions routinely monitor the effectiveness of their programmes, drawing on information such as NSS results, internal surveys, student progress records and other relevant data. QAA audit and review considers whether information in the public domain is complete and accurate, and how institutions are managing, using and acting on information and data about their provision. Much of the information published by institutions is also of general interest to a wider audience, including prospective and current students, students' parents and advisers, schools, colleges, employers and the media.

44. Although much of the information published by and about institutions – both the information on the Unistats web-site and that which institutions publish themselves – is of general public interest, the Staffordshire University/Oakleigh Consulting research found that it is not regularly accessed by prospective students, nor does it necessarily contain all the information they consider 'very useful'. We consider that, since prospective students are a key audience who will pay a significant sum for their studies, this should be addressed.

45. Information and data required for quality enhancement are interlinked with the purposes of both general information and quality assurance. The NSS in particular is an important driver for quality enhancement because institutions take the results seriously and act upon them. Institutions also use the results of internal reviews and surveys to enhance quality. QAA audit and review are also effective drivers of enhancement.

18 For more information see 'Academic Infrastructure evaluation' available from www.qaa.ac.uk under Standards and quality.

19 'Review of external examining arrangements in the UK: A discussion paper from Universities UK, GuildHE and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education' (July 2010), available from www.universitiesuk.ac.uk under Policy and research/Policy areas/Quality and standards/How the system works/External examiners.

Which information should be published?

46. The Oakleigh Consulting/Staffordshire University research identified the pieces of information that current and prospective students find most useful. These broadly relate to satisfaction with teaching, employment outcomes and costs. It found that students ideally want this information at the level of individual courses and in a way that enables comparison between courses. The research also identified that the two main places students looked for information were institutions' web-sites/prospectuses and UCAS.

47. Sixteen information categories were considered 'very useful' by 30 per cent or more of the prospective students questioned for the research. The research also found that prospective students will only look for a limited amount of information: 75 per cent said they looked for five items or more, 50 per cent looked for 11 items and only 25 per cent looked for more than 21 pieces of information. Therefore we propose that the KIS should provide the 16 items found 'very useful'. Table 1 lists the 16 items of information, identified by the research, that we propose are included in the KIS, and the sources from which we would expect them to be drawn. We have also included information on fees, which was not originally identified, but is likely to be viewed as very important in the light of government announcements on fee increases (see paragraph 70).

48. Much of this information is already publicly available, whether centrally on the Unistats web-site, on the UCAS web-site or on institutions' own web-sites. However, between 25 per cent and 50 per cent of the students questioned in the research had not looked for the information.

49. In the light of this, a central recommendation from the Oakleigh Consulting/Staffordshire University report was that this information should be published in a standard, accessible format in the places where most prospective students already look for information: institutions' web-sites/prospectuses and the UCAS web-site.

50. In addition, the research indicates that some of the language and terminology used on web-sites providing information on HE is not readily understood by those coming to HE for the first time, or even by those advising them. The report recommends that HE information web-sites should be more inter-connected, and that the terms and language used should be more easily understandable to a non-expert audience. It is also important to ensure that information – particularly statistical information – is put in context, to help people understand what judgements they may reasonably make based upon it.

The Key Information Set: what is it and why are we suggesting it?

51. Reflecting the central recommendation from Oakleigh Consulting/Staffordshire University, this consultation proposes that it would be beneficial to prospective students to provide the information they find most useful, in the places we know they look for such information. The great majority of this information is already compiled at some level, (see paragraphs 63 to 75), so the focus is on collating it in one useful place, rather than collecting or publishing new information.

52. We therefore propose the development of the Key Information Set (KIS). The KIS would gather together the information identified as most useful to prospective students in a format that would look similar for all courses at all institutions. This would be presented on institutional web-sites, because that is where most students look for information. We also believe that the information should be easily accessible from the UCAS web-site, and are discussing with UCAS how this might be achieved.

53. It is important to note that in some instances it would be inappropriate or impossible to provide the exact information identified by the research as useful, and in these cases we believe we have identified sensible and meaningful alternatives (see Table 1).

54. We envisage that a KIS should be developed for each course. To begin with, due to the limits on the information available, we intend that the KIS should be developed only for undergraduate courses (full- and part-time) that require more than one year's full-time equivalent of study (that is to say, short courses and postgraduate courses are not

Table 1 **The information that students find useful, how the KIS might present it and where it would come from**

Information areas identified as 'very useful'*	Proposed information pieces for publication in the KIS	Source of information
Satisfaction		
Proportion of students satisfied or very satisfied with: • standard of teaching • their course • the support and guidance they received • their feedback on assessment • the library facilities • the IT facilities	NSS results (the most appropriate question(s) will be identified during the KIS implementation testing phase)	NSS
Proportion of students satisfied or very satisfied with the student union	Turnout in student union election Number of student union-run clubs and societies	NUS Annual Returns Survey
Costs		
Cost of halls of residence	Residential costs	Institution
Maximum available bursary	Maximum available bursary (and web link)	Institution
Maximum household income for eligibility for a bursary	Maximum household income for eligibility for a bursary (and web link)	Institution
Student fees not identified in research but due to anticipated changes in the fee regime this is likely to be requested	Cost of tuition fees (graduate contribution)	Institution
Employment		
Proportion of students: • in employment in first year after completing course • employed in a full-time professional or managerial job in first year after completing course	Destinations of students six months after completing their course (including employment and further study) Proportion of students employed in a full-time 'graduate' job six months after completing course	Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey[20]
Average salary in the first year after completing this course	Average salary six months after completing this course	DHLE survey (collection needs to be revised to improve response for this information)
Professional bodies that recognise this course	Professional bodies that recognise this course	Institution
Study		
Weekly hours of teaching contact time	How student time is divided into various learning and teaching methods, and approximate hours per week for the course	Institution
Proportion of the assessment that is by coursework	Mix of assessment methods used (e.g. exam, continuous assessment) by contribution to total mark	Institution

* by prospective and current students in the Oakleigh Consulting/Staffordshire University research.

20 For more information on the DLHE survey see www.hesa.ac.uk under Information provision/Destinations of Leavers from HEIs.

included). Courses delivered wholly overseas and closed courses[21] are also not required to be included at this time.

55. The KIS will contain information at institution level and, where possible, at the course level. However, course level information may have to be aggregated to the subject level in some cases. This is outlined below but explored in more detail in paragraphs 73 to 75 and at Annex F. In brief, the KIS should include:

a. Institution-level information (for example accommodation costs) which will be the same for each KIS an institution produces. This information could be provided by a central source within the university or college.

b. Information at the course level (for example types of assessment, accreditation by professional bodies and course fees) which will be specific to that particular course. The course-specific items would have to be added individually.

c. Information derived from the NSS and Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey. We hope to present this at course level where possible if sufficient data are available; otherwise it will be presented at the most detailed level possible of the Joint Academic Coding System (JACS)[22], subject to the surveys' response rate and threshold requirements. This information is held by HEFCE and the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), for publicly funded institutions and others that subscribe to HESA.

56. We recognise that for private providers of higher education that subscribe to QAA, but do not currently subscribe to HESA or participate in the NSS and DLHE survey, further discussion will be needed on what is involved in meeting the public information requirements for institutional review. But we expect that they will need to provide information on the same basis as other QAA subscribers and will similarly be subject to the judgement in this area. This will mean they have to participate in the NSS and DLHE surveys and provide student data to HESA.

57. We intend to consult with specialist groups on how to put information into the KIS effectively and efficiently, and will then provide further technical guidance on doing so.

58. Although the list of items of information presented in Table 1 is the result of extensive research and discussion with prospective students, respondents to this consultation may have further ideas about what useful information might be included. We do not wish to include an unmanageable amount, though, so we will restrict the first set of KISs published to the items set out in Table 1.

59. However, prospective students' needs will change over time, so HEPISG will keep the KIS under regular review to ensure that it remains helpful (see paragraphs 102 to 105). We are also aware that particular groups, such as overseas students, may have different information needs and this will be considered in the future.

60. An example of a potential KIS is shown in Annex E. Please note this is for illustrative purposes only and the final version would be subject to the results of this consultation, as well as a pilot scheme in a sample of institutions, user testing with prospective students and further graphic design work.

61. We do not expect the KIS to replace other information sources, or to be presented in isolation. The KIS could be useful as a starting point from which users could be directed to other information. We would also hope that institutions might be able to 're-use' KIS data for other purposes.

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21 'Closed' courses are those that are not open to all suitably qualified applicants, for example courses provided solely for the employees of particular companies. Such courses are not funded by HEFCE.

22 JACS codes are developed and maintained by HESA and UCAS for the purpose of providing consistency in coding academic subjects across higher education institutions. They are arranged in a hierarchy of specialisations within wider groups: for example JACS code J720 'Animal biotechnology' sits within code J700, 'Biotechnology' which itself sits within the wider J000 'Technology' group.

62. The KIS will be developed with a set of guidelines for users, explaining sources of information, appropriate interpretations and disclaimers, and any other relevant information. This would be subject to the same user testing as the KIS itself, agreed with UUK and GuildHE, fully discussed with the NUS and then published by HEFCE.

Consultation question 2

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

Where would the information come from?

Sources of information on satisfaction

63. Most of the 'student satisfaction' items listed in Table 1 can be drawn from the NSS and so can be provided centrally by HEFCE. Where there are sufficient data, they will be presented at the course level; otherwise they will be aggregated to JACS level 3 (as information is currently shown on Unistats). Level 3 currently comprises over 100 named subjects. However we propose that where there are insufficient data for NSS findings to be made available (even when aggregated over two years) data may be offered at Level 2 in the subject hierarchy (currently comprising 42 subjects) or failing that Level 1 (22 subjects). It is not currently proposed to offer data at whole-institution level (level 0). Annex F sets out how information may be aggregated by different JACS levels.

64. Data on 'satisfaction with student unions' does not currently exist and it is difficult to measure. We are discussing with the NUS how a meaningful alternative can be identified. One proposal is to include information gathered by the NUS' annual returns survey (previously called the Association for Managers in Students' Unions (AMSU) survey). This collects a range of data including the percentage of student turnout in elections and the number of union-run clubs and societies. This describes rather than evaluates, but could provide a 'picture' of the student union and using it would be less burdensome to institutions than seeking new data. The very few student unions that are not affiliated to the NUS would need to provide comparable information.

Sources of information on employment

Employment/study six months after leaving course

65. Information on what graduates do after graduation can be provided from the DLHE survey, which collects data from graduates six months after they leave their course.

66. However, reliable data on average salary are currently not available because this question is optional in the DLHE telephone survey and many institutions do not ask it. This element would therefore need improvement before inclusion in the KIS.

67. The DLHE survey is currently undergoing a review that considers this issue among others[23]. This is being overseen by a review group including representatives of HESA's key stakeholders (HE funding bodies and government departments) and sector representatives. When relevant, reliable data are available from the DLHE survey they will be included in the KIS.

Professional accreditation

68. At the moment, institutions must include information about which professional bodies accredit their qualifications as part of 'programme specifications' (concise descriptions of what students can expect to get as a result of doing a course). However prospective students are not generally aware of programme specifications, which are technical documents, and the information is not provided in a comparable format. We therefore propose to include this on the KIS. Other forms of course recognition beyond that of professional bodies, such as that of Sector Skills Councils, may also need to be considered. The sourcing and presentation of these data will be discussed by an expert working group (see paragraphs 84 to 85).

[23] HESA invited comments on proposals for revisions to the DLHE survey in circular 10/02, available at www.hesa.ac.uk under Circulars library. Changes agreed following the review are to be announced in February 2011.

Sources of information on costs

Accommodation costs

69. We appreciate that costs for student residences can vary widely depending on the type and length of residential agreement; we also appreciate that providing accommodation costs is only helpful if vacancies are likely to be available. We recognise therefore that presenting this information may be challenging and will discuss this further with an expert working group (see paragraphs 84 to 85). We suggest that a link is provided from this information to the relevant institutional web-page.

Fees, scholarships and bursaries

70. We will need to ensure that the KIS reflects anticipated changes to student fees and finance following the most recent Comprehensive Spending Review and the Review of Higher Education and Student Finance (the 'Browne Review')[24] and consequent government policy. We now know the intended main features of fees and student finance[25], but further detail, not least in the forthcoming White Paper, will also have an impact. We are proposing that fee information is included in the KIS; it may also be useful to include links to information on bursaries and scholarships. We suggest that information about the range of available bursaries is provided and that a link should be provided from the KIS to information about how to apply for these.

Sources of information on teaching, learning and assessment

71. We propose that the KIS present:

- an overall total of weekly expected study hours (full-time study, term time only), with an indication of how that time would be divided into different activities: for example laboratory time, lectures, independent study, group work
- assessment methods in categories such as exams, course work and group work.

An expert working group (see paragraphs 84 to 85) would explore this area in greater detail and produce a list of learning, teaching and assessment method categories that institutions could use when making their KISs.

72. We have included a slightly broader concept of learning, teaching and assessment in this section than that suggested in the Staffordshire University/Oakleigh Consulting research (interviewees identified only hours of teaching and proportion of assessment by course work as useful). But we feel this broader approach, offering further clarification of what is meant by these terms, is a more accurate reflection of higher education study and therefore likely to be more appropriate and useful.

Use of course-level and JACS-level data

73. The Staffordshire University/Oakleigh Consulting research indicated that prospective students appreciate having information at course level so this is what we aspire to give them. But this may pose a problem for new courses, or where there are too few students on a course to ensure anonymity and/or statistically significant data.

74. This would not affect the information to be provided by the institution at course level (learning and teaching activities, assessment methods and professional accreditation), which can be published regardless of how many students are on a course. But in the case of the information from the NSS and DLHE survey, it may not always be possible or desirable to present all data at course level. Instead, information could be aggregated over a number of years or could be offered at less detailed levels, such as at subject level using JACS codes – see Annex F for how data might be aggregated. This would be preferable to providing no data at all and is in line with our approach to Unistats. As with Unistats, the aim will be to provide the information most likely to be useful to prospective students in making a choice on what and where to study, without misleading them about the source of the data or their relevance to the course in question.

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[24] The report of this review, 'Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education in England', is available at http://hereview.independent.gov.uk/hereview/report/.

[25] See footnote 12.

75. In some cases there will be nothing to compare a course to, for example when provision is new. In developing the KIS, we hope to adopt an approach that will minimise the number of courses where no quantitative data can be presented. We will discuss this with stakeholder groups, with a view to providing detailed guidance on how this will work in the KIS specification. If there are any gaps in the information provided, then it must be clear to users why this is so.

Publishing the KIS

Where will the KIS be published?

76. The KIS needs to be located where prospective students already look for information. Since most students will have chosen their subject before the point at which they would find the KIS useful, we suggest that the KIS, or a link to it, is published alongside course descriptions on institutions' web-sites. Institutions are very different and this is reflected in their web-sites, so we do not propose to be any more prescriptive about KIS location so long as it is sited prominently alongside other course information.

Franchised-out provision or courses validated by other institutions

77. HEIs are autonomous bodies responsible for their own quality management systems and for the standards of awards made in their names. Many institutions, particularly further education colleges (FECs), provide courses that are franchised from, or validated by, other institutions, In these instances, the franchiser or validating institution is responsible for standards.

78. Different colleges will have different responsibilities for publishing information according to their arrangements with awarding bodies. Although we recognise this, we consider that since the KIS is aimed at prospective students, it should be published at the point at which they look for information: this will probably be the delivering institution's web-site.

79. In the case of provision funded indirectly in FECs, partners should discuss the information together; in general we would expect the KIS to be published at the point of delivery, but recognise that the franchiser institution will be responsible for it. Institutions delivering programmes in partnership may wish to consider including responsibility for public information in their partnership agreements, as recommended in section 2 of the QAA Code of Practice regarding collaborative provision.

Links to other published information

80. The Staffordshire University/Oakleigh Consulting research identified UCAS as the other main location where students seek information. We therefore propose that links should be provided to KISs from the UCAS web-site, although it is important to remember that not all students apply through UCAS and that some courses (such as part-time courses) are not currently included on the UCAS web-site. For these students the institutional web-site remains the primary source of information.

81. However, we are aware that much of the 'entry profile' information currently provided by institutions to UCAS is similar to that in the KIS. We wish to avoid duplication of effort so we are discussing with UCAS how this might be managed, with a view to institutions only having to provide one set of information, possibly linked to a number of other web-sites.

Consultation question 3

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

82. As noted in paragraph 61 the KIS is not intended to replace other, perhaps more extensive, published information. Although the KIS itself should be provided in a standard format, institutions should be able to provide contextual information linked to – or in addition to – the KIS if they so wish. They may choose to do this by linking from the KIS to relevant web-pages, by providing a central 'information' page on the institution's web-site, or by some other means.

83. We would like to work with other organisations that provide student information on HE and other related careers guidance, such as Prospects (www.prospects.ac.uk) and Connexions,

to build links between web-sites and to maximise exposure of the KIS. This would be relatively low in cost and effort for the organisations concerned, and may help prospective students find information. We would welcome suggestions for any other web-sites or resources that should be considered for linking to the KIS.

Producing the KIS

84. To make an informed response to this consultation, institutions need to have an idea of how a KIS will be produced and the amount of work this will require. We cannot do detailed work on this before publishing this consultation because we need to move forward quickly with the development of the information set. But parallel to the consultation we will begin further development work on the KIS. This will involve:

a. Setting up three expert working groups to advise on how best to publish and present some of the more complex items of in the KIS, namely:

- accommodation costs
- learning, teaching and assessment methods
- accreditation by other bodies.

b. Piloting the production of the KIS with a small sample of institutions, including one FEC. This will include consideration of how institutions will source the information and the balance of work between the sector and HEFCE in formatting data.

c. Developing a logo and 'brand identity' for the KIS so it can be readily identified on institutional web-sites.

d. Following the completion of the pilot and the consultation, we will carry out extensive user testing with prospective students on various designs of the KIS to identify the one that would have most impact

85. We will report on the progress of this work on a dedicated web-page that will be kept up to date: www.hefce.ac.uk under Learning & teaching/Assuring quality/Public information about HE/revised information set. We will also report on the results of the pilot at two consultation events in 2011, on 18 February (in London) and 3 March (in Birmingham) which will be held as part of this consultation exercise. Information about these events will also be posted on the web-page and publicised through the admin-hefce e-mail mailing list (to join this list see www.hefce.ac.uk under Receive updates by e-mail). The web-page will also be updated to reflect developments in fees and other financial arrangements and links with UCAS.

Costs of producing KISs

86. We recognise that producing a KIS for each course will require effort and resource on the part of institutions, even though some of the data will be provided centrally which will alleviate this to some extent. We intend that the pilot phase will provide a firmer idea of the effort and costs involved and we will publish this information as soon as possible.

Consultation question 4

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

What will happen to Unistats?

87. If the KIS goes ahead, HEFCE and its partners will need to consider how the Unistats web-site might be used in future. In line with the Oakleigh/ Staffordshire University report's recommendation 5, we do not propose to make any major changes to Unistats at this time, but to review its position two years after the KIS is in place (that is, in 2014).

88. Some minor changes, however, are being considered for Unistats in response to the Oakleigh/Staffordshire University report recommendations, as follows:

- provide data at course level where possible. We will consider how this might be achieved in the context of the report's other recommendations on course-level information
- revise the 'overview' set of information to ensure it presents those items in the KIS that are already on Unistats, and to include DLHE survey data on salary when available. The

current DLHE survey response rates on salary are too variable to provide robust data (see paragraphs 66 to 67)

- provide a short explanation indicating to users that the information in the overview is regarded by other students as 'very useful' in making choices.

Quality assurance: a wider public information set

89. Annex C lists the public information currently used in QAA audit and review. This is wider than the KIS, and has a dual purpose:

- to provide information about higher education to a wide variety of audiences including: prospective and current students; students' parents and advisers; employers; the media; and the institution itself
- it forms part of the evidence used in QAA audit and review.

90. QAA institutional audits of higher education institutions currently offer a commentary on how accurate and complete an institution's published information is. They also consider how institutions use that information, such as survey responses, and during an audit or review visit, auditors talk to students and staff about how they use the information and how accurate they think it is.

91. Higher education courses in FECs undergo a different process of quality assurance called Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review (IQER). In IQER reviewers form a 'conclusion' on the published information set.

92. QAA has confirmed that, in its view, all the items of information in Annex C are valuable as evidence in institutional audit, although they are not always available in an easily accessible format or place. We consider that this information is also all potentially useful to the public, so we propose that institutions should continue to make it available and consider whether any of it could be presented in more publically accessible ways. We would like to encourage early progress in this area. QAA reviewers will be able to comment on the accessibility of the information.

93. We propose that the items listed in Annex C should be included in the information to be published on institutional web-sites, which is shown in full at Annex F.

Information about support for employability

94. To provide clearer information for prospective students, we asked institutions in June 2010[26] to publish a short statement on the support they provide to enhance their students' employability. This was intended to be an interim measure for students entering in 2011-12; we expected that this public information review would determine the longer-term approach to employability and employment information.

95. The research done by Oakleigh Consulting/Staffordshire University highlighted that students consider specific data at course level about employment after graduation (such as employment rates, salary and professional recognition of courses) to be highly important. We propose that the KIS include this information.

96. Institutions provide support for employability both within courses and through central support services. We believe prospective students will benefit from being able to compare easily the range of resources provided across the institution as a whole, as well as being able to see specific, course-related information as proposed in the KIS.

97. We therefore suggest that from 2011, a statement on the support provided at institutional level to enhance students' employability should be included in the information to be published on institutional web-sites, which is shown in full at Annex F (and which already includes information about links with employers). There could be a link to this statement from the KIS.

Consultation question 5

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

26 For more information see 'Employability statements' (HEFCE Circular letter 12/2010). All HEFCE publications are available at www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs.

Consultation question 6

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

QAA judgement on published information

98. In 'Future arrangements for quality assurance in England and Northern Ireland: Outcomes of consultation' (HEFCE 2010/17) we proposed making the management of public information subject to a formal judgement in institutional audit, rather than a comment as is currently the case.

99. Respondents to that consultation had been concerned that information management should only be subject to a judgement in audit after a fully comparable, sector-wide information set was agreed. We intend the information set under consultation in this document to fulfil that requirement, with the comparable element being provided by the KIS.

100. We expect that this information set would also apply as far as possible to the quality assurance method to be used in FECs from 2012, after the current cycle of IQER completes, and would also be subject to a judgement.

101. QAA and QHE Group will determine how the judgement will operate in practice, taking into account the outcomes of this consultation, HEFCE 2010/17 and QAA's own recent consultation on the quality assurance method to apply in HEIs from 2011-12[27]. The judgement will come into effect from 2012-13, after the common information set has been agreed (following this consultation) and institutions have had time to put it in place. Until then, published information will remain subject to a comment.

Making sure published information remains appropriate

102. As agreed in the underlying principles for the quality assurance system (see Annex D), we wish to ensure that both QAA review and published information remain flexible and responsive to the changing HE context and to student needs, particularly in the light of the Browne Review and subsequent White Paper.

103. We will therefore keep the public information set under review and will take advice from HEPISG and QHE Group if we consider that it needs to be amended at any point. We suggest that the list of items to be published should be shown on the HEFCE web-site and updated as necessary. QAA handbooks and operational descriptions of review methods could then refer to this link. The English and Northern Irish HE sectors will be informed of any changes in sufficient time to make the necessary information available.

104. If any change is considered by HEPISG and QHE Group to be substantive (for example, if it is likely to require a lot of work by institutions), the English and Northern Irish HE sectors will be invited to comment[28].

105. These principles also apply to the KIS. The list of items considered 'most useful' by prospective students will not remain static, particularly in the light of forthcoming changes to funding and fees, and the content of the KIS will be reviewed regularly to ensure that it continues to fulfil users' needs.

Consultation question 7

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

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27 See footnote 17.

28 The QHE Group has prepared a draft protocol setting out how it will manage future flexibility in the quality assurance system, including how it will decide what constitutes a substantive change to the method; see www.universitiesuk.ac.uk under Policy and research/Policy areas/Quality and standards/Quality in Higher Education Group.

Developing and enhancing the National Student Survey

106. As well as making sure that institutions have mechanisms in place to ensure their public information is accurate and complete, QAA audit and review considers how the institution uses this information – for example, how it is acting on the results of the NSS or internal surveys.

107. The Institute of Education's review of the NSS[29] found that it had been very effective as a means of helping to enhance the student learning experience, because institutions used it to identify concerns and took action to address them. The researchers recommended that QAA should continue to use NSS results in supporting judgements, considering not only the survey outcomes but also how institutions used them for both quality assurance and enhancement. The report suggested that the NSS should be more widely exploited as a means of quality enhancement (recommendation 2).

Reviewing the questions

108. The Institute of Education report argues strongly in favour of making no change to the core questions of the NSS, and proposes that HEPISG should review the survey once a year at most, which would allow any changes to questions (either core or additional) to be adapted in response to changing circumstances but still be valid (recommendations 6 and 18).

109. It also says that the NSS should continue to be carried out each year (recommendation 12) and that it should be reviewed comprehensively in 2015, after it has completed 10 cycles (recommendation 17).

110. We accept the recommendations of the Institute of Education report and therefore do not expect to make any changes to the NSS before this proposed HEPISG annual review mechanism has been put in place in 2011. HEFCE will continue to run the NSS annually and will review it in 2015. HEPISG will continue to oversee the structure and reporting of the NSS.

The optional question banks

111. In addition to the core questions, there are 13 pre-defined optional question banks (including the bank for NHS students) of which up to six may be selected by the institution. Responses to the optional questions are only seen by institutions and their student unions, and add more breadth to the responses from the core questions.

112. The Institute of Education research recommends that student unions, in consultation with their institution, be invited to recommend one of the 13 optional banks of questions for inclusion, making possible seven optional banks for each survey. This has clear potential benefits:

- to get students more involved, offering more opportunity for them to voice their opinions and thus benefit quality enhancement
- to encourage more institutions to engage with the optional question banks (currently only about half do so)
- as an added incentive for student unions to support and promote the survey, increasing response rates.

We therefore propose that all student unions are able to nominate, through their institution, one optional question bank each year.

Consultation question 8

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

Further work on the NSS

113. The research done by Oakleigh Consulting/Staffordshire University and the Institute of Education includes further recommendations on the NSS which we have not included in this consultation because they require more detailed consideration and work, and financial investment. However, paragraphs 114 to 127 set out what action might be taken on the NSS in future and we welcome comments on these issues.

[29] See footnote 13.

Surveying postgraduate students

114. The Institute of Education's research explored whether it would be of value to introduce the NSS for postgraduate taught (PGT)[30] students. It established that a PGT NSS could improve PGT education and the availability of information to students. The report notes that the number of students following taught postgraduate programmes is increasing rapidly. Extending the survey to PGT students would therefore be a way to collect comparable feedback on the quality of this important aspect of English higher education.

115. However, the report identifies some significant challenges in extending the NSS to PGT students, mainly: the timing; relevance; choosing which students to include; dissertation-specific questions; and balancing costs with benefits for Government, HEFCE and institutions. There is also a potential issue with courses that have small numbers of students, where publication of NSS data could allow individuals to be identified. There are established thresholds below which we will not publish data and any extension of the NSS to include postgraduates would need to include measures that balanced anonymity with the need for robust, comparable data.

116. The report recommends that HEFCE explore whether extending the NSS to postgraduates is feasible. We are discussing it with Government and other interested parties, and will make judgements on the best way to proceed.

Surveying students on one-year courses

117. It has been agreed that, for now, students on one-year undergraduate courses will not be included in the NSS because:

a. At the time of the survey, one-year students will only have completed one term, and may not have had any formal assessment or received any formal feedback. They will therefore not have a sufficient range of experience to make robust judgements.

b. Institutions will not have submitted HESA data returns for these students at the point when they need to be submitted to the survey agency. Under the HESA process, demographic details are not collected until approximately 12 months after the NSS is complete.

118. HEPISG will continue to keep the inclusion of these students under review.

Use, analysis and publication of the open text questions

119. The NSS includes two 'open' questions that allow free text responses, rather than multiple choice. The Institute of Education research considered whether the responses to these open questions should be published, as they may contain information that prospective students might find helpful.

120. The open text responses are currently only available to the institution and the student union after they have been checked for anything that might identify the respondent (students are told their responses will be anonymous before they complete the survey).

121. These checks may not be sufficient if the comments were to be published, but there would be considerations around how far comments could be screened without full censoring. Students would have to be informed that their comments were to be published and this might have unintended effects, for example on their willingness to comment or changes in the issues they raise.

122. Consideration would also need to be given to how to present the responses, so that they are easily accessible and there is no danger of prospective HE students only reading a limited selection of responses, which might look like bias.

123. One alternative (recommendation 8 in the Institute of Education report), would be to develop a tool to enable institutions to consistently analyse the free text comments made by their students in the NSS. This might be done by coding the text in some way, so that themes – perhaps linked to the

30 Postgraduate taught students are those studying at a level for which a degree is normally an entrance requirement, and who follow a taught programme rather than studying through independent research.

core questions – could be identified and published at either institution or sector level. This would help to develop good practice, and the analysis – and the actions taken by the institutions in response – might also be useful to other organisations, most obviously QAA as part of review, while protecting student anonymity. HEFCE is willing to explore the feasibility of developing such an analytical tool, if resources are available to support this activity.

Using NSS data to make comparisons

124. The Institute of Education research identifies examples of how institutions can use the NSS results responsibly to make comparisons of their results against those of other institutions. For example, comparisons can be made (with appropriate vigilance) between responses about the same subject area in different institutions, but it is not valid to compare different subject areas within institutions or to construct league tables of institutions. Recommendation 5 of the Institute of Education report suggests that guidance on appropriate use of the results should be widely distributed and HEFCE intends to take this forward.

125. HEPISG is reviewing the format in which we publish the results of NSS Question 22 (overall satisfaction), because the Institute of Education research warned HEFCE to avoid simplistic comparisons that do not take into account subject mix and student characteristics. HEFCE has already confirmed[31] that, to avoid encouraging these comparisons, 2010 will be the last year that it presents the whole institution results table in the current format. HEPISG will keep the sector informed of developments in the format for publishing 2011 data on overall satisfaction.

Better use of NSS responses to improve quality

126. Institutions act on the results of the NSS to improve provision. The Institute of Education recommended that the Higher Education Academy[32] disseminate more widely the examples it has compiled of how results have been used to improve student experience, to help develop good practice across the sector (recommendation 2). We endorse this recommendation as this would be a helpful addition to existing public information.

127. The Institute of Education research also offers case studies from the NUS of how institutions have worked with students to improve the learning experience. We encourage institutions to use the NSS results as they work with their students in enhancing provision and to do more to communicate to students what improvements have been made as a result of the survey.

Helping prospective students and their advisers to access and use the published information

128. The Oakleigh Consulting/Staffordshire University research highlights that clear and comprehensive information, advice and guidance need to be provided to prospective HE students in schools and colleges. Critical to this is raising awareness of the information sources that are available and how they can be used.

129. Recommendation 1 of that report says that HEFCE, UCAS, the Training and Development Agency for Schools, and the Departments for Education and Business, Innovation and Skills should work together to develop an awareness-raising strategy for careers advisers and teachers in schools and colleges. We are happy to contribute our expertise to any such initiative and to work with schools, colleges and their representative bodies in any way we can to help to raise the profile of information sources for which we are responsible.

130. Offering information, advice and guidance to prospective students, their teachers and families, has been part of the Aimhigher[33] and Lifelong Learning

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31 See www.hefce.ac.uk under News/2010/'Student survey shows high levels of satisfaction among undergraduates'.

32 The Higher Education Academy is an independent organisation that helps universities, colleges and individual academics to improve teaching and learning for students. The four UK higher education funding bodies contribute to its funding, as do institutions (through subscriptions).

33 Aimhigher is a national programme that aims to widen participation in HE by raising awareness, aspirations and attainment among learners from under-represented groups. For more information see www.actiononaccess.org.

Network[34] initiatives, which are well established. We are also aware that institutions have their own outreach activities, but there is still much to do.

131. The Oakleigh Consulting/Staffordshire University report suggests that signposting useful information at a critical point in the UCAS registration process may help to raise applicants' awareness of information that others have found very useful (recommendation 3). We are discussing with UCAS how we might work together on providing information for prospective students during registration, and will include this in our discussions.

132. We would welcome comments on how we might raise the profile of the public information set with prospective students and their advisers.

Consultation question 9

Do you have any other comments on the proposals in this document, or further suggestions for what we might do?

Responding to this consultation

133. Responses to this consultation should be made online by **Monday 7 March 2011** using the response form that can be accessed alongside this document at www.hefce.ac.uk under Publications.

134. This is an open consultation and we welcome views from anyone with an interest in information about higher education.

What happens after the consultation closes?

135. We will analyse the responses to this consultation in March/April 2011 and HEPISG will advise the Boards of HEFCE, UUK and GuildHE on what action should be taken in the light of the responses. QHE Group will also have the opportunity to comment. This will include any necessary further work to reflect developments in respect of student fees and access to other support.

136. We will publish our analysis of responses to the consultation. Additionally, all responses may be disclosed on request, under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act. The Act gives a public right of access to any information held by a public authority, in this case HEFCE. This includes information provided in response to a consultation. We have a responsibility to decide whether any responses, including information about your identity, should be made public or treated as confidential. We can refuse to disclose information only in exceptional circumstances. This means responses to this consultation are unlikely to be treated as confidential except in very particular circumstances. Further information about the Act is available at www.informationcommissioner.gov.uk.

137. In summer 2011 we will publish the consultation outcomes, with recommendations and guidance for action. This will include a descriptive summary of responses.

138. After the outcomes document is published, we will expect institutions to start preparing their revised information sets and to publish them as soon as possible. We envisage that, subject to the outcomes of this consultation, institutions should have the revised information sets in place by academic year 2012-13. They will, from then, be subject to a judgement in QAA review.

[34] Lifelong Learning Networks are partnerships of higher education providers that aim to improve progression from further to higher education. For more information see www.hefce.ac.uk under Widening participation/Lifelong Learning Networks.

Annex A
Summary of consultation questions

Responses should be made online by **Monday 7 March 2011** using the response form that can be accessed alongside this document at www.hefce.ac.uk under Publications.

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

Strongly agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Strongly disagree
Please add any comments:

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

Strongly agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Strongly disagree
Please add any comments:

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

Strongly agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Strongly disagree
Please add any comments:

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

Please add any comments:

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

Strongly agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Strongly disagree
Please add any comments:

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

Strongly agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Strongly disagree
Please add any comments:

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

Strongly agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Strongly disagree
Please add any comments:

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

Strongly agree/Agree/Neither agree nor disagree/Disagree/Strongly disagree
Please add any comments:

Consultation question 9: Do you have any other comments on the proposals in this document, or further suggestions for what we might do?

Please add any comments:

Annex B

Summary of recommendations from the research reports[35]

Oakleigh Consulting and Staffordshire University, 'Understanding the information needs of users of public information about higher education: Report to HEFCE' (August 2010)

This research investigated the needs and wants of the intended users of public information. Prospective students were the main focus but there was some consideration of their advisers and of employers. The researchers interviewed sector stakeholders, careers advisers, employers and representatives from HEIs and FECs. They also surveyed 1,926 current and prospective students by questionnaire and a further 66 in focus groups. Key messages and recommendations from this research were as follows:

1. Raise the profile of the information sources currently available to show prospective students, career advisors and teachers what they offer and how they can be used.

2. Publish as a minimum the 16 information items identified as very useful by prospective students, at course level, in a standard format on the sources most used by all prospective students (institutions' web-sites/prospectuses and UCAS), and make this information available to QAA to be subject to a published judgement on institution's ability to ensure the accuracy and completeness of public information.

3. Incorporate consideration/review of the information items identified as very useful by prospective students as part of the process for setting up a UCAS account. This may entail applicants being prompted with a message that tells them that this information is regarded as very useful by other prospective students, and where they can find the information.

4. Revise the language and terminology used in information presented to prospective students and their non-expert advisors (i.e. family and friends), so that it is aimed at these groups as the primary audience.

5. Retain Unistats for the present as the current 'official' source for comparative information, but put in place plans to review the information it provides and its functionality at a defined point in time (no more than two years) after the institutional-focused publication of a standard set of information is in place. The review should take into account changes in the English and Northern Irish HE sectors and any behavioural changes of users of public information following the introduction of the standard set of information.

Centre for Higher Education Studies at the Institute of Education, 'Enhancing and Developing the National Student Survey: Report to HEFCE' (August 2010)

The purpose of this study was to provide advice on whether and how the NSS should be updated or enhanced, and whether there were additional purposes for which it should be used. The work featured a literature review including consideration of surveys in other countries, and interviews and focus groups with those who designed and managed the NSS and those who used the results. Recommendations are as follows:

1. The NSS should continue to support the three purposes of quality assurance, student choice, and improvement of the student learning experience (quality enhancement).

2. The notable success of the NSS as a means of quality enhancement should be more widely exploited.

3. We [the researchers] encourage QAA to continue to use NSS results in supporting their judgements about confidence through institutional audits, examining not only NSS results, but also how institutions use them for quality assurance and enhancement.

4. NSS results should continue to be made available to assist student choice. However, users should be encouraged to make use of these assets in the context of the much wider and more complex range of information which exists.

5. It is desirable to make available clear guidance about the risks and issues associated with using NSS results for purposes of comparison.

35 Both reports are available in full at www.hefce.ac.uk under Publications/Research & evaluation.

6. The core NSS should remain as it is for the present, with its continuing usefulness and relevance being the subject of annual consideration by HEPISG (see recommendation 18).

7. If there is a need for additional information about students' experiences that is not supplied by the NSS, this should be satisfied through ad hoc surveys rather than by adding questions to the NSS.

8. We [the researchers] recommend a study to explore the feasibility of developing an analytical tool to enable institutions to analyse comments in the free text area of the NSS in a consistent manner.

9. We [the researchers] recommend continuation of the opportunity now provided to institutions to use the optional banks of questions at least until the next major review point. We do not recommend that the choice of the optional banks to be completed should lie with respondents.

10. There should not be a requirement that the results from the optional questions should be made public.

11. We [the researchers] recommend commissioning a periodic independent analysis of the results of the open comments at sector level.

12. We [the researchers] recommend that the NSS should continue to be administered each year.

13. We [the researchers] recommend a feasibility study that would examine an extension of the NSS to include postgraduate taught students.

14. We [the researchers] have noted the strong interest of both staff and students in communicating not only results from the NSS, but also information about subsequent actions taken by institutions. We recommend that this practice is strongly encouraged.

15. The current set of additional items for NHS-funded students appears to be working satisfactorily. It should be subject to further scrutiny as part of the review recommended below (recommendation 17).

16. To safeguard validity, the same publication thresholds should apply to all groups of higher education students [whether in HEIs or FECs].

17. We [the researchers] recommend a comprehensive review of the NSS 10 years after its inception (i.e. in 2015).

18. In determining any interim changes to the NSS we [the researchers] advise that the following procedures and criteria should apply:

- the Higher Education Public Information Steering Group should consider proposals for additions or other changes to the NSS, and proposals for variations in how the results are reported, not more often than once a year
- proposals for new questions should ensure that the items form part of a scale structure and have been subject to a validation process equivalent to that used for the present core and optional items
- proposals for new questions for the core NSS should indicate which scales and items will be deleted to make room for the new ones
- proposals for new questions should focus on aspects of teaching and learning rather than more general aspects of the student experience
- proposals for new questions should articulate the reasons for not using other surveys (such as internal institutional surveys or surveys of graduates like the DLHE survey) in preference to altering the NSS.

Annex C

Background to the quality assurance system and development of the published information set

1. Providing information about higher education courses is an important part of the quality assurance of higher education in England and Northern Ireland. It dates from the beginning of the current quality assurance framework in 2001, when a move away from QAA subject-level review to institutional audit meant there was less information about quality at subject level.

2. The sector's representative bodies (UUK and GuildHE), QAA and HEFCE therefore agreed to develop a specification for a new set of published information about quality and standards. Its purpose was to enable prospective students and their advisers to make informed decisions, to inform the judgements of other stakeholders, and to secure accountability for the use of public funds.

3. The information set originally applied only to HEIs, but was later extended to FECs as part of the IQER method. The development and provision of public information is overseen by HEPISG.

4. The information set has been reviewed and revised over the years[36]; the current version, as introduced in Annex F of 'Review of the quality assurance framework; Phase Two outcomes' (HEFCE 2006/45) is set out in paragraph 13 of this annex.

5. The information for publication includes:

- quantitative data, such as information on numbers of students and qualifications gained, provided by HESA and the Data Service
- results from the DLHE survey and NSS.

These are collected centrally and published on the Unistats web-site (www.unistats.com). Institutions are able to check the data before publication. They also have the option of providing a brief commentary on the site. Data from surveys are only published where there are sufficient students to make the publication of data meaningful.

Institutions are also expected to make certain types of information available on their web-sites, such as the results of internal monitoring procedures.

6. The information on Unistats is particularly aimed at prospective students and their advisers to help them make effective choices about what and where to study. The wider information set as introduced in Annex F of HEFCE 2006/45 was intended to be of use to both prospective and current students and to the wider public, that is, those who are not HE professionals but have a strong interest in HE, notably: current and prospective students; their parents and advisers; employers; and the media.

7. The information is also part of the portfolio of evidence used by QAA in audit and review to assure the quality of the institution's provision. QAA ascertains whether the institution has mechanisms in place to ensure that published data is accurate and complete, and looks at how the institution manages and uses the data. In institutional audit in HEIs, this currently constitutes a 'comment', rather than a judgement, in the audit report. (However, an 'essential' recommendation made in respect of the management information would directly contribute to a 'limited confidence' judgement. This is not a failing judgement, but an institution would be expected to take action to address any weak points.) HEIs view any problems with data management seriously and take steps to address any problems. In IQER in FECs, reviewers form a 'conclusion' on the information set which can lead to a judgement of limited or no confidence.

Reviewing published information about higher education

8. In 2008-09, consideration of public information formed part of several reviews of learning, teaching and quality assurance, including the 2008 National

[36] Further information on the development of the information set can be found in the following publications: 'Information on quality and standards in higher education: Final report of the task group' (HEFCE 2002/15), 'Information on quality and standards in higher education: final guidance' (HEFCE 2003/51) and 'Review of the Quality Assurance Framework: phase two outcomes' (HEFCE 2006/45).

Student Forum report[37], the 2008 NUS Student Experience report[38], and a 2009 report from a sub-group of HEFCE's Teaching, Quality, and the Student Experience (TQSE) Committee[39]. It was also considered as part of wide-ranging research into 'Students and Universities' by the House of Commons Select Committee for Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills[40].

9. These reports, and government responses to them, found that although there was plenty of information available that was useful to prospective students, it was spread over many different sources and was not always accessible. The TQSE sub-committee also found that the distinction between information that is useful to prospective applicants and present students on the one hand, and for sector-specific quality assurance purposes on the other, has been blurred. Some of the information presently required by both HEFCE and QAA may be in a format that is not well suited to either student information or quality assurance, thus raising questions about the purpose of collecting or publishing it.

10. The TQSE sub-committee made several recommendations with regard to public information, including:

- HEPISG should review the efficiency, effectiveness and use of public information
- research should be carried out into understanding information users' needs
- as a result of this research, a revised information set in an appropriate common format should be produced by all institutions
- the status of public information in institutional audit should be upgraded from 'comment' to 'judgement', subject to the provision of a sector-wide, comparable information set.

11. In July 2010, HEFCE, DEL, UUK and GuildHE published the outcomes of a consultation on the future of quality assurance of higher education in England and Northern Ireland (HEFCE 2010/17). This included an agreed set of overarching principles and objectives for the quality assurance system. One objective is to 'provide authoritative, publicly accessible information on academic quality and standards in higher education'.

12. HEFCE 2010/17 also outlines characteristics of a revised institutional audit method. In response to the TQSE sub-committee's recommendations, these included proposals for changing how public information is considered in institutional audit, namely making it subject to a formal judgement rather than a comment. HEFCE 2010/17 noted that this would be subject to sector agreement on the data that the institution makes available to inform prospective students and other interested parties about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards. Seeking this agreement is the purpose of the current consultation.

Information set currently produced by institutions

13. The following information is currently produced by institutions (based on Annex F of HEFCE 2006/45 and current IQER requirements):

a. Provided on Unistats web-site:

- HESA data on:
  - entry qualifications/tariff points
  - students continuing/completing/leaving without awards
  - class of first degree achieved
- results of the DLHE survey, including information on leavers entering employment/further study and common job types

37 National Student Forum, 'Annual report 2008', available at www.bis.gov.uk under Policies/Higher education/Students/Student listening programme/National Student Forum.

38 National Union of Students, 2008, 'NUS student experience report', available from www.nus.org.uk

39 'Report of the sub-committee for Teaching, Quality, and the Student Experience: HEFCE's statutory responsibility for quality assurance' (HEFCE 2009/40).

40 House of Commons Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee, 'Students and Universities: Eleventh Report of Session 2008-09', available from www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmdius/170/170i.pdf

- NSS results
- links to QAA reports
- institutions' commentaries on the data and links to their web-sites (optional).

b. Provided on institutional web-sites or to be provided on request:

- information on institutional context, for example:
  - — mission statement
  - — sections of corporate plan
  - — statement of quality assurance policies and processes
  - — learning and teaching strategy
  - — higher education strategy (for FECs)
- information about the quality and standards of programmes, for example:
  - — prospectuses, programme guides, module descriptors or similar
  - — programme specifications
  - — information about procedures and outcomes for programme approval, monitoring and review
  - — details of accreditation from professional, statutory and regulatory bodies
  - — arrangements for assessment and external examination procedures
  - — results of internal student surveys
  - — policies for student complaints, appeals and representations
- information about partnership agreements and links with awarding bodies/delivery partners
- information about links with employers.

Annex D

Principles and objectives for the quality assurance system

After discussion in the joint consultation 'Future arrangements for quality assurance in England and Northern Ireland' (HEFCE 2009/47), it was agreed that the following principles and objectives should underpin the revised system to assure quality and standards in HE:

a. Provide authoritative, publicly accessible information on academic quality and standards in higher education.

i Provide timely and readily accessible public information, on a consistent and comparable basis, on the quality and standards of the educational provision for which each institution takes responsibility.

ii Report results on a robust, consistent and comparable basis that meets public expectations.

b. Command public, employer and other stakeholder confidence.

i Ensure that any provision that falls below national expectations can be detected and the issues speedily addressed.

ii Apply transparent processes and judgements, and function in a rigorous, intelligible, proportionate and responsive way.

iii Assure the threshold standards of awards from higher education institutions in England and Northern Ireland, wherever and however they are delivered.

iv Explain clearly where responsibilities lie for the quality and standards of provision and how they are secured.

c. Meet the needs of the funding bodies and of institutions.

i Enable the funding bodies to discharge their statutory responsibilities to assure the quality of the programmes they fund.

ii Recognise the role of institutions as independent autonomous bodies responsible for their own quality management systems and for the standards of awards made in their name.

iii Enable institutions to discharge their corporate responsibilities, by providing them with information on how well their own internal systems for quality management and setting and maintaining standards are functioning, and identifying areas for improvement.

iv Where relevant, recognise the role of employers as co-deliverers of higher education, taking the quality assurance requirements of such provision into account.

d. Meet the relevant needs of all students.

i Have current and prospective students' interests at its heart, underlying all of the other principles.

ii Engage students in the quality process, whether at course, institutional or national level.

iii Focus on the enhancement of the students' learning experiences without compromising the accountability element of quality assurance.

e. Rely on robust evidence-based independent judgement.

i Incorporate external reviews run by an operationally independent body (the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education) and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies.

ii Incorporate evidence from institutions' own internal quality assurance processes, including those which involve external participants.

iii Recognise and support the important role of external examining.

f. Support a culture of quality enhancement within institutions.

i Apply a process of external review, both by academic peers and by students, rather than inspection by a professional inspectorate.

ii Include processes based on rigorous institutional self-evaluation.

iii Promote quality enhancement in institutions.

iv Enable the dissemination of good practice.

g. Work effectively and efficiently.

i Operate efficiently, in order to avoid disproportionate use of institutional effort and resources which could otherwise be directed to the delivery of frontline student teaching.

ii Rely on partnership and co-operation between the institutions, Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education and the funding bodies.

iii Address both quality (appropriate and effective teaching, support, assessment and opportunities for learning provided for students) and standards (levels of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an award) as two distinct but interlinked concepts.

iv Work on the principle of collecting information once to use in many ways.

v Acknowledge that while the quality assurance system applies to England and Northern Ireland only, it is underpinned by reference tools that are UK-wide.

vi Adhere to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (encompassing internal and external quality assurance).

vii Maintain sufficient flexibility and responsiveness to meet changing demands and public priorities in a timely manner.

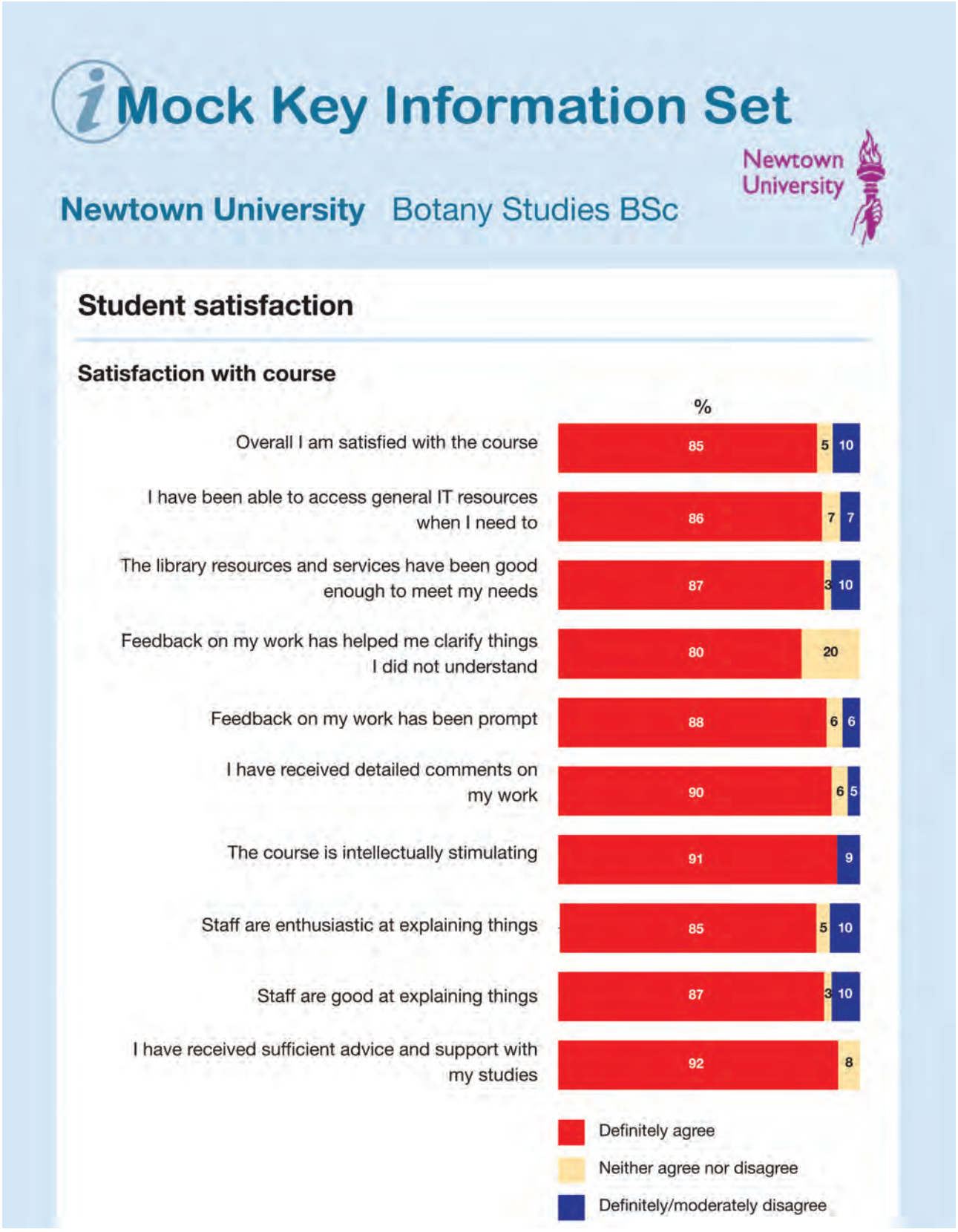
viii Complement and avoid duplication with, so far as possible, other assurance processes in higher education (for example Ofsted; professional, statutory and regulatory bodies).

For more information on this list and its development, see HEFCE 2009/47 and 'Future arrangements for quality assurance in England and Northern Ireland: Outcomes of consultation' (HEFCE 2010/17).

Annex E

Mock Key Information Set

Please note this is for illustrative purposes only and the final version would be subject to the results of this consultation, as well as testing with users and institutions and further graphic design work. It will need revisiting in order to ensure that it fully reflects proposed changes to student fees and financial support.

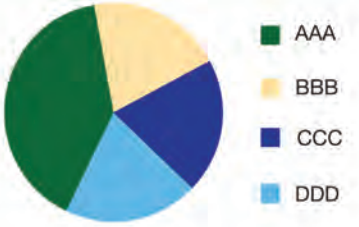


Newtown University Botany Studies BSc

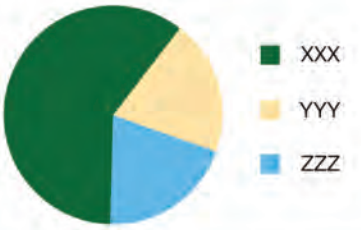
KIS

Teaching, learning and assessment

Learning and teaching methods used on this course
– This is based on a 40-hour week (full-time study, term time only)

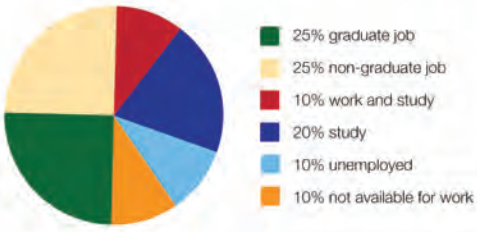


Assessment methods used on this course



Employment/study six months after leaving course

Employment and study
– For those in employment, 25 per cent were in graduate jobs



Average full-time salary	£16,000
Professional bodies that recognise this course	The Council of Botanists – please see www.Botanists.org.uk

Newtown University Botany Studies BSc

Bursaries and accommodation

Costs of halls	£67 per week - £124 per week, for more info please go to our residences pages: www.newtown.ac.uk/residences
Bursaries available	We provide bursaries ranging from £250 to £3000 Max household income to be eligible for our minimum bursary is £44,000 To check whether you are eligible for a bursary please visit www.newtown.ac.uk/bursaries

Student union

Student union	Student union 2010 election turn-out	**23%**
	Number of student union-run clubs and societies	**145**
	For more info on the student union go to: www.studentsunion.org	

Annex F
Proposed new information set

Information item	Level of information
Information provided in the KIS	
Student satisfaction with course (NSS results)	By course (named award) where possible, otherwise aggregated in the following order: Course current year Course latest two years JACS level 3 current year JACS level 3 latest two years JACS level 2 current year JACS level 2 latest two years JACS level 1 current year JACS level 1 latest two years*
Information on student union (from NUS annual returns survey)	Institution
Cost of student residences	Institution
Information on bursaries	Institution or course as appropriate
Maximum household income for eligibility for a bursary	Institution
Destinations of students in the first year after completing their course (including employment and further study)	Course level or aggregated as above
Proportion of students employed in a full-time professional or managerial job in first year after completing course	Course level or aggregated as above
Average salary in the first year after completing this course	Course level or aggregated as above
Professional bodies which recognise this course	Course level
Number of hours' study expected per week and mix of learning and teaching methods	Course level
Mix of assessment by different methods	Course level
Wider information to be provided by institution	
Information on institutional context: • mission statement • corporate plan • statement of quality assurance policies and processes • learning and teaching strategy • higher education strategy (for FECs) • partnership agreements • employability statements	Institutional level, latest version

Information about aspects of course/awards (not available in the KIS): • prospectuses, programme guides, module descriptors or similar • programme specifications • results of internal student surveys • links with employers • partnership agreements, links with awarding bodies/delivery partners	Course/programme level
Information on the quality and standards of programmes, for example: • procedures and outcomes for programme approval, monitoring and review • external examination procedures • policies for student complaints, appeals and representations	May be at subject, department/faculty or institution level depending on particular institution's arrangements

Information provided on Unistats	
HESA data on: • entry qualifications/tariff points • students continuing/completing/leaving without awards • class of first degree achieved	By course (named award) where possible, otherwise aggregated in the following order: Course current year Course latest two years JACS level 3 current year JACS level 3 latest two years JACS level 2 current year JACS level 2 latest two years JACS level 1 current year JACS level 1 latest two years
Results of DLHE survey: • Leavers by activity • Numbers entering graduate level jobs • Common job types for leavers	As above
NSS results	As above
Links to QAA reports	Institution, most recent report
Institutions' commentaries on the data and links to their web-sites (optional)	Course and institution level

Annex G
List of abbreviations

DEL	Department for Employment and Learning (in Northern Ireland)
DLHE	Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (survey)
FEC	Further education college
HE	Higher education
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI	Higher education institution
HEPISG	Higher Education Public Information Steering Group
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
IQER	Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review
JACS	Joint Academic Coding System
KIS	Key Information Set
NSS	National Student Survey
NUS	National Union of Students
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
QHE Group	Quality in HE Group
TQSE	Teaching, quality and the student experience
UUK	Universities UK

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