



Thematic enquiries into concerns about academic quality and standards in higher education in England

Final report - April 2009

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Executive summary

Introduction

This is a final report on the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA's) 'thematic enquiries into concerns about academic quality and standards in higher education' (the Enquiry). The report refers to work undertaken between mid-December 2008 and the end of March 2009.

The main body of the report comprises a commentary on the five areas of interest identified from articles and comments made in the media over the summer of 2008:

- student workload and contact hours
- language requirements for the acceptance of international students
- recruitment and admission practices for international students
- use of external examiners
- assessment practices, including institutions' arrangements for setting the academic standards of their awards.

Under each of these broad headings is a summary of statements and comment made in the media, discussed alongside other material gathered during the course of the investigation. This material includes findings from QAA audits and published papers, work undertaken by other bodies, and opinions gathered during a series of interviews conducted with representatives of key organisations and focused discussions with targeted groups of stakeholders arranged by QAA for the purpose of the Enquiry. An analysis of written and uncorrected oral evidence, relevant to the five themes of this project, submitted to the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Select Committee (IUSSC) inquiry into 'students and universities', and published on its website in March 2009, is also included. Annex A provides a list of the information sources consulted. Annex B describes the method used for the Enquiry, including a list of the organisations whose representatives were interviewed and the focus groups.

The Enquiry makes no attempt to either capture or represent evidence, comment or information on those areas where academic standards and quality are clearly and confidently assured and good practice is readily demonstrated. The purpose of the Enquiry is to provide an objective evidence-based assessment of current practices in a narrower range of areas in order to:

- inform the clear identification of *prima facie* cases where there are, and are not, areas of legitimate concern
- identify those areas that need to be addressed in order to safeguard the academic standards and quality of English higher education
- respond appropriately to perceptions about concerns regarding academic quality and standards.

Findings

Student workload and contact hours

Investigation into student workload and contact hours reveals a range of views on the concerns in this area. The publication of two reports by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) in 2006 and 2007 elicited considerable comment. The reports highlighted apparent differences in students' contact hours and workload in the UK and in Europe, with European students reported to experience more contact with academic

staff and to undertake more study in total than their UK peers. The HEPI reports also revealed differences between subject disciplines and institutions in the nature and degree of contact with staff across the UK higher education sector.

Responses to the HEPI reports from higher education institutions have highlighted the different models of higher education followed in the UK and Europe, with the UK model emphasising students' autonomy and their responsibilities for their own learning. Some comments in the media and other sources about the UK model are sceptical that the sum of contact hours, and the learning undertaken by students on their own, is sufficient to enable them to reach graduate standards of achievement.

Several information sources emphasise that the absolute amount of time that students spend with staff is only one part of the **learning** activities undertaken by students. Current debates about contemporary higher education that tend to over-generalise the differences in contact hours between subject disciplines were reported, by some, to be unhelpful. Few commentators, however, have addressed the argument that the total learning effort of UK students matches that of most continental European countries.

While national surveys of student satisfaction do not report a widespread concern over contact hours, a few of the online students' blogs examined contain negative comments from students, particularly in the arts and humanities, about the amount of contact they have with staff. A perception that low rates of contact with staff represents poor 'value for money' in a fee-paying environment is apparent in some of the student blogs and from the focus group discussion held with students.

There is evidence to indicate that the following actions are required:

- a national discussion, at a discipline level, about the range of contact hours, in the context of the full range of learning activities, modes and programme type, appropriate to the student learning experience and sufficient to enable degree standards to be achieved
- provision by institutions of readily available and clear information about the nature and amount of contact students may expect with staff in respect of individual study programmes, and the expectations that the institutions have of students as independent learners.

International students - admission and language requirements

The Enquiry has looked at evidence and perceptions surrounding the recruitment and admission of international students, including matters to do with English language competence and ongoing support more generally. It is clear that the higher education community welcomes the role international students play in UK higher education, but it is also clear that under some circumstances difficulties can, and do, arise.

Specific challenges have been identified with regard to the admission of students with English language skills that are either insufficient to deal with the demands of their programme of study or which have the potential to have a detrimental effect on the learning experience of all students. While institutions recognise the importance of providing English language and other support for international students on a continuing basis, there appears to be some variation in the availability and/or effectiveness of such support mechanisms.

There is evidence to indicate that the following actions are required:

- a review of the efficacy and appropriateness of established schemes for testing the English language skills of international students, in determining English language competence and support needs before acceptance on to higher education programmes and while studying in the UK
- institutions, either individually or collectively, should provide clear guidance to international students and their advisers about higher education teaching, learning and assessment practices in the UK and, further, both facilitate international students' understanding of these expectations and support them in making the transition to studying in the UK
- a general statement or guidance about the support arrangements that international students should expect from higher education institutions, including English language support and personal and academic support, be developed.

Use of external examiners

External examiners are held in high regard by almost all those in higher education and many regard the external examining process as a keystone in supporting academic standards and quality in the UK. Analysis of a range of information sources suggests a lack of understanding beyond those who regularly participate in the process about its intentions, operation and role. More particularly, institutional processes for the identification and appointment of external examiners appear to lack transparency to observers outside higher education (and some within it).

Analysis of the collated information suggests that although institutions are diligent and thorough in their engagement with external examiners, a number of cases have arisen where external examiners are reported to feel compromised by the demands placed upon them and/or where they feel that their reports have not been given sufficiently serious consideration by the host institution.

There is evidence to indicate that the following actions are required:

- the external examining process should be made more transparent and should be better explained in order to facilitate understanding of its intentions, limitations, operation and role
- there should be further discussion at national level and development of appropriate guidance about the procedures used to identify, train and support external examiners
- a nationally agreed and mandatory set of minimum expectations for the role of all external examiners should be developed and implemented.

Assessment practices, including institutions' arrangements for setting the academic standards of their awards

A number of sector-wide bodies and working groups have in recent years undertaken projects, conducted reviews and made recommendations related to institutional assessment practices, including institutions' arrangements for setting the academic standards of their awards. QAA's audit and review reports typically make more recommendations linked to assessment than to any other area.

The prominence of recommendations linked to assessment does not signify that no work has been done by institutions to address perceived problems, but it does show that this is a dynamic and challenging area that is central to both learning and

academic standards. Institutions devote considerable time, thought and resource to the assessment of students.

Most institutions have developed a range of assessment methods and introduced criterion-based marking schemes linked to the intended learning outcomes of the programme. This has made more transparent what a student has to achieve in order to progress or to receive a higher education award. Nevertheless, variation in the way that institutional assessment regulations are applied by individual schools or departments (with potential impacts on parity and fairness) has attracted criticism.

Some academics, writing on assessment policy and practice in higher education, have expressed the view that the rationales for particular approaches to assessment (and degree classification) need to be more open to scrutiny and comparison, with a view to encouraging good practice and discouraging approaches to assessment that are inappropriate or unfair.

There is widespread criticism of the degree classification system across the information sources analysed so far. Criticisms from outside higher education focus on awards classified at particular levels (for example, a first class honours award) that are notionally for performance at the same level but which are widely acknowledged to be very different in character.

There is evidence to indicate that the following actions are required:

- a review of assessment practice supported by developmental activities aimed at improving the robustness and consistency of assessment and classification practices within and between institutions
- clarification and explanation of the reasons for, and meaning of, variation in particular approaches to assessment (and degree classification).

General comments

During the course of the Enquiry, several underlying themes have emerged.

First, the structure and function of higher education in the UK have changed considerably since the 1960s and the speed of change has been particularly notable over the last two decades. 'Massification' of higher education has been accompanied by changes in the nature of the student population. Institutions have responded in different ways and at different speeds. Many outside higher education, and some within it, appear to be unaware of the extent and nature of some of the changes institutions have made as they have transformed higher education into an activity suited to a more diverse student body.

Secondly, in 2008 a limited number of original articles appearing in the media about higher education attracted comments that tended to be repeated in separate web forums, discussion threads or when new articles appeared. Such reporting and response may not necessarily be indicative of a widespread concern or systemic problem.

Thirdly, among the general public and media commentators there does not appear to be a common understanding of what the terms 'academic standards' or 'academic quality' mean. Many commentators in the media have taken the view that 'standards are falling', based on a perception that graduates are less able to perform in certain areas than they once were, or that it is easier to obtain a degree than it once was.

The higher education community, working with QAA, has agreed a set of threshold levels for attaining various higher education awards (*The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ)). Institutions calibrate their provision against the statements of levels of achievement in the FHEQ. However, knowledge and understanding of the FHEQ, the generic expectations in the subject benchmark statements and other reference tools used by institutions in setting and maintaining academic standards and academic quality appear to be low among commentators in the media, and from other sources, and among some in the higher education community itself.

There is evidence to indicate that the following actions are required:

- development of mechanisms for promoting a wider knowledge and understanding of the national framework and tools used by institutions in setting and maintaining academic standards and quality
- development of mechanisms for key higher education bodies and stakeholders to communicate a common and shared understanding of the principles and purposes of a broad Quality Assurance Framework for assuring public confidence in the setting and management of academic standards and quality
- further development of proportionate, timely and responsive external quality assurance review methods that use both primary and secondary sources of evidence and support institutions' continuous improvement in the management of academic standards and the enhancement of quality
- development of more effective and widely available ways of informing the general public about standards and quality in higher education and of the fundamental differences between secondary, further and higher education.

Final report

Introduction

1 This paper is the final report on QAA's thematic enquiries into concerns about academic quality and standards in higher education in England (the Enquiry). It outlines the context in which the enquiries have been undertaken, describes the method used and provides a commentary on the key themes identified as a result of this work.

2 Commentary around the five themes refers to material gathered and analysed between mid-December 2008 (when the Enquiry was agreed with the Higher Education Funding Council for England ((HEFCE)) and the end of March 2008. Reference is made to media articles and commentary, published reports, notes from interviews with individuals representing key organisations and focus group discussions, and written evidence submitted to the Innovation, Universities Science and Skills Select Committee (IUSSSC) and published in its web pages. Annex A provides a list of the information sources consulted. Annex B describes the method used for the Enquiry, including a list of the organisations whose representatives were interviewed and details of the focus groups convened by QAA for the Enquiry.

Background to the Enquiry

3 Following expressions of concern in the media about degree standards and other quality-related matters in June 2008, QAA proposed a programme of work to look into these concerns. An action plan was approved by QAA's Board in July 2008. HEFCE agreed to provide funding for the part of the action plan which comprised enquiries into specific topics highlighted by the media. The details of these enquiries were developed between August and October and the proposal and funding was agreed with HEFCE in December 2008. That proposal was for a suite of enquiries into the following matters as they relate to higher education institutions in England:

- student workload and contact hours
- language requirements for the acceptance of international students
- recruitment and admission practices for international students
- use of external examiners
- assessment practices.

4 The Enquiry makes no attempt to either capture or represent evidence, comment or information on where academic standards and quality are clearly and confidently assured and good practice is demonstrated. The purpose of the Enquiry is to provide an objective, evidence-based assessment of current practices in a range of areas as possibly being of concern in order to:

- inform the clear identification of *prima facie* cases where there are, and are not, areas of legitimate concern
- identify those areas that need to be addressed in order to safeguard academic standards and the quality of English higher education
- respond appropriately to perceptions about concerns regarding academic quality and standards.

5 The Enquiry has drawn together and analysed the following sources of evidence:

- published and unpublished reports, papers, lectures and speeches
- press and media broadcasts, articles, and comments from readers
- notes of interviews conducted by QAA with representatives of key organisations
- notes of focus group discussions organised by QAA with senior academic managers, students and academics.

6 The Enquiry has collated this material and information to establish whether there is evidence of serious and systemic shortcomings in the practices of English higher education institutions in the five areas listed in paragraph 3. The action plan agreed by QAA's Board in June 2008 (see paragraph 3) established that the following principles should underpin any recommendations arising from this work:

- a cross-sector analysis of evidence of a possible area of concern should precede any general action to deal with it
- possible areas of concern should not be identified for general enquiry without some clear evidence of possible problems in a number of institutions; in other cases the QAA Causes for Concern procedure should be used
- media interest and stories may be used as supporting evidence in the identification of a concern, but will not alone justify action.

Approach

7 For each of the five areas of enquiry, the following activities were undertaken:

- analysis of media and published and unpublished sources of information and evidence
- collection of information and evidence - interviews
- collection of information and evidence - focus groups.

8 The discussion that follows brings together the main points raised in the various sources and includes an analysis of the timing of articles published on given topics, the issues raised, and an appraisal of the volume of comment where articles were published on websites and elicited follow-up letters or postings.

9 From 2002 to 2006, QAA's Institutional audits reported on how universities and other institutions managed the quality of the learning opportunities they provided for students and how they safeguarded the standards of the academic awards they made (or for which they were responsible to another university or college). Over the four years, during the course of 129 audits, there were opportunities for QAA audit teams to speak directly to approximately 10,000 individual students and a similar number of staff. In each audit, students also had the opportunity to make a formal written submission through their representative body, where they could highlight any areas of concern.

10 Every audit has led to both commendations for good practice and recommendations for action, categorised as being either 'essential', 'advisable' or 'desirable', and these are almost invariably accepted and acted upon. This contrasts markedly with the small number of individual complainants who have written to QAA and with the relatively few written submission to the IUSSSC inquiry into 'students and universities'.

Findings

Student workload and contact hours

11 The Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) publishes analyses of policy matters relevant to higher education. In 2006 HEPI published the results of a survey looking at student contact hours and the amount of time spent on independent study across a range of disciplines (*The academic experience of students in English universities*). The report showed that both the amount of contact students have with academic staff and their total workload varied across disciplines (science subjects typically involved a higher student workload than some subjects within art, design and the humanities, which typically involved the lowest overall student workloads). The report went on to note that there was variation between different types of institution within individual disciplines in the amount of time students spent studying. Commenting on this finding, HEPI noted that the 'extent of the differences is remarkable and raises important policy questions. In particular it raises questions about what it means to have a degree from an English university, if a degree can apparently be obtained with such very different levels of effort'.

12 The 2006 HEPI study was repeated in 2007 and the results found to be largely concordant. This second report appeared at a time when interest in the academic experience of students in UK universities compared to those in other countries was high on account of the emerging Bologna Process and the 'internationalisation' of higher education. The report included a commentary on comparisons between the amount of study undertaken by UK undergraduate students and their peers in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Similar comparisons between the amount of time spent studying and contact hours of UK students compared to students in higher education institutions overseas were also made in a recent study by the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI) (*The comparative study experience*, 2008).

Student workload, contact hours and the relationship to learning opportunities

13 Publication of the HEPI reports in particular stimulated debate among academics and policy makers about students' contact time with staff and generated media interest in this matter. Before publication of the HEPI reports, media stories on contact hours appear to have been relatively few, generally confined to particular institutions and usually linked to a perceived change in what students had seen as the course or mode of delivery they had expected. Participants of the 'student' focus group also reported some concern over the extent to which an institution can alter its offering post-enrolment, including reductions in the amount of contact with staff, without the programme needing to be revalidated.

14 Discussion and comment about 'contact time' or 'contact hours' between students and academic staff began to gain attention in the media in 2008. Original comment and media commentary on the discussions have been incorporated into the analysis for the Enquiry. In the 20 blogs analysed, nine (mostly student written) contain comments about contact time. In these, the comments are mostly from humanities and social science students and appear to be polarised between those from students happy to embrace the concept of self-directed or autonomous learning (about half) and those for whom formal contact hours are seen as representing poor value for money (based on the implicit assumption that low rates of contact represent poor value for money). Those comfortable with the notion of self-directed or autonomous learning add to their contact with staff the time they spend preparing for tutorials, other meetings with staff, and undertaking independent work.

15 A perception that contact hours have fallen in recent years within the arts and humanities was shared by participants of the student focus group. In this group, participants reported some dissatisfaction with current arrangements, including the amount of scheduled contact time, access to staff, and access to general and specialised learning facilities. Students expressed particular dissatisfaction with the opportunities for one-to-one discussion with academic staff about their work. Members of the student focus group reported that they would particularly welcome more timely and effective feedback from academic staff on assessed work.

16 There were references to 'contact time' or 'contact hours' in the reports of seven of the first 59 Institutional audits conducted between autumn 2004 and summer 2006: none of these suggested that students had expressed concerns to the audit team or in their written submissions about the level of tuition and academic support they were receiving.

17 Further, a survey of students' contact hours, total workloads and students' satisfaction with their experience was also included in the 2008 *NUS Student Experience Report*. The report noted that '75% of students [surveyed] believe that the contact hours [they receive] were sufficient'.

Relationship between contact hours, study time and achievement of learning outcomes

18 Where articles on contact hours for students studying in the UK are published in newspapers, periodicals and their associated websites and comments are invited, these comments often express surprise that students can achieve degree-level outcomes with the particular contact hours cited. However, participants in each of the focus group discussions expressed mixed views about 'contact hours'. Academics and subject specialists agreed that contact with academic staff forms only one part of overall pedagogy and an emphasis on contact with academic staff alone when referring to student achievement is not meaningful, or helpful. That is not to say that contact is not important, rather opinion is varied about its level of significance. All participants reported that recognition of the diversity of students' learning needs should be considered in discussions of 'contact hours' within and between different institutions.

19 There are discussions of, or references to, students' 'contact time' or 'contact hours' with academic staff in 14 of the 93 written submissions made to the IUSSSC. Several submissions made the point that there is no necessary correlation between the number of hours that a student studies in the presence of a member of staff and the outcome that the student subsequently achieves. This reiterates a point made in the HEPI 2006 and 2007 reports.

20 While accepting the argument that information about size of teaching groups and contact time will not necessarily tell an observer 'much about the quality of the experience the student will receive, not least because so much depends upon what the student brings to the party', one submission to the IUSSSC argues that 'long term resourcing pressures' and the greater prominence given to research by institutions and their staff has led to 'less personal interaction between students and staff which many see as essential to the quality of student learning, and not only in higher education'.

21 Interviews conducted with representatives of key organisations working in higher education suggest that the recent focus on contact hours had produced a distorted view of the nature of the academic student experience in higher education. Participants reported that the absolute amount of time that students spend with staff

was only one part of the **learning** activities undertaken by students and that learning also included, among other things, time spent on independent study, laboratory work or practice-based training.

22 Participants also reported that current debates tend to over-generalise between subject disciplines where disciplinary traditions are well-established and well-understood by academics; students from science, technology and engineering disciplines, for example, will spend large proportions of time engaged in laboratory work or in practice-based training, supervised by staff, while students of arts and humanities subjects will be expected to undertake a significant amount of independent study and self-directed work. However, all participants in focus group discussions (academics, registrars and students) commented that the reasons for the differences in modes of delivery and consequently 'contact hours' between subject disciplines may not be clearly or well understood by students and commentators outside higher education.

Nature of higher education and the student learning experience

23 The nature of higher education and the type of contact students can expect with staff was also raised by interviewees as an important factor that was poorly captured in the current debates (that is, whether contact is considered to derive from lectures, small group tutorials, supervised laboratory work or email access to staff). Accordingly, almost all interviewees noted the lack of a clear and shared understanding of what is meant by 'contact time/hours'. Discussions did not suggest that interviewees believed that there was an absolute or optimal amount of contact with academic staff for degrees in particular disciplines, but instead demonstrated a belief in the importance of individual institutions and programme leaders being able to determine the structure of a programme in line with its aims, the needs of the student cohort and the experience of academic staff.

24 Interviewees reported that it was particularly important to provide students with a clear understanding of the academic experience offered by institutions and the reasons why programme structure (including the nature and level of contact with academic staff) varies between institutions and disciplines. Interviewees generally reported that institutions could do more to explain the academic culture to applicants and could work with students to clarify expectations (both those of the student and those of the institution) once enrolled on a particular programme of study. Participants in the academics focus group, however, suggested that sufficient information about a programme and its intended mode of delivery is made available to prospective students, but that it is not always read or understood.

25 In its submission to IUSSSC, one institution argues that 'it is the space allowed for independent learning which characterises the UK higher education system. Provided that such independent learning and development is properly guided and supported by institutions, including access to substantial library and online resources, the outcome is a level of intellectual independence which cannot be delivered through the mere transmission of the syllabus through face-to-face direct teaching'.

26 Several submissions note, however, that where students receive higher contact hours (and particularly one-to-one support from academic staff) students with poorer qualifications on admission achieve a better outcome from their higher education experience and tend to complete their studies.

27 The response from UK representative bodies and agencies such as QAA, the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and HEFCE to the HEPI reports of **relative**

measures of student workload has been to emphasise the importance of learning outcomes, arguing that if the student can demonstrate that they have attained the intended learning outcomes of a programme, the means through which this has been achieved (including the number of hours of tuition and private study) should not be an overriding concern. From the media responses and commentaries (including commentaries by those describing themselves as academics), the notion of learning outcomes being at the heart of student achievement does not seem to be well embedded and in some cases is regarded with scepticism.

Comparison with other European countries

28 Some representatives of organisations interviewed by QAA for the Enquiry made specific mention of the implications of the current debate about contact hours in higher education in England for the reputation of UK higher education in Europe and globally. It was generally recognised that students in other European countries experience a higher absolute number of contact hours on average, but noted that this area is poorly understood and poorly explained. Specifically, interviewees pointed to differences in the nature of the student body between different countries and in the nature of the contact itself. Interviewees commented that the UK should not be complacent in any debate that has potential implications for the reputation of UK higher education overseas and that the nature of UK higher education (including student workload and contact hours) could be explained more effectively than it is at present.

29 It was suggested by a number of interviewees that perceptions of 'value for money' underpinned many of the current debates about contact hours. Despite concerns over possible perceptions of value for money, many of the bodies interviewed noted that recent student satisfaction surveys (the National Student Survey and the 2008 *NUS Student Experience Report*) report a high level of satisfaction with the academic experience and that none raise issues specifically in connection with contact hours. Similarly high levels of satisfaction were reported in student satisfaction surveys focussing on the academic experience of overseas students (the International Student Barometer produced by i-graduate and work done by Opinionpanel and the UK Council for International Student Affairs ((UKCISA)) were mentioned).

Recommendations

30 Based on the information gathered and the analysis undertaken, there is evidence to indicate that the following actions are required:

- a national discussion, at a discipline level, about the range of contact hours, in the context of the full range of learning activities, modes and programme type, appropriate to the student learning experience and sufficient to enable degree standards to be achieved
- provision by institutions of readily available and clear information about the nature and amount of contact students may expect with staff in respect of individual study programmes, and the expectations that the institutions have of students as independent learners.

Language requirements for the acceptance of international students studying in England

Institutions' arrangements for supporting international students

31 Since 1992, academic audits conducted under the auspices of the Higher Education Quality Council (the predecessor body to QAA) and, since 1997, by QAA, have commented on institutions' arrangements for supporting international students.

The emphasis in the enquiries undertaken by audit teams is on establishing whether institutions provide fair and accurate information to international students (as applicants) about the facilities and support on their campuses and that, once registered, the particular needs of international students for academic and personal support are recognised and met. Between 2002 and 2006, six Institutional audit reports commented in specific terms on English language testing for international applicants, describing internal diagnostic and support arrangements.

32 QAA published two papers in its *Outcomes from institutional audit* series, (papers that bring together findings and recommendations by theme from published audit reports), in 2006 and 2008, looking at evidence from a total of 129 Institutional audits on institutions' arrangements for international students. Both found much good practice in the way that institutions were supporting their international students. The second paper observed that, overall, 'the audit reports show that institutions are aware of the substantial learning and cultural issues involved in recruiting large numbers of international students, many of whose first language is not English, and are adopting strategic approaches to their support'. The paper also noted that the number of international students was rapidly growing in many institutions and in some (mainly in London) there was now almost parity in the number of international students and those from the UK.

33 Throughout 2007, press and media reports increasingly focused on the link between the admission of growing numbers of international students to universities and a range of difficulties being encountered by the students and the staff teaching them. One article, for example, reported that students had complained to their university about the 'lack of support for overseas students' (and an overall reduction in contact hours), while two weeks later the same publication, citing material taken from an internal institutional discussion forum, reported that 'international students with poor English language skills have led to a "plague of plagiarism", and their presence is "downgrading" the experience of home students as lecturers have to give basic English lessons...!.

34 A survey aimed at benchmarking institutions' support for international students in relation to their academic and pastoral needs was undertaken by the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) in 2007 with financial support from the Prime Minister's Initiative for International Education (PMI). UKCISA's survey noted that most institutions provide a range of services to international students, from pre-departure information to immigration advice, study support, and the opportunity for participation in social and cultural activities. However, around the issue of language, 62 per cent of institutions surveyed (66) said that they will admit students on to programmes with less than the minimum stated language requirements. A large proportion of the institutions surveyed (73 per cent) offered in-session tuition in language or study skills for all students; 17 per cent of institutions offered such support for some students and eight per cent reported that they did not offer any such support.

Assessment of English language competency

35 An article published in the press in 2006 argued that the minimum International English Language Testing System (IELTS) scores required by many universities were not appropriate 'to ensure students could keep pace with the expectations of academics, particularly on postgraduate courses', and that the adoption of low 'language requirements [was] the result of international students' status as a "lucrative source of income" for institutions in the UK'. The author argued that universities needed 'to provide a greater level of support to enable overseas

students to deal with the challenges of daily teaching as well as to help them to undertake dissertations and larger enquiries in English'.

36 All representatives of organisations interviewed for the Enquiry considered competency in English to be an important factor in the recruitment and admission of international students. Interviewees were aware of the use by institutions of the IELTS, although some noted that not all institutions found the system to be as helpful as it could be in determining students' language capabilities. Interviewees noted that English language requirements for a programme of study might be particular to the academic context and even to the discipline being studied. Participants in the 'academic' and the 'student' focus groups (which included international student representatives) commented that IELTS scores do not necessarily correlate well with a student's ability to understand conversational English, including local dialects and accents, or their ability to understand subject-specific vocabulary. It was further noted that international students beginning a programme of study in the UK may benefit from ongoing support to enable them to develop their language skills.

37 Participants in the focus group discussions noted that international students are not a homogeneous group; the issues discussed in relation to international students' understanding of UK academic culture and their ability to communicate verbally and in writing in English were reported to be more pronounced for students from some countries than others. Some institutional strategies involve the recruitment of students solely from countries and/or regions with which the institution had a partnership agreement, while others recruit students from areas in which the institution has established an overseas office where its own staff are resident to both market the institution's courses and assess the qualifications and 'preparedness' of potential applicants for UK higher education.

Alleged academic malpractice

38 At the beginning of the current decade, media articles referring to 'international students' and 'language skills' appeared to overlap in some cases with mentions of 'plagiarism'. The development of the JISC Plagiarism Advisory Service (JISCPAS) in 2002 has enabled the development of a greater awareness on the part of academics and commentators of the importance of assessing English language skills and providing language support for international students. A paper in the academic journal, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, noted in 2003:

One group of students who regularly feature on the 'at risk' list is international students for whom English is not their first language.... As well as coping with language difficulties, these students often have different attitudes towards academic authority and deference...and arrive with less well-developed study skills (including note taking, essay writing and bibliography construction skills)....

39 In the early part of 2008, 'plagiarism', 'cheating' and the language skills of international students were put together in a BBC News article which reported that activities of an 'essay-writing firm' that claimed it had experienced a 'three-fold' rise in the number of international students buying essays so that, it was asserted, they now represented half of its customers. The article reported, without comment, the assertion by the essay-writing firm that 'the rise in demand is caused by universities recruiting students with inadequate English language skills'.

40 The BBC enabled readers to comment on the story and posted 25 responses on its website. A number of respondents identified themselves as students or academic staff with English universities. Of these, several in their postings queried

how students who could not converse well in English could nonetheless produce assessed work in the language to a level that enabled them to achieve their award. Commentators elsewhere have asserted that international students are being marked 'leniently' and 'positively' because their 'full-cost fees are now a lucrative and essential source of revenue'.

41 The importance of ensuring early on that international students fully understand an institution's assessment regulations was raised more than once during interviews with representatives of key organisations. Similarly, during focus group discussions participants reported that international students are frequently unable to fully understand an institution's academic regulations, including those governing the avoidance of academic malpractice and plagiarism and the penalties that may be incurred when academic malpractice is identified. Participants in all three focus groups reported that complaints or appeals against an assessment decision are received more frequently from international students than 'home' students. Academics suggested that this was due to a more pronounced 'consumer' approach to studying adopted by some international students.

Shared learning experience

42 While many responses to the BBC news item referred to in paragraph 39 focused on plagiarism, this article also discussed the impact of recruiting large numbers of international students on the learning of UK students. In this case, an individual posting as 'a visiting lecturer at postgraduate level' stated that 'where I teach, a small proportion of overseas students clearly have quite inadequate language skills to cope with the courses. The university does provide quite extensive language support, but the impact is very patchy. This inevitably interferes with the learning experience of other students.' The 'interference' mechanism was not specified, but in other articles and discussion threads the assertion is frequently repeated, sometimes with the explanation that students whose first language is English are expected to provide additional language support for those for whom English is a second language, and that the additional support needs of international students were detracting from the learning experience of their peers. During focus group discussions, a number of participants from across the groups supported the notion that where issues relating to cultural differences to academic study and language ability arise, they affect not only the learning opportunities of international students but also those of 'home' students.

43 A small number of the organisations interviewed for the Enquiry also reported that where a programme attracts a disproportionate number of international students, particularly from one country or region, questions have been raised during accreditation panels or by other means about the integrity of the academic experience for all students on the programme.

Recommendations

44 Based on the information gathered and the analysis undertaken, there is evidence to indicate that the following actions are required:

- a review of the efficacy and appropriateness of established schemes for testing the English language skills of international students, in determining English language competence and support needs before acceptance on to higher education programmes and while studying in the UK.

Recruitment and admission practices for international students studying in England

45 Representatives of all of the organisations interviewed regarded the recruitment of international students to be a positive feature of contemporary higher education. International students were reported to bring a global dimension to the experience of all students and potentially to present alternative perspectives when students are engaged in group learning.

46 Media articles on the recruitment of international students tend to fall into two broad categories: the first, and more positive, identifies the challenges for institutions, their staff and international students of managing the recruitment and admissions process and identifying whether international applicants have the capacity and skills they will need to succeed on their chosen course. Articles frequently focus on the need for universities and colleges to reach a realistic assessment of the English language skills of applicants before making the admission decision. The second category includes a growing number of reported irregularities by institutions and individuals in university and college admissions processes, and reports of malpractice on the part of applicants.

47 Articles in the media from 2007 onwards that discuss the admission of international students tend to incorporate the assumption that the willingness of institutions to set aside their own procedures and requirements is due to the 'lure' of the higher fees paid by these students. This is particularly clear in articles throughout 2008, where an explicit link is made between the financial problems of higher education institutions, 'the lowering of standards...threatening the credibility of the degree system' and the allegation that the 'higher fees charged for overseas students...[are] creating tensions. It brings cash to universities, but there are questions about the English language standards. Reflecting the sensitivity of the topic, there is a deep reluctance to talk publicly'. Other articles linking academic malpractice (usually either the presentation of false credentials or plagiarism) to the growing numbers of international students also mention the relative fee levels for international students and UK students.

48 Representatives of higher education organisations interviewed by QAA for the Enquiry were open about the higher fees paid by international students and recognised that their recruitment represents a significant financial input for many institutions. Some interviewees acknowledged, however, that the level of resource dedicated to supporting international students was not always sufficient to fully meet their needs.

Recruitment and admission practices

49 Since 2006, QAA Institutional audit reports have commented on institutions' admissions policies. Of the 36 reports published by December 2008 and available to the Enquiry, seven described admissions procedures as they applied to international students. The relevant sections of the reports focus on where decisions are made to admit international students and whether institutional policies have been followed. In this regard it should be noted that five of the audit reports published since 2006 have made specific recommendations linked to learning arrangements for postgraduate international students, one of which relates to the adequacy of admission arrangements. The other recommendations relate to aspects of the learning environment, with three recommendations specifically mentioning the need for greater English language support for international students.

50 In 2006 QAA commissioned an *Outcomes...* paper on the *Recruitment and admission of students*. This paper drew on the findings of 59 individual audit reports and found that, in general, institutions had 'satisfactory arrangements for recruiting and admitting students. The policies they used were monitored and implemented, and the information they provided for applicants was, with few exceptions, fair, accurate and comprehensive.' It also noted, however, that the relevant section of QAA's *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)* 'did not appear to have played a prominent part in the arrangements institutions had made for developing and monitoring their policies and procedures'.

51 The *Outcomes...* paper on recruitment and admission noted one case where an institution had extended its widening participation agenda to international students, to the point where the minimum requirement for entry into degree-level programmes at the institution 'was lower than would normally be expected in UK degree-level education', and concluded from the evidence provided that the institution's admissions policy 'was a significant contributory factor to the low level of academic achievement within certain programme areas'.

Verification of entry requirements

52 An additional feature of the BBC article cited in paragraph 39, and the responses to it, is the appearance of blunt assertions that universities are simply interested in securing the fees being paid by international students and that they do not check the authenticity of their credentials properly. Contrary to these earlier reports, more recent media commentary appears to have been initiated by the discovery by one university that a substantial number of its international students had been admitted on the basis of false credentials and, as a consequence, some had been expelled.

53 Participants in the focus group composed of academics and that of registrars openly discussed instances where forged or false academic certificates required for admission to a programme were suspected and at times uncovered. Participants reported that, at departmental level, institutional staff have investigated the validity of some students' entry qualifications following suspicions aroused by students' ability to cope with the programme of study. Although evidence was anecdotal, participants implicated third-party agents operating in the students' country of residence in the falsification of entry qualifications. The focus group composed of students shared this view, reporting that international students have talked openly to student representatives about the conduct of some agents.

54 Institutions' policies and practice regarding the admission of international students were cited by several members of focus groups convened for the Enquiry as the reason behind several of the recent challenges appearing in the media about academic standards and quality of students' learning experiences. Many participants, particularly in the groups composed of academics and students, reported that institutions do not, variably, set, enforce or verify entrance requirements for international students sufficiently to ensure that they are able to succeed with the programme of study. Discretion applied by institutions in making individual admission decisions for international students was felt to be higher in some, but not all, institutions for international students than for home students. Differences in the degree of discretion exercised by institutions were attributed to the fulfilment of institutional quotas and the need for institutions to generate income.

Support for international students

55 The 2008 *Outcomes...* paper on arrangements for international students, which considered the findings of 59 audit reports published between 2004 and 2006, commented on institutions' arrangements for the recruitment, induction and support of international students (there was, however, no requirement at that time to report separately in audit on arrangements for the support of international students from that of home students). Many of the reports describe how the support offered to international students is organised and indicate that institutions have identified the importance of a coordinated approach to enhance support mechanisms at both central and programme level. Many also comment on the academic support made available to international students; in several instances data on student progression and achievement had led to the provision of additional academic support.

56 The Enquiry has also analysed the student written submissions provided by students' representative bodies as part of Institutional audit. Of these, a significant number (15 out of 35) express some degree of concern about institutions' support for their international students. Matters discussed in the written submissions include: the need for more information about the institution and the UK prior to arrival; limitations in the explanations provided by institutions for international students of the assessment arrangements that will apply to them and what institutions regard as unfair practice (including plagiarism); insufficient English language support for international students; and how international students can adjust to the academic culture of the UK. Three written submission comments on the disproportionate number of international students needing support from students' representative bodies when facing allegations of unfair academic practice. Several participants in the focus group composed of students also expressed dissatisfaction with current arrangements for the support offer to international students.

57 The 2007 UKCISA survey referred to in paragraph 34 also reported, with regard to continuing support for international students, that there was no correlation across responding institutions between the number of international students studying in an institution and the number of institutional international student advisers, a finding regarded as serious by UKCISA in relation to the level of support available for this group of students.

58 Support to make the initial transition and adaptation to UK higher education was identified, by both interviewees and participants in the various focus group discussions, as crucial to the educational experience of all students. A number of participants in each of the focus groups reported that cultural and communication difficulties can lead to the separation of home and international students, which participants felt reduced the opportunities for all students to benefit from a more global higher education experience. The focus group composed of students felt strongly that institutions could do more to encourage integration early on, in both academic and non-academic settings.

59 The challenges to the learning experiences of all students posed by the inconsistency with which international students are able to communicate with staff and other students was raised in each of the focus group discussions. Home students in this context were reported to feel 'disadvantaged' when academic staff appeared to make dispensations for international students' language capabilities, and where they perceived that they are likely to receive lower overall marks for group work when teamed with some international students.

60 The particular needs of international students studying in the UK, from their initial recruitment through to academic and pastoral support while studying, were

discussed in most of QAA's interviews with representatives of higher education organisations. Opinion varied on how well institutions in the UK understood the needs of international students. There was, however, a general consensus that institutions take their responsibilities in this area seriously. Nevertheless, further guidance at a national level, on good practice in supporting international students and facilitating their adaptation to UK teaching and learning and assessment methods was felt to be extremely important.

Recommendations

61 Based on the information gathered and the analysis undertaken, there is evidence to indicate that the following actions are required:

- institutions, either individually or collectively, should provide clear guidance to international students and their advisers about higher education teaching, learning and assessment practices in the UK and, further, both facilitate international students' understanding of these expectations and support them in making the transition to studying in the UK
- a general statement or guidance about the support arrangements that international students should expect from higher education institutions, including English language support and personal and academic support, be developed.

Use of external examiners

The external examining process

62 Evidence from QAA audit reports contained in *Outcomes...* papers on *External examiners and their reports* (2005 and 2008), and on the *Assessment of students* (2006 and 2008) shows that 'very few audit reports found deficiencies in the way institutions handled their external examining processes that were sufficiently serious to merit recommendations whether about the overall design of the processes, or how they were being managed'. On the basis of the Institutional audit reports, QAA found it reasonable to say in its 2008 *Outcomes...* paper on *External examiners and their reports* that most institutions were 'responding satisfactorily to the information provided in their reports by "conscientious and professional" external examiners'.

63 There are references to external examiners in 17 of the 93 written submissions to the IUSSSC. Overall, current external examining arrangements receive support (albeit sometimes qualified support) from more than half of those referring to them in their submissions. Seven of the 17 submissions that mention external examiners are from individuals. In four cases it seems that the authors strongly disagreed with the actions of colleagues and external examiners who had overturned their own academic judgements. Extrapolating from their individual experience they consider that external examining arrangements more broadly are defective.

64 Of the submissions to IUSSSC from higher education institutions, all state that they have recourse to external examiners and have confidence in their advice. One submission, however, recommends that QAA be abolished and the 'external examiner system [sic] should be restored to centrality and power'. A separate submission, from an established centre of expertise, comments on the existence of a number of studies that have shown that 'reliance on the external examiner system to mediate standards within the [higher education] system was misplaced'. The submission provides no further evidence or explanation. In its submission, a professional body states that when external examining arrangements work well 'the

external examiner is a critical friend, who can help improve courses enormously'. The main focus of the observations in the submission, however, is that current external examining arrangements are open to abuse and leave room for improvement. It advocates 'closer adherence to QAA's code of practice on external examining'.

65 Interviews with representatives of key higher education organisations show a consensus of opinion about the value of the external examining process and its place in the overall quality assurance arrangements employed by the higher education sector. Interviewees reported that the external examiner system was respected and valued both among academics in England and by overseas organisations. Similarly, participants in the focus group composed of academics reported that the external examiner system plays a crucial role in institutional arrangements for quality assurance. The importance of a quality assurance system that includes independent peer review and which fosters cross-communication between institutions at a discipline level was reported to be particularly important since the cessation of external subject review by QAA.

66 A variety of perceptions about the core functions of the external examining process emerged during interviews with representatives of key organisations. Some interviewees felt that the process served to ensure comparability of standards between institutions while others argued that this function, although desirable, was no longer realistic given the expansion and diversification of higher education over the last few decades. Some interviewees reported that ensuring fairness in institutions' assessment arrangements was an important function of the external examining process. One interviewee noted that institutions may use the process to seek an external view on current or planned provision, by inviting comments from external examiners on curricula. Another interviewee felt that the process was important in playing a role in raising the esteem of teaching and creating opportunities for professional development for individuals who became external examiners.

Roles, functions and performance of individual external examiners

67 Reviewing articles and exchanges in the media, together with other published information, suggests that matters to do with the role and work of individual external examiners are not well understood. It appears that some have been under the impression that there is something akin to a 'national' external examiner system in higher education, with nationally prescribed criteria for making academic awards, and that external examiners are appointed by some national body.

68 An examination of media articles, together with discussion threads linked to such articles, reveals instances where those who report themselves to be academics seem unaware that individual higher education institutions with degree awarding powers can have quite different arrangements for assessing their students and for appointing and working with their external examiners. While two sections of the *Code of practice* have been developed and updated by QAA in collaboration with the higher education sector, it appears to be poorly understood that both *Section 4: External examining* and *Section 6: Assessment of students* represent codified good practice and advice rather than requirements.

69 Within the focus group composed of students, awareness and understanding of the role and functions of external examiners appeared to be low. Students mainly perceived external examiners as providing a service by double marking or verifying the marks awarded by internal markers; this perceived source of impartiality and externality was welcomed by students.

Effectiveness of the external examining system and the behaviour and management of examiners by institutions

70 Throughout 2008 there was a steady stream of articles and commentaries in the media that referred to the role of external examiners in contemporary higher education. The Enquiry has uncovered seven articles linked to some aspect of external examining appearing in June and nine articles in July. An increased volume of comment appeared with the publicity given to one particular public lecture and the radio interview that preceded it in which it was asserted that senior institutional managers were instructing their staff to tell external examiners that their institutions needed more first class honours degrees in order to improve their standing in the (unofficial) league tables published by national newspapers; that decisions made by external examiners could be and had been overturned by institutional managers with no experience of the relevant subject area; and that the external examiner system had 'broken down' and had become 'a fig leaf' that no longer guaranteed academic standards and that this was as a consequence of modularisation.

71 Representatives of key organisations interviewed by QAA for the Enquiry reported that the effectiveness of the external examining process relied upon the experience, expertise and motivation of the individual examiner, the relationship between the examiner and the appointing institution, and the use made by the institution of its examiners' reports. Anecdotal accounts of pressure being placed on individual external examiners to alter their report were given by two interviewees. Others commented, from personal experience, on the diligence shown by institutions in their management of external examiners and their reports.

72 More detailed discussion surrounding the purpose of external examining with participants in the three focus groups revealed some differences of opinion. Some participants within the academics and registrars groups felt that external examiners play an important part in ensuring fairness in assessment and comparability of standards between institutions. Others felt that this was not realistic given the diversity of programmes on offer and widespread modularisation of programmes. It was further suggested that since institutions often (but not always) select their examiners from similar types of other institutions, comparability is essentially assured between sub-sections of the sector rather than across the entire sector.

73 Participants in the academics focus group felt that retaining some flexibility in the definition of the intended roles and functions of external examiners was helpful to institutions so that they could make the most appropriate use of their examiners. It was suggested, however, that given this flexibility in current arrangements, it is important for institutions to be clear at the start of the process about their expectations regarding the role of their examiners.

74 When asked for their views on the effectiveness of the external examining system and the behaviour and management of examiners by institutions, participants did not report widespread concerns or dissatisfaction with current practice. Some noted the reports in the media relating to the use made of examiners' reports by some institutions but felt that such cases, whether or not evidenced, were not indicative of a systematic cause for concern. Participants within the academics and registrars groups noted that at times examiners become involved in difficult or challenging discussions with the host institution but felt that this was inherent to the role and an accepted feature of peer review.

75 To date, the Enquiry has found relatively few allegations of any impropriety or lack of integrity on the part of individual external examiners, bearing in mind the number of higher education institutions in England and the number of external

examiners they retain. Where allegations have been brought to QAA's attention, they have and will continue to be addressed through QAA's Causes for Concern scheme, to enable cases of purported malpractice to be individually investigated.

Recruitment and training of external examiners

76 In 1997, the report of the National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education (the Dearing report) advocated:

...a strengthened external examiner system from which all universities and other degree-awarding institutions must select external examiners.... The pool could be created through nomination by institutions of appropriately qualified staff with a small panel - managed by the Agency [QAA] - to approve the inclusion of any individual on the nationally recognized list.

and that

...the remit of the external examiner will need to be consistent across the UK, necessitating thorough familiarisation, training and preparation, including a trainee/apprentice model for new external examiners.... A further role for the Agency, which would support the work of external examiners, would be to encourage institutions to maintain archive scripts to facilitate the maintenance of standards over time.

77 Recommendation 25 of the Dearing report stated that QAA should 'work with universities and other degree-awarding institutions to create, within three years, a UK-wide pool of academic staff recognised by the Quality Assurance Agency, from which institutions must select external examiners'. None of the recommendations were, in the event, accepted, so that the external examiner process remains substantially as it was in the mid-1990s, at a time when it was already acknowledged to be under strain.

78 More than one interviewee suggested that the selection and appointment of examiners by institutions was not always transparent and that this could potentially undermine the impartiality and thus the integrity of the external examining process in the eyes of those unfamiliar with higher education and its quality assurance arrangements. Some interviewees suggested that QAA's audit reports should provide an indication of the operation and effectiveness of the external examining process at a national level.

79 Participants in each of the focus group discussions were asked for their views on the identification and training of external examiners. Most reported that it can sometimes be difficult to identify and recruit appropriate external examiners, particularly in highly specialised subject areas. Similarly, with regard to training, some felt that training at a local level can be helpful, particularly for new examiners, but that over-regulation of training may serve to deter individuals from carrying out the role. At least one participant noted that they had participated in organised opportunities for sharing of practice between examiners employed by a particular host institution, and that this was helpful.

80 More than one interviewee raised the notion of a national register of examiners that could be organised either through a body such as QAA or the Higher Education Academy (HEA), or at a subject level through the HEA subject centres or subject associations. Despite the challenges associated with identifying examiners, the notion of a national register of external examiners was not favoured by the majority those interviewed for the Enquiry. It was felt that this would not in itself

increase the pool of suitably qualified individuals and would change an independent peer review process to one which was inspectorial and place further demands on institutions. Others indicated that such arrangements would be welcome.

Recommendations

81 Based on the information gathered and the analysis undertaken, there is evidence to indicate that the following actions are required:

- the external examining process should be made more transparent and better explained in order to facilitate understanding of its intentions, limitations, operation and role
- there should be further discussion, at national level, and development of appropriate guidance, about the procedures used to identify, train and support external examiners
- a nationally agreed and mandatory set of minimum expectations for the role of all external examiners should be developed and implemented.

Assessment practices, including institutions' arrangements for setting the academic standards of their awards

82 Audits and reviews at the institutional level have tended to question institutional assessment arrangements that result in different judgements of achievement for students undertaking the same or comparable work and inconsistencies in the way assessment regulations are applied across institutions, often linked to the way that assessment boards use the discretion they are routinely granted. Academic audit reports have consistently attached more recommendations for action to institutional assessment arrangements than almost any other area scrutinised by audit teams, with arrangements for the classification of honours degrees attracting a particularly large number of recommendations. In the case of degree classification arrangements, QAA considered the weaknesses to be sufficient and sufficiently widespread to justify commissioning and publishing a *Quality matters* paper (QAA's series of occasional papers) in April 2007 on the degree classification system in order to bring the matter to the attention of institutions and representative bodies.

Honours degree classification

83 All representatives of organisations interviewed commented to the effect that the honours degree classification system was not fit for the purpose of describing student achievement. Some felt that, in the light of the expansion of higher education and the breadth and diversity of the academic student experience, it was no longer appropriate to attempt to capture and summarise attainment in the form of a single summative classification. Other interviewees noted that the integrity of the honours degree classification system had been undermined by misunderstandings surrounding differences in the use of grading criteria between institutions and between disciplines and by accusations of unfairness and grade inflation in the media. Several interviewees described the reported rise in the proportion of higher degree classes (1st and 2:1) as modest, and in contrast to the substantial increases commented on in the media. One interviewee further noted that with the use of criterion-based rather than normative referencing in determining degree class there should be no inferred malpractice in a higher rate of 1st and 2:1 classifications being achieved.

84 A total of 25 submissions to IUSSSC discussed degree classification. Some took the view that the 'proportion of 1st and upper 2nd class honours degrees

awarded by English higher education institutions had remained broadly constant at 58-60% over a four-year period (03/04 to 06/07)¹. Others offered different perspectives. Two submissions from professional groups active in developing the theory and practice of assessment explicitly endorsed the analysis of the weaknesses of degree classification arrangements advanced in QAA's *Quality matters* paper referred to in paragraph 82.

85 Three submissions to IUSSSC discussed matters to do with degree classification and 'grade inflation'. One submission identified a large number of possible causes for the purported 'grade inflation' and suggested that further research to identify the relative importance of individual causes was unlikely to provide definitive answers. Instead, the submission advocated further research and developmental activities aimed at improving the robustness and consistency of assessment and classification practice across and between institutions.

86 The appropriateness of the honours degree classification for describing student attainment was discussed in each of the focus groups convened for the Enquiry. The majority of participants felt that there was too much variation within a given degree class for the system to be meaningful. The lack of a common grading scheme across institutions and differences between disciplines in the determination of degree class were also felt to mitigate against the integrity of the system.

87 Some participants were aware of the Measuring and Recording Student Achievement Steering Group (the Burgess Group) proposals and current trialling of the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR). Participants in the student focus group welcomed the use of a transcript to record student achievement, noting that it would produce a more detailed and meaningful account of student attainment. One participant within the academics group, however, felt that since no common grading criteria is proposed and variation in institutional assessment practices would therefore persist, concerns over issues of comparability across and between institutions would not be addressed by the introduction of a pass/fail and transcript method of representing student achievement.

88 In its paper on *Assessment of students* in the first series of *Outcomes from institutional audit*, published in 2006, QAA noted the large number of recommendations in audit reports that were linked to assessment practices and in particular to the classification of honours degrees, and the difficulties students might encounter when studying two or more subjects for their degree where the assessment patterns and practices of different disciplines could be incompatible. Similarly, in the corresponding paper in the second series of *Outcomes from institutional audit*, published in 2008, the number of recommendations for action linked to institutions' assessment arrangements considerably outweighed the good practice that audit teams had been able to identify. A preliminary analysis of the Institutional audit reports published since 2006 suggests that the next *Outcomes from institutional audit* paper to address assessment of students will report similar findings.

Institutions' arrangements for setting the academic standards of their awards

89 Perspectives on assessment practices, including institutions' arrangements for setting the academic standards of their awards varied among representatives of higher education organisations interviewed for the Enquiry. Some discussed the strengths of current arrangements in relation to the various forms of assessment available and the growing recognition that students learn (and therefore should be assessed) in different ways. This point was particularly emphasised in the context of the increasingly diverse student body. One interviewee felt that institutions could do more to meet students' individual learning needs and that there is an over-emphasis

on the use of summative assessment generally and certain types of summative assessment in particular (such as the use of examinations and essays).

90 More than one interviewee felt that the commentary on assessment in the media attempted to generalise this area when generalisations are not meaningful. Interviewees noted that assessment practices (and marking criteria) vary between both institutions and disciplines but felt that this variation, and the reasons for it, was not widely understood. Variation in itself was not considered to represent a cause for concern or to threaten academic quality or standards but it was felt that the higher education community could do more to explain the reasons for, and meaning of, such variation to students and other stakeholders.

91 None of the participants in any of the focus groups reported dissatisfaction or concern over the integrity or validity of assessment practices. On the contrary, participants highlighted the extensive internal validation of marks and the thoroughness of institutional examination boards. Fairness in assessment was felt to be assured via a combination of internal processes of anonymous and double-marking, the use of external examiners and the scrutiny of grades that takes place during examination boards.

92 Of the 93 written submissions to IUSSSC, 36 referred to theoretical and practical matters to do with marking and grading students' work. Submissions from one Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL), and from a long established working group, provided an overview of the challenges to be addressed if assessment arrangements are to become more conducive to learning and more fair and consistent. These two submissions agreed that there is 'considerable variation across the higher education sector in assessment practices' and that this is a 'consequence of institutional autonomy'. One of the submissions recalled a suggestion, earlier offered to the Measuring and Recording Student Achievement Steering Group (the Burgess Group) that higher education as a whole 'would benefit from development work which would explore and evaluate the rationales for assessment regulations, with a view to providing a basis from which the sector could - more collectively than hitherto - advance its assessment practices'.

Alleged academic malpractice

93 Recent media comments and complaints about assessment arrangements in higher education are frequently linked to some aspect of alleged academic malpractice, including leniency in marking, leniency in penalties for plagiarism and the inflation of grades with respect to the assignment of degree class. Some such articles have focused on instances where institutional managers have been perceived to have overturned the decisions of assessment and examination boards or to have sanctioned arithmetical or other 'adjustments' of marks to allow students to progress to the next stage of their studies without fully attaining the intended learning outcomes. The suggestion that there is an increasing tendency for senior institutional managers to encourage their staff to award higher marks and to adopt 'lenient grading schemes' in order to improve the standing of their institution in the unofficial league tables maintained by national newspapers has been met with agreement by some readers - of whom some profess to be academic staff based in higher education institutions.

94 Similarly, a number of submissions from individuals to IUSSSC cited their personal experience and alleged (without making reference to sources of corroborating evidence) improprieties among academic staff in marking and grading. In some cases the allegations were directed at staff in the employing institution, others contained blanket allegations against the whole of higher education, including

external examiners. Other submissions alleged that the pressure to admit larger numbers of students and to retain them through to graduation has put pressure on staff to allow students to progress from year to year and to graduate when they do not deserve to do so.

95 Representatives of organisations that were interviewed suggested that a 'culture of consumerism and competition' was responsible for creating pressure within institutions to attract (and retain) students. The existence of league tables and their impact on an institution's reputation and success was reported universally to be unhelpful. The creation of such rankings was said to impose a false sense of uniformity and to mask institutional differences in mission and the experience that they offered students. With a diverse student body entering higher education with diverse needs, it was felt that differences between institutions, reflected in their particular strengths and areas of expertise, should be made more visible to students.

Recommendations

96 Based on the information gathered and the analysis undertaken, there is evidence to indicate that the following actions are required:

- a review of assessment practice supported by developmental activities aimed at improving the robustness and consistency of assessment and classification practices within and between institutions
- clarification and explanation of the reasons for, and meaning of, variation in particular approaches to assessment (and degree classification).

Conclusions

97 Over the last two decades, books, reports and papers from authors, agencies and think tanks have pointed to a higher education sector that has been responding to the phenomenon of 'massification' and contemplating its consequences. Individual higher education institutions have responded to this phenomenon in different ways and at different speeds, while the general public and, possibly, some academics seem unaware of the scope and nature of some of the changes institutions have made as they have transformed themselves to bring higher education to a more diverse student body. Discussions in the media about the role and function of external examiners that fail to recognise the number of students needing to be assessed, the complexity of modular schemes in some institutions, and the different roles external examiners may be asked to perform, illustrate this gap in understanding.

98 The analysis of media articles and commentary for the Enquiry has revealed a number of patterns. One is that a limited number of original sources of comment and opinion are able to generate a large volume of secondary comment, reporting and response that may not necessarily be indicative of a widespread or systemic concern. The practice of enabling readers to comment in web-based versions of news, newspapers and weekly journals appears to have become more prevalent throughout 2008, to the point where reader comments were subsequently recycled as news. The second is a pattern of 'interconnectedness'. An example of this is the frequency with which references to international students appear in articles dealing with a wide range of matters to do with, for example, contact time; assessment; the standards of academic awards; academic malpractice; admission to higher education institutions; tuition fees; student support; and conflicts between teaching staff and managers. This 'interconnectedness' illustrates the complexity of the issues examined by the Enquiry.

99 With respect to external examiners and the external examining process, analysis of a range of sources has shown that there is a need to distinguish between the actions of individual external examiners - where criticisms of their work and their integrity are few in number - and criticisms and identified weaknesses in the external examining processes that higher education institutions rely on to confirm the security and value of students' awards.

100 The points raised in this report relating to the five themes of the Enquiry constitute what might be regarded as the routine healthy debate that accompanies the continuing development of higher education as a large area of cultural, economic and social activity, in which exchanges mainly take place within specialist journals, formal reports and blogs, conferences and other meetings linked to the area. However, what is apparent from media and other information sources consulted is that, at present, there is not a shared understanding of the concept of 'academic standards' among the public, stakeholders, and some academics.

101 Working with the higher education sector across the UK, for more than 10 years, QAA has developed and maintained a set of reference tools (the 'Academic Infrastructure') which are intended to be used by institutions and their staff when setting and applying academic standards. Designed to be used together, the tools of the Academic Infrastructure should enable students to know what they have to achieve in order to secure their qualification (for example, an honours degree). They should also enable institutions, employers and all of those who rely on higher education qualifications, to know what an individual holding a particular qualification should be able to demonstrate and what they are likely to have studied.

102 QAA has published several papers in the two series of *Outcomes from institutional audit* that deal with how institutions use the reference points that comprise the Academic Infrastructure. In a paper published in early 2008 QAA reported that 'some audit reports had found that the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) had been insufficiently embedded in institutions' quality assurance procedures. Other reports found that staff were unaware of the provisions of the FHEQ and that in some cases there was poor institutional oversight of the process of implementing and maintaining alignment of institutional assessment and other provisions with the FHEQ'.

103 The Enquiry has found little evidence that the wider public in the UK is aware of the existence of the reference framework used by institutions and their staff when setting and applying academic standards to individual awards. Moreover, a number of academics writing media articles, and those declaring themselves to be academics who add their comments to newspaper articles, appear to be either unaware of the existence of this framework or, where aware of its existence, are unfamiliar with its contents.

104 The Enquiry's analysis to date suggests the need to bring information, in plain language, to the attention of the public, stakeholders and staff in institutions about how the framework described above is used in the setting and maintenance of academic standards.

Recommendations

105 Based on the information gathered and the analysis undertaken, there is evidence to indicate that the following actions are required:

- development of mechanisms for promoting a wider knowledge and understanding of the national framework and tools used by institutions in setting and maintaining academic standards and quality
- development of mechanisms for key higher education bodies and stakeholders to communicate a common and shared understanding of the principles and purposes of a broad Quality Assurance Framework for assuring public confidence in the setting and management of academic standards and quality
- the further development of proportionate, timely and responsive external quality assurance review methods that use both primary and secondary sources of evidence and support institutions' continuous improvement in the management of academic standards and the enhancement of quality
- the development of more effective and widely available ways of informing the general public about standards and quality in higher education and of the fundamental differences between secondary, further and higher education.

Annex A: Information sources consulted

QAA reports and papers

Outcomes from institutional audit: Series 1

Series 1: Closing overview

Outcomes from institutional audit: Series 2

Arrangements for combined, joint and multidisciplinary honours degree programmes

Arrangements for international students

Assessment of students

Collaborative provision in the institutional audit reports

External examiners and their reports

Institutions' arrangements to support widening participation and access to higher education

Institutions' frameworks for managing quality and academic standards

Institutions' support for e-learning

Institutions' work with employers and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies

Learning support resources (including virtual learning environments)

Programme monitoring arrangements

Progression and completion statistics

Recruitment and admission of students

Staff support and development

Work-based and placement learning, and employability

Quality matters

07-04-23 The classification of degree awards, QAA 173 04/07

Learning from

Learning from Subject Review 1993-2001, QAA, 2004

Media comments [year-month-day of publication]

03-10-14 *The Guardian*

Tear up the class system. It is time to end the classification of degrees - and replace it with something more meaningful, Geoffrey Alderman

04-01-22 *Guardian Weekly*

Admissions of failure, British universities must give more language support to their foreign students, argues Rebecca Hughes

05-02-11 *BBC News* online

Student plagiarism on the rise

06-06-12 *BBC News*

Student cheats contract out work

06-10-18 *The Times*

Plagiarism 'is fault of indulgent lecturers'

06-12-22 *Times Higher Education*
UK told to raise language bar for foreign students

07-05-13 *Sunday Times*
Chinese students oust UK pupils from top universities. Evidence that some top-ranking universities are willing to accept applicants from China and India who are less well qualified than those from the UK has emerged from a Sunday Times investigation, write Geraldine Hackett and Max Colchester

07-09-25 *The Guardian*
University students in England have it easy. Weekly workload much lower than other countries. Findings could hit non-EU intake, think tank warns

07-09-26 *Daily Telegraph*
UK students 'awarded degrees for little study', by Graeme Paton, Education Editor

07-09-27 *The Independent*
Troubled times for universities

07-09-27 *Times Higher Education*
Part-time effort for full-time degrees? Survey finds that contact time and study required at undergraduate level in England is far below the European average, reports Rebecca Attwood

08-01-07 Radio Warwick
David Willetts: Interview

08-01-14 *BBC News*
Parents 'buy essays' for students

08-01-15 *The Guardian*
An English professor is on the warpath against the bureaucrats who monitor university teaching, Chris Arnot reports

08-02-07a *Times Higher Education*
Cambridge asks questions of its many masters. Report citing the lack of common degree standards sparks a wider debate, Melanie Newman reports

08-02-07b *Times Higher Education*
The week in higher education

08-03-03 *BBC News*
Overseas students buying essays

08-04-02 *Daily Mail*
A degree in dishonesty

08-04-08 *BBC News*
Universities in England are 'strongly influenced' by league tables despite concerns about the way they are compiled, a study has found

08-04-10 *Times Higher Education*
Lancaster guarantees students minimum weekly contact time with tutors

08-04-17 *Times Higher Education*
It's about time [letter]

08-04-24 *Times Higher Education*
Manchester social science contact time halved since 1988, report shows. VC says deterioration highlighted by figures is 'undeniable', Rebecca Attwood reports

08-05-01 *Times Higher Education*
Clocking on

08-05-08 *Times Higher Education*
Academics split over teaching contact hours. Lancaster and Manchester move to give students more time with tutors, writes Rebecca Attwood

08-05-12 *Times Higher Education*
The external examiner's role, Harriet Swain

08-05-13 *BBC News*
Staff faking survey

08-05-13 *Daily Mail*
University lecturers told students to give them glowing reports or risk a 's***' degree to boost league table ranking. University staff have been caught telling students to be dishonest in order to boost their college's ranking in crucial Government-backed league tables

08-05-15 *Times Higher Education*
Teaching quality under 'grave threat', by Rebecca Attwood

08-05-15 01 *Times Higher Education*
Don't tell Mum: academic censured for discussing son's course load, by Melanie Newman

08-05-15 02 *Times Higher Education*
Size matters [letter]

08-06-08 *Guardian Unlimited*
Universities Challenged, Rupa Huq, Kingston University

08-06-17a *BBC News*
Blind eye turned to exam cheats

08-06-17b *BBC News*
First-hand views from university. Lecturers have been writing to express their frustration over standards. Stories about university plagiarism have prompted hundreds of e-mails from BBC News website readers who are academics or students in universities

08-06-17c *BBC News*
Student walks out over standards. Stuart Hill walked out of his course at Southampton University. A student was so concerned about the low standards of English of fellow students on a postgraduate course that he walked out, writing off thousands of pounds that he had borrowed

08-06-17d *BBC News*

Whistleblower warning on degrees. Degrees are being awarded to overseas students who speak almost no English, claims a whistleblowing academic

08-06-17 *BBC Radio 4 Today*

Geoffrey Alderman and Michael Thorne (Anglia Ruskin University), interviewed by Sarah Montague on the day Geoffrey Alderman was to give his inaugural lecture at the University of Buckingham

08-06-19 *Times Higher Education*

Standards lowered for rankings, says Alderman

08-06-21 *Dawn* [Pakistani news service]

No wonder plagiarism comes naturally to students, Sarah Churchwell

08-06-23 *BBC News*

Watchdog: Degree grades arbitrary

08-06-23 *The Guardian*

A degree of disappointment

08-06-24 *Daily Mail*

More overseas students could distort results because they expect good degrees in return for fees, uni watchdog warns

08-06-24 *Evening Standard*

Foreigners who want degrees for fees, Dominic Hayes, Education Correspondent

08-06-25a *Daily Telegraph*

Degree system 'rotten' and 'unreliable', says university watchdog

08-06-25b *Daily Telegraph*

Of course undergrads are making the grade

08-06-25 *BBC News*

Examiner dropped course criticism

08-06-25 *Telegraph Calcutta*

Degrees-for-fees rap on British varsities

08-06-26 *Times Higher Education*

External examiners under pressure to uphold marks and avoid criticism

08-07-01 *The Guardian*

Quality: easy to say, harder to put into practice

08-07-02 *BBC News*

Email leak of degree inflation

08-07-03 *Times Higher Education*

Public concern prompts MPs to scrutinise degree grading

08-07-06 *Daily Telegraph*

Degree minimum standard dropped to 2:2 by leading British companies. Graduate recruiters are dropping their minimum requirement of a 2:1 degree, claiming it can no longer be relied upon as a benchmark of high academic achievement

08-07-08 *The Guardian*

Standards of student achievement

08-07-10a *Times Higher Education*

MPs ask QAA head to defend degree standards

08-07-10b *Times Higher Education*

Examining the evidence

08-07-17a *Times Higher Education*

Is it time to unleash the watchdog to safeguard our degree standards?

08-07-17b *Times Higher Education*

Debate must remain public

08-07-17 *The Guardian*

Scrap unfit system of grading degrees, says watchdog chief

08-07-17 *Independent*

Susan Bassnett: Why university exams need a radical overhaul

08-07-18 *Times Online*

Degree classifications not fit for purpose says watchdog

08-07-19a *Daily Telegraph*

Britain's university degree classification system has 'descended into farce', the head of a committee of MPs has said

08-07-19b *Daily Telegraph*

University degree system 'is a farce'. The university degree classification system has 'descended into farce' and 'reached the end of its use-by date', a committee of MPs has heard

08-07-24a *Times Higher Education*

MPs have a bone to pick with QAA over standards

08-07-24b *Times Higher Education*

Leader: Honesty is not the best policy

08-08-28 *Times Higher Education*

Debate grows on academic rigour of degrees

08-09-11 *Independent*

Are PhD students neglected by their supervisors? Paul Jones is among a growing number of disaffected postgraduates considering suing their universities

08-09-11 *Times Higher Education*

Guest leader: The real sting of the QAA whip

08-09-18a *Times Higher Education*
Sector told to show house is in order

08-09-18b *Times Higher Education*
Review, Geoffrey Alderman: Grade Inflation: Academic Standards in Higher Education

08-09-30 *Daily Telegraph*
Academics who pressurise colleagues to 'mark up' students' work to boost league table positions face a fresh clampdown under Government plans

08-09-30 *Telegraph*
Academics who mark up to boost university ratings face clampdown

08-10-02 *Times Higher Education*
The long and the short of it. Britain's one-year masters is proving a sticking point in the Bologna Process, but the equivalence issue is raising difficult questions about length of study for other degrees, too, Hannah Fearn reports

08-10-21 *The Guardian*
First on the line. Geoffrey Alderman

08-10-23 *The Guardian*
Universities are dumbing down, say lecturers. Survey finds plagiarism rife and staff under pressure to give high marks

08-10-23 *Times Higher Education*
Keep it stupid, simple, by John Gill

08-11-00 *StudentDirect*
University Or Just Business As Usual? Luke Carson investigates the opportunistic entrepreneurs making money out of our higher education

08-11-06 *The Journal*
Losing confidence in university teaching. Students' Association president isn't impressed by the commitment of Edinburgh universities to quality teaching, EUSA President, Josh MacAlister

08-11-06 *Times Higher Education*
'Come out of the woodwork now': MP's challenge to standards critics

08-11-08 *BBC News*
Universities reject more scrutiny. University chiefs say that there is no need for any further scrutiny. Universities have defended the effectiveness of self-regulation in maintaining standards - rejecting any need for further external scrutiny

08-11-11 *The Guardian*
Checks and balances. Degrees won't be trusted until regulation changes, says Terence Kealey

08-11-11 *BBC News*
Forged document students expelled. Dozens of foreign students have been told to leave Newcastle University after the certificates they used to gain entry were found to be forged

08-11-12 *The Guardian*

Newcastle expels overseas students with fake grades, Anthea Lipsett

08-11-12 *BBC News*

Dozens of foreign students have been told to leave Newcastle University after the certificates they used to gain entry were found to be forged

08-11-12 *The Chronicle of Higher Education (USA)*

British University Kicks Out Chinese Students Admitted With Fake Applications. Dozens of Chinese students who submitted fraudulent applications have been expelled from Britain's University of Newcastle, according to the BBC and The Guardian

08-11-12 *Daily Mail*

Traditional university terms 'must be scrapped' to allow students to enrol all year round, by Laura Clark

08-11-18a *The Guardian*

Watch and learn. Was Terence Kealey right to argue on these pages last week that the regulation of universities is in crisis? Peter Williams and Gillian Evans discuss the issues

08-11-18b *The Guardian*

Letters from Simeon Underwood and Anon

08-11-20 *Times Higher Education*

Taboo but true: PhD students 'not up to scratch'

08-11-21 *BBC News*

Uni's US college link 'damaging'. The University of Wales is a 'laughing stock' for having awarded degrees at a controversial bible college in the USA, an American education expert says

08-11-25 *The Guardian*

A two-year degree would be affordable to more students. Degrees should be cut from three years to save money on tuition fees, says Geoffrey Alderman

08-11-27 *The Guardian*

Fraud and loophole for non-doms put student grants under scrutiny

08-11-27 *Times Higher Education*

The class of 2020? Bosses want work-ready recruits, but academics argue that they may end up less happy than before if universities cultivate skills, not intellect, writes Hannah Fearn

08-12-10 *BBC News*

Universities 'may face deficit', by Hannah Richardson

08-12-11a *Times Higher Education*

Lecturer admonished to 'find the excellence' and lift marks

08-12-11b *Times Higher Education*

Despair over home students' grasp of English

08-12-11a *Times Higher Education*
Minority report 1 [letters]

08-12-11b *Times Higher Education*
Rapid results culture undermines quality 1 [letters]

08-12-11c *Times Higher Education*
A matter of opinions, by John Gill [student centred learning]

08-12-18 *Times Higher Education*
Deregulate and win back autonomy, watchdog urges

08-12-30 *The Economist*
The Americans Are Coming! The next big shake-up of the global higher education business

09-01-08 *Times Higher Education*
Muffins hold the key to victory, Rebecca Attwood hears about student union campaigns that have scored notable successes

09-01-15 *Independent*
How overseas students can avoid the pitfalls of signing up for a PhD in the UK. Thousands of international graduates sign up each year for PhDs in the UK. But many find that their supervision is poor quality. Steve McCormack looks at the pitfalls - and how to avoid them

09-01-15 *The Economist* [print edition]
Build it, and they will come, Universities are going all out to lure foreign students

09-01-27 *The Guardian*
University red tape: Regulation, regulation, regulation

09-01-27 *The Guardian*
Why accountability can be a positive thing, David Eastwood, head of HEFCE, on when red tape is actually necessary

09-01-28 *BBC News* website
University's 'future in doubt', by Sean Coughlan BBC News education reporter

09-01-28 *The Herald*
College head swaps plea to deny course charges

09-01-29 *Daily Telegraph*
Our universities are in a first-class mess. There are too many dud degrees being awarded to dud students, argues Melanie McDonagh

09-01-29 *Times Higher Education*
A cheat, moi? That's unfair

09-01-29 *Yorkshire Post*
Campus chiefs have doubts on degrees, Focus on dilemma of Pakistani students in UK, by Murtaza Ali Shah

09-01-30 Press Association
Graduate numbers see 5% increase

09-01-31 *The Guardian*

Students have been sold a lie

09-02-02 *The Voice*

Principal accused of fraud clashes with students. War of words after judge adjourns hearing, by Trudy Simpson

09-02-03a *The Guardian*

'Universities don't like common people, do they?' Exclusive figures reveal the poorest have little chance of a place. Your postcode can still determine where - or indeed, whether or not - you go to university, by Jessica Shepherd

09-02-03b *The Guardian*

Balancing the books. 500 jobs may be lost at London Met as the funding council claws back millions it overpaid, by Maureen Paton

09-02-03c *The Guardian*

Time to force a social balance? Dramatic action should be taken to force equality in universities, writes Claire Phipps

09-02-03d *The Guardian*

No such thing as a level playing field. Educational opportunities were there to be seized only after sheer hard work, writes Yvonne Singh. Many immigrants see education as a route away from manual labour

09-02-03e *The Guardian*

White, middle-class families dominate top university places. Children from richest 2% of all households twice as likely as average to go to university, Jessica Shepherd

09-02-04a *Daily Mail*

It's the children at the bottom of the heap who have been hurt most by turning education into jargon-laden twaddle, by Melanie Phillips

09-02-04b *Daily Mail*

Exclusive: The invisible A stars: Universities told to ignore new top grade to stop surge in middle-class recruits, by Laura Clark

09-02-04 *The Guardian*

The iPod challenge to universities [letter]

09-02-05 *The Guardian*

Universities are not guilty of deluding students and employers. Rosy-tinted memories can't obscure the fact that we are good at preparing graduates for work, says Rick Trainor

09-02-08 *World University News*

UK: Rise in foreign students, fall in part-timers

09-02-09 *The Guardian*

Failures of external examiner system [letter]

09-02-22 *kentnews.co.uk*

Universities see record-breaking applications hike

09-02-22 *Sunday Times*

Huge increase in demand for postgraduate degree courses

09-02-23a *The Guardian*

Anxiety rife as competition for foreign students heats up. UK universities depend on the influx of learners from abroad, particularly Asia, but they risk losing out, says Malcolm Gillies

09-02-23b *The Guardian*

New visa rules 'could damage higher education'. Vice-chancellors fear unexpected rise in student visa fees will put off overseas students in what is an increasingly competitive recruitment market

09-02-24 *BBC News*

Denham says no return for polys

09-02-24 *The Guardian*

Deflated degrees. The honours degree system must not be allowed to die, says Terence Kealey

09-02-24 *The Scotsman*

Are students on a path to a brighter future?

09-02-25 *The Scotsman*

University to take place on world stage, armed with new name, by Fiona MacLeod

09-02-26 *BBC News*

Foreign students leaving UK debts, by Andrew Bomford

09-02-26 *Daily Mail*

EU students who leave Britain get a 'free' university education by dodging repayments, by Laura Clark

09-02-26 *Daily Telegraph*

EU students 'failing to pay off university loans'. Almost three quarters of graduates from European Union states are failing to pay back student loans, leaving British taxpayers with a multi-million pound bill, by Graeme Paton, Education Editor

09-02-27 *Daily Telegraph*

Cambridge University in attack on school standards. Working class students are missing out on places at Cambridge because their grades are not good enough, the University said, by Graeme Paton, Education Editor

09-02-28 *Daily Telegraph*

Universities socially engineer student intakes. University tutors are being encouraged to offer places to poor students over their middle-class counterparts, under new systems which flag up their applications for special consideration, by Julie Henry, Education Correspondent

09-03-05a *Times Higher Education*

Select Committee Inquiry - 85% failure rate was 'appropriate', but marks were raised

09-03-05b *Times Higher Education*

Select Committee Inquiry - Can't think, won't think: students damned by scholars

09-03-05c *Times Higher Education*

VC should check his facts: I am the Kingston University journalism student who wrote the Surrey Comet article that first highlighted Kingston's misreporting of student non-completions [letter]

09-03-05d *Times Higher Education*

Select Committee Inquiry - 'Compensated passes' and easier work are the reality, says lecturer

09-03-05 *The Independent*

Leading Article: Degrees of difference

09-03-08a *The Sunday Times*

Analysis: State monopoly on universities must be broken, Alan Smithers

09-03-08b *The Sunday Times*

Lecturers reveal watered-down degrees

Other documents

95-10-01

Peter Scott (1995) *The Meanings of Mass Higher Education*, Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press, Buckingham

97-03

Keith Chapman (1997) Degrees of difference: variability of degree results in UK universities, *Higher Education*, vol 33, no 2, pp 137-153

97-07-23

The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (the Dearing Report), report in 24 Chapters, especially Chapters 7, 9, 10 and 16

03-10-05

In Other (People's) Words: plagiarism by university students - literature and lessons, Chris Park, *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, Vol 28, No 5

04-10

UKCOSA, *International students in UK universities and colleges, Broadening our Horizons, Report of the UKCOSA Survey*
www.ukcosa.org.uk/about/material_media/archive.php

05-03-15

Mass Higher Education - Ten Years On, Peter Scott, AUA annual conference, Coventry, 15 March 2005

05-11-01

Ian McNay (ed) *Beyond Mass Higher Education. Building on experience*, SRHE/Open University Press, 2005, particularly Chapter 1 'Delivering Mass Higher Education - the Reality of Policy and Practice', Ian McNay; Chapter 8 'Assessing Complex Achievements', Peter Knight; and Chapter 9 'Formative Assessment and Employability: Some Implications for Higher Education Practices'

07-05

Benchmarking the Provision of Services for International Students in Higher Education Institutions, UKCOSA

07-07-12

Economic Costs and Benefits of International Students, HEPI
www.hepi.ac.uk/pubs.asp?DOC=Reports

07-09-25

The Academic Experience of Students in English Universities, HEPI
www.hepi.ac.uk/pubs.asp?DOC=Reports

07-09-27

Commentary, HEPI Report, Graham Gibbs, accessed from HEPI website
www.hepi.ac.uk

2008

National Student Forum (2007) NSF Annual report 2008
http://nationalstudentforum.com/NSF_annual_report_2008.pdf

08-02-12

The taught postgraduate student experience Overview of a Higher Education Academy survey, Chris Park, The Higher Education Academy

08-04-09

Student Jury papers published by DIUS:

- *International Jury Report*
- *London Jury Report*
- *Manchester Jury Report*
- *Bristol Jury Report*
- *Student Juries Executive Summary*

All available at:

www.dius.gov.uk/higher_education/students/student_listening_programme/student_juries

08-04-14

Office of the Independent Adjudicator, Annual Report 2007

08-06-17

BBC Radio 4 Today, Geoffrey Alderman and Michael Thorne (VC Anglia Ruskin University), interviewed by Sarah Montague

08-06-17

Lecture: Teaching quality assessment, league tables and the decline of academic standards in British higher education, Geoffrey Alderman, inaugural lecture at the University of Buckingham, provided by the author

08-07-10

Reserved judgement of the Employment Tribunals between Professor Paul Buckland and Bournemouth University Higher Education Corporation, Case 3102727/07

08-07-17

Minutes of evidence taken before Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee (Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Sub-Committee) Quality Assurance Agency's recent reports on standards in universities
www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmselect/cmdius/905/8071701.htm

08-10-07

Transforming Assessment and Feedback: Enhancing Integration and Empowerment in the First Year, Enhancement Themes paper (draft version), QAA

08-10-30

Announcement: IUSSC New Enquiry, Students and universities
www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/ius/ius_301008.cfm

08-10 (various dates)

The Debate on the Future of Higher Education, papers on 'Understanding institutional performance', HEFCE; 'The internationalisation of HE: a Ten-Year View', Professor Drummond Bone, UUK; 'Teaching and the Student Experience', Professor Paul Ramsden, HEA; 'Part-time Study', Professor Christine King, Staffordshire University, see: www.dius.gov.uk/higher_education/shape_and_structure/he_debate

08-11 [not published]

The Comparative Student Experience, John Brennan, Kavita Patel and Winnie Tang, report to HEFCE, Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI)

08-11-06

Input vs output: what our international admissions processes say about us - and why it matters, Gavin Douglas, Director of Student Recruitment, The Robert Gordon University, PowerPoint presentation to 2008 NARIC Conference

08-11-04

Quality and Standards in UK Universities, A guide to how the system works, UUK

08-11-04

Speech at the launch of Universities UK's *Quality and Standards in UK Universities: A guide to how the system works*, Peter Williams, House of Commons

08-11-11

Lecture, Roger Brown to London Metropolitan University Policy Institute, Can quality resist the market? London Metropolitan University Institute For Policy Studies In Education

08-11-18

A changing world: the internationalisation experiences of staff and students (home and international) in UK Higher Education, HEA

08-11-20

NUS Student Experience Report 2008
www.nus.org.uk/PageFiles/4017/NUS_StudentExperienceReport.pdf

08-11-20

Brennan, John et al (2008) *The Social and Organisational Mediation of Learning: Full Research Report*, ESRC End of Award Report, RES-139-25-0109, Swindon: ESRC

08-12

The sustainability of learning and teaching in English higher education. A report prepared for the Financial Sustainability Strategy Group by J M Consulting

08-12-09

Selection Processes, Academic Standards and Internationalisation, Gaynor Lloyd-Jones and Charles Neame, presentation to SRHE annual conference, 2008

08-12-02

Private letter to Peter Williams from Sean Coughlan, BBC News, summarising the key themes, as he saw them, from responses to stories on the BBC website

08-12-09a

Eddies in the current? Trends in honours degree classification in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, 2002-07, Professor Mantz Yorke, presentation to SRHE annual conference 2008

08-12-09b

Eddies in the current? Trends in honours degree classifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, 2002-07, Professor Mantz Yorke, SRHE conference paper 0029

08-12-18

Centre for Policy Studies, *Freedom for Public Services*, William Mason and Jonathan McMahon, foreword by Sir David Arculus

09-01-07

NUS Briefing: Assessment Purposes and Practice

09-03

Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee, Students and Universities, Memoranda of Evidence, www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmdius/memo/170/170memo0902.pdf
(To date, only memoranda of evidence published to 12 February 2009 has been analysed for the project)

Student Written Submissions prepared by students' representative bodies from 33 English higher education institutions to support the respective Institutional audits. These were submitted to QAA as part of the audit process and are not published.

Blogs

05-07-12 The Student Room

Prejudice against Oxford and Cambridge students

05-10-04 Warwick student blog

http://blogs.warwick.ac.uk/paulbirch/entry/week_1-_my

05-10-16 Warwick staff blog

http://blogs.warwick.ac.uk/robertspaul/entry/early_reflections_continued

05-11-13 Warwick student blog

http://blogs.warwick.ac.uk/natashaporter/entry/what_happens_now

06-11-09 The Student Room
The dwindling amount of contact time for arts students. HELP!!!

06-11-11
Angry Since 1967

07-11-13 Warwick student blog
http://blogs.warwick.ac.uk/alastairplumb/entry/year_3_term_1_2_3_4_5/

08-01-29 The Student Room
University is nothing but an expensive library membership. Contact hours/self directed study

08-04-17 The Student Room
Shall I Quit Uni & Emigrate? How worthwhile is a humanities degree

08-06-05 Ellie Clewlow
Managing Quality Enhancement, CHES Seminar, Managing Quality Enhancement, Institute of Education, 29-31 May 2008

08-06-14 Ellie Clewlow's blog
Quality enhancement II: 'i before e'

08-06-24 Ben Saunders' blog
University degrees in the news

08-06-24 David Willetts' website
Press Release: QAA a wake-up call for universities

08-06-25 Tom Morris's blog
Lowering the standards

08-06-27 The Student Room
Ex polytechnics are devaluing degrees

08-07-04 Ellie Clewlow's blog
We are arbitrary, rotten and unreliable...allegedly

08-07-05 Ellie Clewlow's blog
Trust in Me

08-09-13 The Student Room
Thread starts September 2008 and continues

08-10-05 UKCLE blog
Degree classification and grade 'inflation', Julian Webb

08-11-06 Ellie Clewlow
Feel the quality

08-11-26 Liberal England blog
Phil Willis attacks critics of Labour university policy

09-01-14 Ellie Clewlow

Quality assurance: current events and future developments. Some bullet points from a presentation by Peter Williams, head of the QAA, to the meeting of the Quality Practitioners Group of the Academic Registrar's Council, December 2008

09-01-15 The Student Room

Humanities vs Science contact hours

09-01-16 The Student Room

Contact time in Geography

09-01-17 The Student Room

Contact Hours in Languages

09-01-26 Mark Harrison's blog

Quiet Flows the Don: The Radice Critique of Higher Education in the UK

09-01-30 Overseas Pakistani friends

Overseas Pakistani Friends. A blog of overseas Pakistani friends

Annex B: Enquiry method

A: Analysis of media and other sources of information and evidence

1 Members of QAA's Communications Team routinely collect items of information from the media that refer to a wide range of matters connected to higher education, together with items that refer specifically to QAA. QAA's International Collaboration Team likewise monitors international press and other sources for references to UK higher education and QAA. This material provided a starting point for work in this Enquiry. It was subsequently augmented by retrospective searches of the archives of several periodicals and the websites of newspapers and broadcasters. The Enquiry also imported and analysed the written submissions and uncorrected oral evidence given to the IUSSSC's inquiry into 'universities and students'.

2 In all but a few cases the material originally published, together with any linked reader comments or postings, was copied and imported into qualitative research software for analysis. The qualitative research software used was NVivo8, a 'code and retrieve' package that uses Microsoft SQL technology and is equipped with powerful search tools. Use of the software made it possible to accumulate material (text, audio and video) that was subsequently tagged and coded for analysis and searched for keywords and phrases.

3 The software was used in the Enquiry to catalogue and manage articles, broadcasts and transcripts of broadcasts, material from blogs, papers, and (subject to copyright restrictions) notes and extracts from other published sources including journal articles and published reports by other agencies. The software was used to search the various sources for topics of interest to the Enquiry, for articles, posts and comments that elicited larger or smaller volumes of reader response and to identify their key characteristics.

4 QAA contracted with an independent consultant with expertise in the management of qualitative research enquiries and experience in the use of the qualitative software to advise on approaches to the design and optimisation of the database used to hold these and other materials.

B: Collection of information and evidence - interviews

5 QAA arranged a series of interviews with representatives of key bodies. These took place in January and February 2009. Interviews were conducted with representatives of the following organisations:

- Universities UK (UUK)
- GuildHE
- The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)
- Higher Education Academy (HEA)
- Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI)
- Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR)
- UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA)
- British Council
- Engineering Council UK (ECUK)
- Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA)

- National Union of Students (NUS)

6 In addition to the research management consultant mentioned above, QAA contracted with a second consultant with experience in the design and conduct of research based on interviews and focus groups to advise on the design of semi-structured interviews. The structure for the interviews was designed using the information referred to in A above and with the advice of the consultants to enable the information collected to be analysed using the qualitative research software.

7 An experienced QAA officer was teamed with the consultant for the purpose of carrying out the interviews. The consultant acted as the primary interviewer, with the QAA officer managing the interviews and acting as note-taker.

C: Collection of information and evidence - focus groups

8 QAA arranged a series of focus groups with key stakeholder groups. These took place in February and March 2009. Focus group discussions were held with:

- academic registrars, or equivalent
- academics and subject leaders, or equivalent
- students.

9 As with B above, the consultant facilitated the group discussions using a semi-structured format. As with the interviews the semi-structured framework for the focus groups drew upon the information gathered for A. The framework was designed in association with the consultant to enable the outcomes of the focus groups to be analysed using the qualitative research software.