

October 2006/45

Core funding/operations

**Report on review and
next steps**

Actions for institutions are given in
paragraphs 5 and 6

This document sets out the outcomes of phase two of the review of the Quality Assurance Framework for learning and teaching in higher education. It includes recommendations and plans to improve the Teaching Quality Information and National Student Survey initiatives. These have been endorsed by HEFCE, Universities UK and GuildHE, the sponsoring bodies of the review.

Review of the Quality Assurance Framework

Phase two outcomes



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Review of the Quality Assurance Framework: phase two outcomes

To	Heads of HEFCE-funded higher education institutions Heads of HEFCE-funded further education colleges Heads of universities in Northern Ireland
Of interest to those responsible for	Learning and teaching; Quality assurance; Information management
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Enquiries to	At HEFCE Emma Creasey tel 0117 931 7225 e-mail e.creasey@hefce.ac.uk At GuildHE Helen Bowles tel 0207 387 7711 e-mail helen.bowles@guildhe.ac.uk At Universities UK Fiona Hoban tel 0207 419 5484 e-mail Fiona.Hoban@UniversitiesUK.ac.uk

Executive summary

Purpose

1. This document sets out the outcomes of phase two of the review of the Quality Assurance Framework (QAF). It includes recommendations and plans to change and improve the Teaching Quality Information (TQI) and National Student Survey (NSS) initiatives.

Key points

2. The QAF Review Group has completed its evaluation of TQI and the NSS. The group concluded that these initiatives can make a valuable contribution to student choice, but that a number of improvements are needed to ensure they achieve this objective. In particular, the group recommended re-focusing the TQI site on the needs of applicants and their advisers, and removing from the site the qualitative materials currently provided by institutions.

3. The sponsoring bodies fully endorse the recommendations, and plan to relaunch the TQI site in summer 2007, in line with the group's recommendations.

4. In paragraphs 7-24 below we describe the background to the review, how HEFCE proposes to implement the recommendations, and the implications for institutions. This is followed by the review group's full report.

Action required

5. Higher education institutions (HEIs):

- a. Are not expected to publish any further qualitative information – that is, summaries of external examiners' reports, summaries of learning and teaching strategies, summaries of periodic reviews and summary descriptions of employer links – on the TQI site.
- b. Should make any adjustments to existing qualitative materials published on the site by December 2006, as it will not be possible to edit them after this time.
- c. Should prepare to share external examiners' reports as a matter of course with the institution's student representatives, for example through staff-student committees.
- d. Should review the information they make publicly available, in the light of the removal of qualitative information from the TQI web-site. This should include consideration of Annex F of this document.

6. In parallel with this report, HEFCE has issued Circular letter 23/2006, 'Development of TQI and the NSS'. Both HEIs and further education colleges are asked to consider and respond to the detailed proposals and plans in that letter.

Background

7. In 2004, HEFCE, Universities UK and the then Standing Conference of Principals (now renamed GuildHE) jointly established a review group to evaluate the revised Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) that has been in place since 2002. The group conducted its work in two phases, focusing first on institutional audit by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), and then on the public information aspects of the QAF – that is, Teaching Quality Information (TQI) and the National Student Survey (NSS).

8. In July 2005, HEFCE published ‘Review of the Quality Assurance Framework: phase one outcomes’ (HEFCE 2005/35), which set out the QAF Review Group’s conclusions and recommendations about institutional audit. HEFCE, Universities UK and GuildHE endorsed those recommendations, and in the light of them the QAA has revised its methodology for institutional audit.

9. This document includes the review group’s report on phase two of its work, with its conclusions and recommendations about TQI and the NSS (see page 7). In paragraphs 14-24 below, we outline HEFCE’s plans to implement the outcomes.

10. Several strands of research were commissioned to inform the review; the findings are summarised at Annex D, and the full reports can be accessed on the HEFCE web-site, www.hefce.ac.uk under Publications/R&D reports.

11. The group concluded that TQI and the NSS can make a valuable contribution to student choice, but that a number of improvements are needed to ensure they achieve this objective. This will involve re-focusing the TQI site on the needs of applicants to higher education and their advisers, presenting the information in a more user-focused format, and removing from the site the qualitative materials currently provided by institutions.

12. The qualitative materials were found to be of little value to users compared with the costs of preparing them. In the light of this change to the TQI site, the review group recommended that institutions should share external examiner reports as a matter of course with student representatives,

and should review how they make information about quality and standards available to the public through other means. A summary of the recommendations can be found at Annex C.

13. HEFCE, Universities UK and GuildHE fully endorse the group’s findings and recommendations, and welcome this clear steer about how to take forward TQI and the NSS into a new phase, to ensure that these initiatives provide a resource that is truly valuable to applicants and their advisers.

Implementing the review outcomes

14. This section outlines how HEFCE will implement the review outcomes, and the implications for institutions arising from the review.

Relaunching the TQI site

15. Following a competitive tendering exercise, HEFCE has appointed UCAS, the body that deals with university admissions, to redevelop the TQI web-site and launch a new site in summer 2007. Key changes will be as follows:

- a. The site will focus specifically on informing prospective students and their advisers, and its design will be driven by their needs. UCAS will test the site with users throughout the development stage, and the TQI/NSS Steering Group will oversee the redesign.
- b. The new site will publish the data that have been recommended by the QAF Review Group (see Annex F). This focuses on data that are of interest to users; the qualitative material currently provided by institutions will not be published on the site.
- c. The site will be re-branded, marketed directly to applicants and their advisers, and made more readily accessible to them through links with UCAS and other relevant web-sites.
- d. UCAS will provide institutions with facilities to preview data before publication, to add commentaries on their data and links to their own web-sites, and to monitor use of the TQI site.

16. Following the launch in summer 2007, UCAS will host the site, provide user support, and continue to develop and improve the site in response to user feedback.

Consultation on developments

17. The TQI/NSS Steering Group has begun to consider how to take forward the recommendations addressed to it, and to make other technical improvements to TQI and the NSS. Alongside this document, HEFCE has published Circular letter 23/2006 'Development of TQI and the NSS', which sets out plans and proposals for consultation, on the following issues:

- a. Proposals for improving the subject classification used on the site.
- b. Proposals for lowering the publication threshold that is applied to the NSS results, and for aggregating data across years where necessary.
- c. Defining a summary of key statistics to be presented on the site.
- d. Defining student profile data to be published on the site, to provide contextual statistics about the make-up of an institution's student body.
- e. Proposals for incorporating data about higher education in further education colleges.
- f. Details of the 2007 NSS.

18. Institutions are encouraged to respond to the letter, to help inform the improvements to the new TQI site to be launched in summer 2007.

Implications for institutions

19. During the period up to the relaunch, the current site will be maintained by HERO Ltd. It has recently been updated with some presentational improvements, and the results of the 2006 NSS were added during August 2006.

20. Qualitative materials previously uploaded by institutions onto the current site will remain published, until the new site is launched (without the qualitative materials) in summer 2007. Institutions need not add any further qualitative materials to the current site.¹

21. Institutions will continue to be able to edit existing material as normal, or add further material should they wish to, through the content management system until December 2006. After December 2006, no further changes will be possible to these documents. They will remain on the TQI site, which will be 'frozen' until it is replaced in summer 2007.² Institutions should thus ensure that their published materials are, by December 2006, fit to remain on the site until the new site is launched in summer 2007.

22. HEFCE Circular letter 23/2006 invites institutions to inform UCAS of their main contacts for the future TQI site. UCAS will inform institutions via these contacts of the new facilities that will be provided to them, including facilities to preview data, add commentaries and links, and monitor site use.

23. The QAF Review Group has recommended that, in the light of the removal of qualitative information from the TQI web-site, institutions should review how they make public information

¹ External examiner summaries for courses completing up to December 2005 were expected to be published by June 2006. These, and any other materials already published, will remain on the current site. We advised institutions in July to delay the preparation of any further reports, in anticipation of the QAF Review outcomes (see HEFCE Circular letter 16/2006). Following the outcomes of the review, institutions are not expected to add any further materials to the site. A clear explanation of the status of the published materials will be added to the TQI site, with information about the site re-development.

² From December 2006, the site will remain unchanged until the new site is launched in summer 2007. Institutions will not be able to edit qualitative materials and no further quantitative data will be added during this period.

about quality and standards available through other means. Given this shift from publishing standard types of qualitative information on the TQI site, towards greater discretion for each institution about what it wishes to publish, HEFCE will no longer ask the QAA to assess the integrity and completeness of an institution's TQI information, as part of institutional audit. The QAA would, however, continue to take an interest more generally in the integrity of whatever information institutions publish about the quality and standards of their provision.

24. The group also recommends that institutions should share external examiners' reports as a matter of course with student representatives, for example through staff-student committees, for the reasons set out in the report. HEFCE will look to the QAA to provide assurance, in the context of institutional audit and mid-cycle review, that this expectation is being met.

Report of the Quality Assurance Framework Review Group on TQI and the NSS

Contents

Background and context	8
Research strands	9
Overview and conclusions	10
Discussion and recommendations	11
Purpose of TQI and its main audience	11
TQI dataset	12
National Student Survey	14
Presentation of the data – the web-site	15
Costs and burden	15
Other points arising from the research	16
Further work	16
Annex A QAF Review Group terms of reference	19
Annex B QAF Review Group membership	20
Annex C Summary of recommendations	21
Annex D Summaries of research reports	22
Annex E Original TQI dataset and NSS questions	28
Annex F Public information about academic standards and quality of HE provision	31

Background and context

The revised QAF and TQI

1. In 2001, the arrangements for assuring the quality of teaching and the standards of awards in higher education institutions (HEIs) were revised. Continuation audits and subject review by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) were replaced with the quality assurance framework (QAF) which comprises:

- institutional audits by the QAA
- collaborative provision audits, to supplement institutional audits, for those HEIs with large or complex collaborative provision
- the publication of information about quality and standards through the Teaching Quality Information (TQI) web-site. This includes the results of the National Student Survey (NSS).

2. These arrangements are underpinned by the Academic Infrastructure, developed by the QAA on behalf of the sector. The Academic Infrastructure establishes national reference points for the quality and standards of qualifications.

3. The principles of the revised QAF are:

- a. Recognising the primary responsibility of each HEI to operate robust internal mechanisms for setting, maintaining and reviewing quality and standards; for generating information about its quality and standards; and for publishing the key parts of that information.
- b. Meeting public information needs, so that stakeholders – and above all students – can obtain information which is up-to-date, consistent and reliable about the quality and standards of teaching and learning at different HEIs.
- c. Lightness of touch, to reduce the burden on HEIs to the minimum consistent with proper accountability and meeting information needs, and thus to secure the greatest value from the resources used.

4. The revised quality assurance processes were implemented through a transitional cycle between 2002 and 2005, during which time each HEI received one or more ‘developmental engagements’ and an institutional audit.

5. To help meet public information needs (as set out in paragraph 3b above), the TQI dataset was developed on the recommendations of a Task Group chaired by Sir Ron Cooke. The Task Group recognised that accurate and up-to-date information about the quality and standards of provision was important:

- to enable potential students and their advisers to make informed decisions
- to inform the judgements of other stakeholders
- to secure accountability for the use of public funds.³

The dataset was finalised following extensive consultation with the sector and was piloted in six HEIs before being rolled out.

6. In its current form, TQI consists of a set of quantitative and qualitative data published for all HEFCE-funded HEIs, as well as for the independent University of Buckingham and publicly-funded HEIs in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. This is based largely on existing data and reports. It includes the results of the NSS, except for some Scottish HEIs (HEIs in Scotland are not required to take part in the survey, but some choose to do so). The NSS is sent out every year to final-year undergraduate students, and consists of a set of questions seeking the students’ views on the quality of the learning and teaching in their HEIs. Further information is at www.thestudentsurvey.com/.

7. Most of the information on the TQI site, including NSS results, is published by subject area for each institution. The data are effectively owned by the sector although ultimate responsibility for the site rests with HEFCE. Decisions as to the content and presentation of the data and the operation of the site are made by a TQI/NSS Steering Group, chaired by Professor Michael

³ HEFCE 2003/51, ‘Information on quality and standards in higher education: final guidance’.

Arthur (Vice-Chancellor of the University of Leeds). Several of the recommendations in this report have been made to this group for them to take forward at the operational level.

8. The TQI site and the NSS were developed and implemented from 2003 to 2005, and the TQI site was launched in September 2005 (see www.tqi.ac.uk). A list of the TQI data and the NSS questions are reproduced for information in Annex E.

9. TQI and the NSS are not currently a requirement for further education colleges (FECs) that deliver higher education (HE). FECs were therefore not included in the scope of this report. However, work is under way to develop a TQI dataset for HE in FECs (see paragraph 70) and the recommendations made in this report will influence that work.

Review of the QAF

10. The Better Regulation Task Force recommended that the impact of the revised QAF should be evaluated two years after implementation. In response HEFCE, Universities UK and GuildHE, as joint sponsors of the QAF, initiated in 2004 a review of the transitional cycle of the QAF. The aim of the review was to identify improvements that could be made beyond the transitional cycle. The sponsoring bodies established the QAF Review Group (QAFRG). The QAFRG's terms of reference and membership are set out at Annexes A and B.

11. Since the revised QAF was implemented in stages, the review is taking place in phases. In phase one, the review group focused on the impacts, benefits and costs of QAA institutional audit during the transitional cycle, in order to recommend improvements for the next cycle of audits. The outcomes were published in HEFCE 2005/35, 'Review of the Quality Assurance Framework: phase one outcomes'.

12. Phase two of the review is in two parts. The first part considered the impacts, benefits and costs of the public information aspects of the QAF. This report gives the outcomes of that review. A summary of recommendations is at Annex C.

13. The QAFRG will begin the second part of phase two, concerning the impacts, benefits and costs of collaborative provision audit, in late 2006.

Research strands

14. The QAFRG's terms of reference for phase two required it to:

- a. Assess how far the revised QAF is providing students, potential students, employers and others with information about quality and standards (by means of the TQI and NSS) that is reliable, valid, comprehensible, comprehensive, relevant and easily accessible.
- b. Assess how far the revised QAF is providing institutions and the sector as a whole with useful information about institutional quality assurance processes and quality enhancement, by means of TQI and the NSS.

15. Three strands of research were commissioned to provide information in support of these requirements, and the following reports were produced:

- 'Teaching Quality Information website: qualitative user evaluation' (Ipsos MORI and the Open University). This research sought the views of potential students and careers advisers about the TQI web-site, by means of focus groups and paper surveys
- 'Impact of the Teaching Quality Information initiative on higher education institutions' (Alan Brickwood & Associates). Researchers used fieldwork with a representative sample of 13 HEIs, as well as interviews with other bodies, to establish the costs, benefits and other impacts of TQI on the HEIs that provide the information. The research was presented to the sector at two seminars in May 2006, and the views of delegates were incorporated into the report
- 'Needs of employers and related organisations for information about quality and standards of higher education' (University of Sussex). Researchers sought the views of a number of employers of graduates, to establish their information needs regarding quality and standards and student achievement in higher education. This included research into graduate recruitment practices. Employers were asked whether they would make use of TQI in this context.

16. Summaries and recommendations from these three reports are at Annex D. The reports are published in full on HEFCE's web-site www.hefce.ac.uk under Publications/R&D reports. In this report, the QAFRG draws on and seeks to respond to the findings of this research.

17. In addition, as the first three-year transitional cycle of QAA institutional audit could not include detailed consideration of TQI, HEFCE asked the QAA to carry out a one-off sector-wide review of TQI during 2005-06, to assess the accuracy, integrity and frankness of the qualitative information that had been published up to that point. The QAFRG noted that the QAA's findings were broadly consistent with those of the other research strands. This report is published on the QAA's web-site, www.qaa.ac.uk.

Overview and conclusions

18. In carrying out the review, the QAFRG sought to work within the principles of the original Task Group, and establish how far TQI was meeting the objectives set by that group: to enable potential students and their advisers to make informed decisions; to inform the judgements of other stakeholders; and to secure accountability for the use of public funds. The review focused on both the content published on the TQI site and the presentation of the information, and sought to establish whether either of these could be improved to meet the objectives more effectively.

19. The research has established that the Task Group's objectives for TQI are still desirable. However, the QAFRG has concluded that it is not possible to meet all these objectives with one dataset presented in one format, as is currently the case.

20. HEIs, advisers and potential students agreed that, if presented in a more accessible and user-friendly way, TQI has the potential to make a substantial contribution to student choice. The NSS is positively viewed by the majority of the student body and potential students both as a source of useful information and as a means of empowerment. While views among HEIs about the NSS are mixed, the student feedback is taken seriously and brings about change. HEIs considered

that TQI had the potential to become, over time, a welcome independent, impartial and stable source of information against which HEIs could compare aspects of their performance against other providers and, as a consequence, improve planning processes. Finally, HEIs welcome the overall reduction in burden that the new QAF arrangements represent.

21. TQI does not, however, meet the objectives in its current form. Indeed, the intended audience for the TQI web-site appears to be unclear; this is partly because it was designed to meet the needs of several audiences, with the result that it does not satisfactorily address any of them. A particular problem is that the TQI web-site is not readily usable by potential students: it is poorly set out, and difficult for a lay audience to understand due to its use of complex language and technical terms. Currently, TQI is widely perceived as having been developed 'by the sector for the sector'.

22. TQI is not currently providing good value for the resources that are being put into it. The overall burden and costs of the new quality assurance method – including TQI – are substantially less than they were under subject review. However, the workload and costs that institutions incur in producing TQI are currently disproportionately high in relation to the value of the information to prospective students. Some HEIs are devoting substantially more time and effort to TQI than others.

23. The QAFRG's overall conclusions are that:

- a. The intended purpose of TQI, and its primary target audience, both need to be clarified. The primary audience should be potential students (and their advisers) and the purpose of the site should be to help potential students choose where to study.
- b. TQI has the potential to fulfil this purpose, but is currently making a limited contribution to it, and needs to be revised to focus on the primary audience. A key priority will be to make the TQI site more accessible and user-friendly. This will also mean revising the content of the site, to focus on what is useful to applicants and to flag more clearly how the data can be used. Following revisions, the web-site should be

relaunched and properly marketed. Oversight of this should be the responsibility of the TQI/NSS Steering Group.

- c. As these changes are made, HEFCE and the TQI/NSS Steering Group should consider the costs and burden on HEIs, and how these can be made more proportionate in terms of the benefits they bring both to HEIs and to their potential students.

24. The remainder of this report sets out a more detailed analysis and specific recommendations. Unless otherwise specified, the recommendations are made to HEFCE, with the expectation that they will be referred to other bodies where appropriate.

Discussion and recommendations

Purpose of TQI and its main audience

Primary audience

25. All three strands of research indicate that the target audience for the TQI site appears to be unclear or unfocused. This may be partly the result of trying to address the needs of a diverse range of stakeholders with a single set of information on a single web-site. Although the original Task Group identified prospective students as the most important audience, it nevertheless developed a set of information that would serve a range of audiences which were not all clearly defined. The information was likewise intended for a range of purposes which were not all clearly differentiated. This has resulted in a site that attempts to serve multiple audiences and purposes simultaneously, but does not serve any of them particularly successfully.

26. The research with both potential students and HEIs indicates that the information that TQI can provide about the academic experience can make an important contribution to informing student choice. The QAFRG's view is that the main purpose of publishing TQI data should be to help potential students make informed choices about where to study, and that potential students (and their advisers) should therefore be clearly identified as the primary audience. Any revisions to the data and its presentation on the site should be driven by this. TQI is not designed to be used as a marketing tool,

although HEIs might wish to flag up items such as positive NSS results on their own sites.

27. The QAFRG recognised that applicants are likely to use the information at particular points in their decision-making process, typically to refine their choices. This would usually be after they had considered their initial options (for example, the institutions offering courses in the subject they are interested in, the entry requirements, and geographic location) from other sources of information, such as UCAS and institutions' web-sites.

28. It is important to ensure also that users of the site are aware of limitations on the data's use, including that data are not available for individual programmes and not all datasets are comparable.

Recommendation 1

The main purpose of the TQI data and web-site should be established as helping potential students to make informed choices about where to study, using academic information relating to quality and standards.

Recommendation 2

While maintaining the integrity and accuracy of the information, the TQI/NSS Steering Group should ensure that the development of the site is driven by this purpose.

Other potential audiences and purposes

29. The QAFRG recommends that work on the TQI site in the first instance should concentrate on the site's primary purpose and audience. However, the Task Group's initial aim of reaching other audiences should not be forgotten. It is important not to lose sight of the Task Group's objective for TQI to help to 'secure accountability for the use of public funds': although this is of less importance to potential students, it is still a vital aspect of the QAF.

30. The public information provided through TQI has an important role in providing assurance about the HE system as a whole, including those parts that

are not publicly funded. To this end, the QAA may wish to consider whether the provision of TQI should be an expectation of all its subscribers, irrespective of their funding sources. However, information from privately-funded subscribers would not be verified by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), and this would need to be made clear on the TQI site. Once the TQI dataset and web-site have been revised so as to meet the needs of potential students properly, it may be appropriate to consider further work into the needs of other users and other uses for the data. Some suggestions for this work are set out in paragraphs 57-70.

TQI dataset

31. The research indicated that there is substantial interest from applicants in the quantitative data available on the site, but that other elements of the TQI dataset are not useful to potential students, and that the site in general is presented in such a way as to be inaccessible.

Quantitative data

32. In general, the research both with potential students and with HEIs shows that all the quantitative data (the NSS results and the HESA-based data) have value for potential students, although the information needs to be better presented.

Recommendation 3

The existing quantitative dataset has value, and therefore should continue to be published.

Presentation of quantitative data using JACS

33. Quantitative data on the site is presented using the Joint Academic Coding System (JACS). It thus relates to subjects rather than programmes of study or courses. The research established that this approach is problematic for HEIs and for potential applicants. Currently 41 subject categories are used, so that related subjects are grouped together, meaning that the information on the site often

conflates or cuts across the programmes of study offered by an institution. Ideally, the site would make information available at the level of individual courses. However, the QAFRG has been advised that this is not currently possible: there is no source of data comparable across institutions at course level. In addition, the numbers of students on individual courses are often too small to provide robust data. From 2007 onwards, the next level in the JACS hierarchy, which comprises 107 subject categories, will be used on the site. This should help to address some of the issues.

34. Other problems include the definition of the underlying codes themselves and the way in which institutions return data for different purposes (for example to HESA). The 'programme title' field in particular is not used by all HEIs in the same way, and does not necessarily match the titles used by UCAS. Joint honours or multidisciplinary programmes are also difficult to code accurately. There may be a need to revisit how institutions use the codes and to issue further guidance. Some HEIs, however, find it unhelpful to have to use a standardised structure, as their individual provision does not always fit.

Recommendation 4

The TQI/NSS Steering Group, liaising with HESA, should continue to identify specific problems and ways forward regarding JACS codes, and seek a better match between use of the system by HEIs and by UCAS.

Qualitative data

35. The evidence indicates that neither potential students nor HEIs find the qualitative data on the TQI site to be of much value.⁴ External examiner summaries are perceived as bland and uniform, as they all follow the same pattern and do not provide much additional information. Some institutions reported that TQI requirements had adversely influenced external examiner reporting, in that

⁴ 'Qualitative information' here means the information provided by the HEI, that is, summaries of external examiners' reports (and associated commentary); summaries of learning and teaching strategies; summaries of periodic reviews; and summary descriptions of employer links.

examiners are becoming more cautious in how they express their conclusions. The QAA's review also found that the restricted content of the summaries severely reduced their usefulness. Periodic reviews by institutions, where available, are also seen as bland and difficult to digest. These data require a large effort from institutions (for example in requesting external examiner summaries and in 'repackaging' institutional documents for a public audience) that is not repaid in the benefits produced. It is also difficult for TQI to reflect complex provision such as collaborative or multidisciplinary programmes.

36. The institution-level documents (summary of the HEI's learning and teaching strategy and links with employers) are less burdensome to produce. The QAA review established that the learning and teaching strategy summaries demonstrate high levels of accuracy, integrity and frankness. However, these documents are not valued by users, being wordy and 'academic' in style. HEIs consulted during the research commented that the existing qualitative data requirements resulted in all HEI information looking the same, so that the distinctiveness of an individual institution was lost.

37. There is also a mismatch in the qualitative data. Scottish and Welsh institutions are not required to provide this data, as a result of the different quality assurance arrangements in different parts of the UK. HEIs are not obliged to post qualitative information for programmes funded by the Department of Health (DH) or the Training and Development Agency for Schools, as these both have separate external quality assurance systems. These inconsistencies were confusing for users and reduced the value of the site.

Contribution of the external examiner system to the QAF

38. THE QAFRG paid particular attention to the issues relating to the publication of data derived from external examiner reports on the site. The revised QAF places significant reliance on the external examiner system in maintaining standards, through:

- emphasising their importance internally within institutions, as a means of gaining the views of

external and experienced peers on standards and on potential improvements

- assuring the effective use of external examiners by institutions, through QAA institutional audit, including adherence to the relevant section of the QAA Code of Practice
- providing public information and contributing to public accountability, through the publication of summary reports on the TQI site.

39. The group took the view that, in the light of the evidence about applicants' lack of interest in the TQI data, the external examiner information was not meeting the objective of providing public information, and that these summaries should no longer be published on the TQI site. This does not diminish the important role of external examiners in maintaining standards, nor the role of QAA institutional audit in assuring the effective use of external examiners by institutions.

40. In considering other contributions that the external examiner system might make to public accountability, QAFRG noted:

- a. Institutions have a responsibility to ensure the effective working of the external examiner system. HEIs will want to be able to demonstrate that they have mechanisms and processes to ensure this. These are routinely tested in QAA institutional audit. The QAA's mid-cycle follow-up will also review the previous three years' worth of external examiner reports.
- b. In addition to being a central feature of institutional audit, external examiners' reports can be requested by the QAA to inform its enquiries about any cause for concern that may be triggered by other sources of information.
- c. The external examiner system contributes to quality enhancement, in that external examiners engage in discourse about their discipline with subject teams, and their reports often contain recommendations which institutions act upon to improve provision.

d. There may be potential for external examiners to contribute to identifying strengths and issues for improvement within subject disciplines, beyond reporting to institutions individually. It might be useful to initiate a project led by the Higher Education Academy and QAA to investigate how the expertise of examiners can better contribute to sharing good practice, building on the academy's project to develop the skills of external examiners and existing co-operative activities by QAA and the academy.

41. In order to ensure that feedback from external examiners is not lost to the student body, and also to ensure transparency, the QAFRG recommends that institutions should share external examiners' reports as a matter of course with institutional student representatives (student union officers and course representatives). This might be done through staff-student committees, for example. This could strengthen students' involvement in quality assurance and enhancement, and enable them to work with institutions on improvements. The National Union of Students will offer support and guidance to the local student representatives as necessary.

42. In the final guidance on information on quality and standards (HEFCE 2003/51), institutions were reminded of the need to adopt a publication scheme so as to comply with the Freedom of Information Act 2000. It was suggested then that institutions might refer in their publication schemes to the availability of information about quality and standards on the TQI web-site. The removal of qualitative information from the TQI site will mean that institutions may need to revisit their publication schemes.

43. Institutions produce a range of documents and materials about the quality and standards of their provision, which may be of interest to members of the public. Annex F includes a list of the types of such information that institutions typically generate. In the light of removing qualitative information from the TQI site, institutions should consider making such information available to the public, either by publishing it (for example on their own web-sites) or releasing it on request.

Recommendation 5

Given that qualitative data (summaries of external examiners' reports, summaries of learning and teaching strategies, summaries of periodic reviews and summary descriptions of employer links) appear not to be useful to potential students, are used inconsistently between providers, and are costly and burdensome to HEIs, these should be removed from the TQI site.

Recommendation 6

Institutions should share external examiners' reports as a matter of course with institutional student representatives, for example through staff-student committees.

Recommendation 7

As a result of the removal of qualitative information from the TQI web-site, there is a need for institutions to make information public by other methods. This should include consideration of the data at Annex F, and institutions should review their publication schemes.

44. The group noted that the proposed changes to the TQI web-site would necessitate some changes in the arrangements for mid-cycle review as set out in the QAA's revised handbook for institutional audit published in 2006.

National Student Survey

45. Potential students found the NSS to be the most useful part of TQI, perceiving it as valuable information that cannot be obtained anywhere else. This is also the most accessible part of the data. Student unions too are generally positive about the NSS, as a means of empowering current students as well as informing future applicants.

46. Some HEIs suggested that the NSS should be run biennially, so that they could run their own surveys in the alternate years without creating 'survey fatigue', or to reduce the overall costs of the exercise. The QAFRG recommends that the NSS should continue to be run annually for the time

being in order to build up a fuller picture and gather data more quickly; however, the TQI/NSS Steering Group may wish to revisit this issue in the future. The QAFRG also recognises some concerns within the sector about the NSS methodology and expects that the Steering Group will monitor this, as part of its continuing work in taking forward improvements to the survey.

Recommendation 8

The NSS should continue to run annually for the time being.

47. Students funded by the DH are not currently included in the NSS. This results in incomplete coverage, and means that a substantial number of final year students at some institutions do not have the opportunity to contribute their views through the survey. This in turn disadvantages potential students with an interest in studying on healthcare programmes funded through the DH.

Recommendation 9

The QAFRG recommends to the Department of Health that its students should be included in the NSS in the interests of full coverage.

Presentation of the data – the web-site

48. It is clear from the research that currently data on the TQI site are poorly presented and difficult to use. Students find the statistical information hard to understand and the site is difficult to navigate without instruction. There is also a low awareness of the site among the intended audience (although it is worth remembering that the research took place very shortly after the launch of the site and awareness may build up over time). The site is not linked closely enough to other related sites such as UCAS. The name of the site itself does not clearly convey what it has to offer.

49. Improvements to the presentation of the site are now overseen by the TQI/NSS Steering Group.

Recommendation 10

The QAFRG recommends to the TQI/NSS Steering Group that the TQI web-site should be substantially revised, taking into account the following issues:

- a. The web-site should be re-named to better describe its purpose.
- b. The user interface should be changed to make the data more accessible. This should include changes in terminology.
- c. The web-site should include guidance on how to use it and how to interpret the data (with information about any limitations of the data).
- d. The web-site should be properly marketed to the target audience of potential students and their advisers.
- e. Links should be made to TQI from the UCAS site and other relevant sites.

Costs and burden

Costs to institutions

50. The research with HEIs indicates that the move to institutional audit, together with TQI/NSS, has substantially reduced both the costs and the burden of quality assurance, compared to the previous subject review system. Two of the sample institutions in the research suggested that the reduction was in the region of 30-40 per cent.

51. The current cost of TQI/NSS to the sector (all institutions in England and Northern Ireland) is estimated to be around £7 million per year, although with much variation between institutions. Most of these costs can be attributed to staffing, and much of this concerned the repackaging of qualitative data and engagement with external examiners. The recommended removal of qualitative information from the site should further reduce the costs to institutions.

52. During its initial years, the central costs of commissioning the TQI site and the NSS were around £2 million per year. There will need to be some additional investment in relaunching the TQI

site, but these costs are expected to reduce gradually over time once the new site is established, and as the NSS becomes more efficient (with greater online participation).

Burden/workload

53. Generally, HEIs agree that institutional audit and TQI are less burdensome than the previous subject review method. TQI still imposes a burden on institutions that may not always be necessary, although the workload of meeting TQI requirements appears to vary between institutions according to how they interpret the requirements or the extent to which they wish to be engaged. The research found that departments which are now involved in the provision of data for TQI, but which were not previously engaged in subject review, have reported a significant increase in workload. Given that HEIs do not currently consider the publication of qualitative data on the TQI website to be of much value to them or their potential students, this workload is seen as disproportionate to the benefit. A major source of work is the need to repackage existing reports and information into a format suitable for publication. The QAFRG hopes that the removal of the qualitative information from the dataset, and the revision of the site so that it is of more use to potential students, will address many of these issues.

54. Some institutions, which chose to allocate a lot of staff time to encouraging students to respond to the NSS, found the survey a considerable burden, but others did not consider it so. There was an indication that survey fatigue in students has resulted in lower response rates to the institutions' own surveys.

Recommendation 11

HEFCE and other agencies should continue to monitor the burden and costs of TQI and the NSS, to ensure they are proportionate to their benefit.

Other points arising from the research

Benefits of implementing TQI

55. The research revealed a number of secondary beneficial outcomes of TQI, and examples of good practice regarding the way institutions have responded to it. It may be beneficial for the sector to be aware of these outcomes, which include:

- using TQI in internal briefings
- improved data management
- electronic submission of external examiner reports
- better co-ordination of central functions
- re-assessment of existing, or initiation of new, internal student satisfaction surveys
- appreciation and use of objective information that can facilitate benchmarking.

Monitoring site use

56. Some HEIs commented that they were not able to find out easily how many hits had been made on their part of the site, and expressed a wish for monitoring data on the use of the TQI site.

Recommendation 12

The QAFRG recommends to the TQI/NSS Steering Group that arrangements should be put in place on the TQI site to allow HEIs to monitor and evaluate use of their TQI data.

Further work

New data

57. User feedback suggested that an immediately visible summary of the key TQI statistics for a course area at an institution would be helpful. We suggest that the TQI/NSS Steering Group should explore this further; it will be important to consider the appropriate level of granularity for any such summary and avoid over-simplification of complex information.

58. The QAFRG also discussed whether additional contextual quantitative statistics regarding the profile of students and provision at the institution might be valuable. This could include data about, for example, the mix of full-time and part-time students, young and mature students, home and international students. These data could be produced at institutional level rather than course level. If developed, the information should be drawn from existing HESA data and not require any additional collection of information from institutions. We suggest that the TQI/NSS Steering Group should consider developing this in the medium term, following the 2007 launch of the revised site.

59. With regard to qualitative data that is optionally published on institutional web-sites, it may be valuable to do further work into the kind of institution-level contextual information that would be useful to users and would help institutions to promote their own individuality to potential students, but in a way that could be compared. Such information could be produced by institutions, perhaps on their own web-sites but with links from the TQI site.

60. The QAFRG considered whether any other additional data should be put onto the revised TQI site. It agreed that this was not advisable at this stage as the priority should be to get the existing data formatted and presented in a better way. Once the site is more established and has built up better public awareness, it may be appropriate for the TQI/NSS Steering Group to consider this issue again.

Other users of the site

61. While potential students are clearly identified as the main target audience of the TQI data and web-site, the QAFRG bore in mind the Task Group's original aim that TQI should meet the needs of a range of stakeholders. In its research and discussion, the QAFRG identified three other main types of users: HEIs, employers, and statutory, regulatory and funding bodies. The group established that

these users would have different information needs to those of potential students, and while some of the TQI data may be useful to them, it would need to be presented or analysed differently.

62. Some initial thoughts about the information needs of these users are set out below. Further work to define their needs and adapt data accordingly would be needed before TQI could be developed specifically for their benefit, and the sector would need to be consulted regarding some issues. The QAFRG stresses that the needs of potential students need to be addressed first before commencing work for other users.

HEIs

63. While views among HEIs about the NSS are mixed, the student feedback is taken seriously and brings about change. Some HEIs considered that TQI had the potential to become, over time, an independent, impartial and stable source of information against which they could compare aspects of their performance against other providers.

64. Currently, detailed NSS results are provided to HEIs specifically for their internal use through the NSS dissemination web-site. There is potential to provide access to the other TQI data (HESA-based statistics) in a similar way, to help HEIs to benchmark with other institutions and to contribute further to quality enhancement. This could be delivered in a number of ways, including through an extension of the NSS dissemination site, through a separate area of the future TQI site, through HESA, or through the HEIDI project⁵.

65. Some HEIs suggested that they should be able to add their own questions to the NSS, to avoid the need for additional surveys. The potential to increase the value of the NSS to HEIs has been considered by the TQI/NSS Steering Group, which has agreed to pilot some additional questions, for reporting internally to the institution.

66. Before considering potential solutions, it will be important to clarify the level and nature of

⁵ HEIDI stands for Higher Education Information Database for Institutions. The aim of this project, led by the University of Leeds, is to implement a new web-based management information tool that will reduce the burden on HEIs of extracting and manipulating data for planning and reporting purposes. See <http://heidi.hesa.ac.uk>.

institutions' interest in such data. Any further work will need to be the subject of consultation with institutions and should not involve additional burden.

Employers

67. The research by the University of Sussex into the information needs of employers indicates that employers do consider issues of academic quality and standards when recruiting graduates, but do not have much use for the TQI site in its current form. For the purposes of graduate recruitment, the data are simultaneously too general (relating to organisations rather than the individual graduates in which they are interested) and too specialised (a high level of extraneous detail). Employers would value more programme-level information so that they can find out what a graduate has learnt on their course. The data are more useful for finding information about individual institutions, which employers can use to target marketing and recruitment drives. Employers' time constraints mean that there is a need for at-a-glance information that is easy to access.

68. It might be possible to revise and reformat the TQI data in a way that could better inform employers' recruitment processes, and perhaps display this on a distinct area of the TQI site. However, any attempt to do so is likely to be very challenging, in terms of meeting diverse employer needs, encouraging them to use the information, and avoiding any additional burden for the sector. As employers' information needs are generally being met by a range of other sources, and further work is being undertaken by HEFCE via its employer engagement programme, this is not a high priority for work at present.

Statutory, regulatory and funding bodies

69. The group recognises that these bodies, including the funding councils, may wish to use TQI/NSS data to contribute to decisions regarding public accountability, in addition to other existing information such as QAA reports. These agencies may carry out further work, in consultation with

the sector, to specify how they might use the data. Any such use should be co-ordinated under the auspices of the Higher Education Regulatory Review Group concordat in order to avoid duplication and unnecessary burden on institutions.

Higher education in further education

70. Currently, FECs that deliver HE have a minimal presence on the site. This means that potential students using the site may not be aware that HE is an option at these institutions. Even if they are aware of HE in FECs, they are unable to compare it with HEI information. The group notes HEFCE's intention to rectify this by developing a TQI dataset for HE in FECs that is as analogous as possible to that for HEIs, which will be in keeping with the key purpose of the site, that is, informing potential students. A steering group of key stakeholders, reporting to the main TQI/NSS Steering Group, is overseeing this work.

Recommendation 13

To ensure that the data are comparable for users, recommendations made by the QAFRG in this report should apply equally to the HEI and FEC datasets.

Annex A

QAF Review Group terms of reference

1. To consider the impacts, benefits and costs of the QAF to date, and to make recommendations about any changes that could further improve the QAF in England and Northern Ireland for the 'steady state' beyond 2006. The QAF is defined as QAA institutional audit and collaborative audit, developmental engagements (in the transitional phase), TQI and the NSS, and the use made by institutions of the Academic Infrastructure (a set of nationally agreed reference points developed by the QAA on behalf of the HE sector), in particular the 'Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education'.
2. To oversee the following strands of the QAF review:
 - a. Assessing the emerging impact of the transitional phase of audits and developmental engagements, and their effectiveness in securing the public interest in quality and standards. (Completed July 2005.)
 - b. Assessing the indirect and direct costs of the transitional phase, and projecting costs of the QAF for the 'steady state' beyond 2006. (Completed July 2005.)
 - c. Reviewing the wider and changing context within which the QAF operates, to identify any significant implications for the framework.
 - d. Assessing how far the revised QAF is providing institutions and the sector as a whole with useful information about institutional quality assurance processes and quality enhancement, by means of TQI and the NSS.
 - e. Assessing how far the revised QAF is providing students, potential students, employers and others with information about quality and standards (by means of the TQI and NSS) that is reliable, valid, comprehensible, comprehensive, relevant and easily accessible.
 - f. Reviewing the impacts, benefits and costs of audits of collaborative provision.
3. To advise the commissioned consultants in meeting their brief to assess the impacts, effectiveness and costs of the revised QAF to produce evidence for the review.
4. To report to the sponsoring bodies (HEFCE, Universities UK and GuildHE) against each of the main strands and to make any recommendations for the development of the QAF, with due regard for the principles of good regulation.
5. The review of the impacts, benefits and costs of collaborative provision audits to be completed after summer 2006 (exact timescale to be determined).

Annex B

QAF Review Group membership

Members

Chair

Dame Sandra Burslem

HEFCE committee for Quality Assurance and Learning and Teaching

Professor Phil Jones, Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Sub-Warden, University of Durham

Dr Helen Higson, Deputy Head of Academic Programmes/Director of Undergraduate Studies, Aston Business School, Aston University

Universities UK

Professor Robert Burgess, Vice-Chancellor, University of Leicester

Professor David Vandelinde, Vice-Chancellor, University of Warwick (up to May 2006)

Universities UK/TQI/NSS Steering Group

Professor Michael Arthur, Vice-Chancellor, University of Leeds and Chair of TQI/NSS Steering Group

GuildHE

Professor David Vaughan, Principal, Cumbria Institute of the Arts

Professor Philip Robinson, Vice-Chancellor, University of Chichester

NUS

Dr Sofija Opacic, Higher Education Policy and Research Analyst

Representing professional and statutory bodies

Cara Talbot, Quality Assurance Programme Manager, General Medical Council

Association of Graduate Recruiters

Carl Gilleard, Chief Executive

Co-opted

Professor Roger Brown, Vice Chancellor, Southampton Solent University

Ex Officio

HEFCE

Liz Beaty, Director, Learning and Teaching; Sean Mackney, Head of Learning and Teaching

DEL, Northern Ireland

Celia Chambers

Observers

QAA

Peter Williams

DfES

Jane Tory (up to February 2006); Philip Lomas (from July 2006)

Higher Education Funding Council for Wales

Karen Jones (up to February 2006); Celia Hunt (from May to August 2006);

Cliona O'Neill (from August 2006)

Scottish Funding Council

Lesley Sutherland

Higher Education Academy

Professor Paul Ramsden (from July 2006)

Secretariat

HEFCE

Emma Creasey; Graeme Rosenberg

Universities UK

Caroline Carpenter (up to May 2006); Fiona Hoban (from May 2006)

GuildHE

Helen Bowles

Annex C

Summary of recommendations

Recommendation 1

The main purpose of the TQI data and web-site should be established as helping potential students to make informed choices about where to study, using academic information relating to quality and standards.

Recommendation 2

While maintaining the integrity and accuracy of the information, the TQI/NSS Steering Group should ensure that the development of the site is driven by this purpose.

Recommendation 3

The existing quantitative dataset has value, and therefore should continue to be published.

Recommendation 4

The TQI/NSS Steering Group, liaising with HESA, should continue to identify specific problems and ways forward regarding JACS codes, and seek a better match between use of the system by HEIs and by UCAS.

Recommendation 5

Given that qualitative data (summaries of external examiners' reports, summaries of learning and teaching strategies, summaries of periodic reviews and summary descriptions of employer links) appear not to be useful to potential students, are used inconsistently between providers, and are costly and burdensome to HEIs, these should be removed from the TQI site.

Recommendation 6

Institutions should share external examiners' reports as a matter of course with institutional student representatives, for example through staff-student committees.

Recommendation 7

As a result of the removal of qualitative information from the TQI web-site, there is a need for institutions to make information public by other methods. This should include consideration of the data at Annex F, and institutions should review their publication schemes.

Recommendation 8

The NSS should continue to run annually for the time being.

Recommendation 9

QAFRG recommends to the Department of Health that its students should be included in the NSS in the interests of full coverage.

Recommendation 10

The QAFRG recommends to the TQI/NSS Steering Group that the TQI web-site should be substantially revised, taking into account the following issues:

- The web-site should be re-named to better describe its purpose.
- The user interface should be changed to make the data more accessible. This should include changes in terminology.
- The web-site should include guidance on how to use it and how to interpret the data (with information about any limitations of the data).
- The web-site should be properly marketed to the target audience of potential students and their advisers.
- Links should be made to TQI from the UCAS site and other relevant sites.

Recommendation 11

HEFCE and other agencies should continue to monitor the burden and costs of TQI and the NSS, to ensure they are proportionate to their benefit.

Recommendation 12

The QAFRG recommends to the TQI/NSS Steering Group that arrangements should be put in place on the TQI site to allow HEIs to monitor and evaluate use of their TQI data.

Recommendation 13

To ensure that the data are comparable for users, recommendations made by the QAFRG in this report should apply equally to the HEI and FEC datasets.

Annex D

Summaries of research reports

‘Teaching Quality Information web-site: qualitative user evaluation’

Ipsos MORI and the Institute of Educational Technology at the Open University

1. The researchers conducted seven focus groups around the UK in the autumn of 2005, three with careers teachers or advisers and four with students applying to university for 2006 entry. In each group, respondents were given a defined scenario and asked to visit the TQI web-site to explore the content. It became apparent in the first two groups that respondents were not visiting large parts of the site, so in the subsequent five groups they were given task sheets to ensure that they looked at all the main features.
2. Further feedback was sought from teachers and careers advisers by means of a paper survey.
3. The researchers’ conclusions were as follows:
 - a. The name of the site is confusing, as it does not mention universities, which is its primary focus. Respondents expected it to have ‘university’ in its title.
 - b. Respondents found the information on the site of interest, especially the NSS and other quantitative data, but were hampered from accessing it by the web-site layout.
 - c. The qualitative information was generally found to be wordy and uninformative, and difficult to use in making comparisons between institutions.
 - d. The web-site is not very intuitive to use which means that key features required from the site, such as the ability to compare different courses and/or universities, are not apparent to users.
 - e. The site has been designed to be very ‘academic’ in style and content, which discourages students from using it; there are ‘too many words’.
 - f. The layout, involving long scroll-down pages, is seen as being difficult to use. Respondents question why more of the full screen width is not used, which would reduce the information that needs to be carried over.
 - g. The NSS data are difficult to find on the web-site as currently designed. There is a link on the subject page, but the label is greyed out on the statistics section. As this was the most interesting information on the site for many students and advisers, it needs to be much more prominent and easy to access.
 - h. The respondents found some of the statistics difficult to understand. It is essential that all tables have clear labels explaining whether the numbers shown are actual numbers, percentages or points. The preference is to use percentages wherever possible, as these make comparison between courses or universities much easier. Respondents do not understand statistical terms, such as quartiles.
 - i. Respondents liked the use of charts, but want them clearly labelled and not (as at present) requiring a mouse movement to reveal the labels. They also found the colour-coded key difficult to understand and frustrating to use as it required them to scroll up and down from the table to the chart.
 - j. The subject listing, as presented on the site, is difficult to use. Respondents expected to find all subjects listed alphabetically and not, as at present, under broad subject category headings.
 - k. The facility to make up a selection of different subjects and institutions and to compare data for each is appreciated as an important feature of the web-site, but it is also one which needs to be explained explicitly up front. At present, many users do not find this feature in the course of exploring the features of the site. This is not helped by the location and small size of the ‘Add to my TQI selection’ icon.
4. Careers advisers’ and teachers’ comments in response to the paper-based survey generally reflected the findings of the focus groups. Survey respondents found the information on the site useful, and some stated that they would be using the site to advise students rather than just passing on the site link to students. The report suggested that advisers should be contacted as the revised site

goes live. This should include a reminder of the site, its existence, its location and a worked example of how the site might be of use to their students or clients.

'Impact of the Teaching Quality Information initiative on higher education institutions'

Alan Brickwood & Associates

1. This research sought to answer the following questions:

- a. What are the potential positive impacts on HEIs of the various elements of TQI/NSS?
- b. What are the potential negative impacts on HEIs of the various elements of TQI/NSS?
- c. In the light of the above, in what ways could the TQI specification and web-site be made more cost effective and useful from the perspective of HEIs? Are there any further suggestions for improvements?
- d. What are the costs of TQI – both financially and in resources such as staff time?

2. Researchers conducted interviews with a wide range of people in a stratified sample of 13 institutions that was representative of the sector as a whole, and with a number of partner and stakeholder organisations and groups, between February and June 2006. Emerging findings were presented at two seminars in May and feedback sought from the sector.

3. Respondents were broadly supportive of the objectives of TQI, but very few believed that it could achieve these in its current form.

4. While it was agreed that HEIs are not the intended prime beneficiaries of TQI, the following positive aspects of the initiative were identified:

- a. A reduction in the overall burden upon institutions and an associated reduction in costs compared with previous quality assurance arrangements such as subject review.
- b. Student unions were generally enthusiastic about the NSS, believing that it improved their ability to be heard and to contribute effectively to

decision-making that affected them. HEIs were taking the results of the NSS seriously.

- c. TQI was perceived by some as an independent, impartial and stable source of information which had the potential to become an influential aid for professional advisers in schools, colleges and in careers services. HEIs could also use TQI to compare aspects of their performance against other providers and, as a consequence, improve planning processes, including marketing.
 - d. In some institutions, the provision of TQI had prompted beneficial changes to administrative procedures such as data collection and management and submission of external examiners' reports.
5. By contrast, the research identified the following negative aspects:
- a. There is a lack of clarity over the purpose of TQI, the range of intended users and how they can best be served.
 - b. The TQI web-site is not 'user-friendly'; its content is incomprehensible to external readers and its functionality and design are poor.
 - c. As a consequence of this 'failure to deliver', TQI had a low status in many HEIs and among the potential user group.
 - d. The way that academic programmes are presented, using the JACS coding system, gave a distorted or even incorrect view of the institution's provision.
 - e. Most of the qualitative data, in particular external examiners' summaries, were perceived to be bland and of little value in providing information about the institution in a way that facilitated comparison. These data were also costly and burdensome to produce.
 - f. There was disparity between the data published for England and Northern Ireland and that for Scotland and Wales, which was unhelpful for UK-wide recruitment.
 - g. Staff responsible for TQI had experienced significant increases in workload.
 - h. All those responsible for managing and administering TQI spoke of their frustration

from the outset with changing specifications and with technical and functional problems in routine tasks of uploading information onto the web-site.

Costs

6. The researchers sought to identify the direct costs that institutions were able to attribute to the activities they undertook in support of TQI and NSS in 2004-05 and 2005-06. HEIs were asked to estimate costs for TQI and NSS activities in 2006-07. The methods used to identify and scale up the costs for the whole sector are detailed in the final report.

7. The researchers calculated that the average (mean) cost per institution of implementing TQI was £30,500 for start-up costs and £18,400 for recurrent expenses in year one (2004-05). Set-up costs are expected to have fallen virtually to zero by 2006-07 (year three), assuming no major changes to the information requirements, but the researchers estimate that recurrent expenditure will by then be around £54,300 per institution.

8. By far the largest cost to institutions was in terms of staff time, staffing costs comprising 97 per cent of the direct costs of operating the TQI including NSS, and 78 per cent of total costs in year one (2004-05). Moreover, staffing costs as a percentage of total costs are forecast to increase over the three-year period covered by the report, assuming no change to the dataset.

9. The researchers made the following recommendations to the QAFRG.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Clarify the purpose of TQI, the range of users it intends to serve and how that can best be achieved, taking into account other sources of information. At present it is attempting unsuccessfully to serve a wide range of users without any differentiation.

Recommendation 2

Employ a more suitable method of presenting the provision within HEIs. That method will need to accommodate and accurately present the diversity and

distinctiveness that exists within the sector, including size. The current use of JACS codes is failing to provide good, accurate and representative information upon which users can base informed choices.

Representatives of HEIs need to enter into discussions with HESA and other key players such as HEFCE and UCAS to decide how the JACS subject classification can better be used to the advantage of TQI, or whether there is a real appetite for finding a radical alternative to the current use of JACS codes.

Recommendation 3

Until a more suitable method of presenting provision can be developed, some improved explanation of the limitations of TQI data needs to be provided – a ‘health warning’ on why certain datasets are not comparable; why information is not available for individual programmes; the ‘shelf life’ of some data; and also that the absence of information for technical reasons does not imply any negative connotations about that provision.

Recommendation 4

The continued inclusion of external examiners’ reports, as the means of providing public accountability for quality and standards, should be reviewed. Almost all we spoke to questioned the value of this component to users and pointed to the high costs of providing it.

There is an inconsistency with information on HEIs in Scotland and Wales, which does not include external examiner reports. This is unhelpful to UK-wide recruitment and further points to a need to review the inclusion of these reports.

Recommendation 5

TQI needs to be redesigned to make it more ‘user friendly’ with improved navigation, transparency and appeal appropriate to the needs of diverse intended users.

Recommendation 6

Re-launch TQI – possibly with a more suitable name.

Recommendation 7

Provide links from TQI to other sources of information and especially to UCAS to facilitate the user 'search journey'.

Recommendation 8

Clarify the 'ownership' of TQI and especially how decisions affecting its current priorities and future plans are taken and how the interests of HEIs are represented. Many we spoke to seemed to believe, incorrectly, that it is owned by the QAA.

Recommendation 9

A transparent and explicit system for monitoring of use is required.

'Needs of employers and related organisations for information about quality and standards of higher education'

University of Sussex School of Education

1. This study engaged employers from large, small and medium-sized public, private and voluntary sectors throughout England, to establish what their information needs are regarding quality and standards and student achievement in higher education. They were asked about their graduate recruitment practices, what information they used about HEIs, what they wanted in graduate employees, and their views on the TQI web-site and recommendations from the Burgess Report. A total of 41 employers were interviewed and a further 100 were surveyed. Three focus groups were conducted, in the East Midlands, Sussex and the North West. Relevant literature and policy documentation were also analysed.

2. The project aims were:

- to explore employers' awareness of current information on quality and standards in higher education and proposals to revise methods of recording student achievement
- to seek views from employers and related organisations about how they engage with the information on the TQI web-site and in the NSS

- to identify omissions in current information systems in order to meet employers' needs
- to solicit views and advice from employers and related organisations on recommendations from the Burgess Report on recording student achievement.

3. This investigation also explored employers' graduate recruitment and selection processes, to provide a context for considering their use of the TQI site and student achievement information. Some contextual matters considered were:

- a. Time – the time that employers spend on recruitment; induction time and the time that employers believe graduates will stay working in their organisations.
 - b. Graduate recruitment as a staged process, for example, initial screening via web-sites, short-listing and interviewing.
 - c. When recruiting graduates, do employers seek to fill posts, or to spot talent for the future?
 - d. How employers select universities to target for their graduate recruitment, for example, the Top 20, *The Times* lists, specialist knowledge and so on.
 - e. Equality legislation.
 - f. What are the employers' needs and constraints, and how are they manifested during the recruitment process?
4. The researchers made the following specific comments and recommendations with regard to TQI. The recommendations were made with the assumption that the TQI site might be revised in the future with the needs of employers in mind.
- a. To date, the TQI web-site has had limited impact on employers. Only 7 per cent of employers in the interview sample had heard of it, or had even seen it. Those who had looked at it, had done so largely in response to the request for an interview on the subject.

- b. The survey found that only 12 per cent had visited the web-site. Forty per cent of the sample said that they were likely to visit it for recruitment purposes in the future; 60 per cent were unlikely to do so.
- c. Some employers in the interview sample believed that TQI data could be of significant interest to them in their planning, for example checking to see which HEIs offered programmes related to their interests and which HEIs to target for their marketing (32 per cent). Very few believed that it could be of use in their decision-making about individual applicants (5 per cent).
- d. A major explanation for not wanting to use the TQI site was the time factor. The survey found that nearly 70 per cent of organisations spent less than 15 minutes per candidate on short-listing. Employers in the interviews feared that consulting the site could significantly increase the time that they need for recruitment.
- e. A further concern expressed by some was that the information was fairly difficult to access, as it involved extensive searching of individual HEIs and programmes. There were requests for more comparative, summarised datasets.
- f. Several employers expressed concerns about the audience. They believed that the TQI web-site was more appropriate to students in their decision-making processes, or educationalists seeking information about the performance of HEIs. They did not believe that the site was appropriate, in its current form, for employers.
- g. Many employers in the sample reported that their focus was on the individual applicant (academic achievement, competencies, skills, experience, and potential). They were less interested in institutions. In some cases, there were fears that the use of TQI data could be an equality issue, as additional information could advantage/disadvantage applicants.

Recommendations

6. As so few of the informants had seen or used the TQI site, it was difficult to ascertain their precise needs in relation to it. Generally, there needs to be

more publicity and awareness-raising about the site to encourage employers to use it.

7. Employers' stated needs do not always appear to relate to the data provided in the TQI site, as they placed considerable emphasis on non-academic qualities such as interpersonal skills and teamwork. There needs to be more consultation with employers about the types of data included in the site.

8. There could be a separate site prepared especially for employers which could include links to the TQI web-site, and data and information on employability profiles, league tables, transcripts, personal development plans and so on. This resource could include information on how degree classifications are calculated. The Association of Graduate Recruiters has expressed a willingness to assist with the development of this site.

9. If the TQI web-site is to be an important source of information on quality and standards for employers, it needs to be improved as follows:

- some employers pointed out that datasets were incomplete. Wherever possible, data should be inserted and regularly updated
- some employers reported that it would be helpful to have more information at programme level and to be able to compare programmes in the same subject area, on a regional or national basis. The information was also requested at modular level by some of the employers of graduates in science, technology, engineering and mathematics
- some employers suggested that the site could show which programmes are professionally accredited
- there needs to be more awareness of employers' time constraints. Employers need more at-a-glance data, with special employers' pathways through the site or a special section for employers. Most employers are more likely to use the current datasets for targeting their marketing than for individual graduate recruitment
- details of courses which attract sponsorship could be highlighted

- the site could contain more information relating to diversity, for example on ethnicity or gender of students, to help those employers who are hoping to increase the diversity of their workforce
- some employers felt that the site had not been designed with employers in mind. A guide for employers would be helpful to facilitate navigation of the site
- the front page needs to be changed to attract a wider audience.

Annex E

Original TQI dataset and NSS questions

(Summarised from HEFCE 2003/51, 'Information on quality and standards in higher education: Final guidance').

1. Quantitative data (provided from HESA by subject area):

- a. Data on students' entry qualifications and tariff points.
- b. Data on students continuing at the institution, completing awards and leaving without awards (separately for students after the first year of study, and for all years of study).
- c. Data on class of first degree achieved by students.
- d. Data on leavers entering employment or further study, or unemployed, and data on the most common job types held by employed leavers.
- e. Results of the National Student Survey.

(Items a-d are provided from HESA.)

2. Qualitative data:

- a. Summaries of the findings of external examiners at programme or subject level, produced annually.
- b. A summary statement of the institution's learning and teaching strategy as presented to the HEFCE under its Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund programme.
- c. Summary statements of the results of, and the actions taken in response to, periodic programme and departmental reviews, to be undertaken at intervals of not more than six years.
- d. Summaries of the HEI's links with relevant employers, how the institution identifies employer needs and opinions, and how those are used to develop the relevance and richness of learning programmes. This information could be provided as a separate summary, or included as part of learning and teaching strategies and supplemented in individual programme specifications.

- e. A voluntary commentary by the HEI explaining the external examination structure at the institution.

- f. Links to programme specifications.

- g. Links to relevant reports on the QAA web-site.

(The QAFRG is recommending that items a-f are now removed.)

National Student Survey Questionnaire

For each statement, show the extent of your agreement or disagreement by putting a cross in the **one** box which best reflects your current view of the **course as a whole**.

- 5 Definitely agree
 4 Mostly agree
 3 Neither agree nor disagree
 2 Mostly disagree
 1 Definitely disagree
 N/A Not applicable

	5	4	3	2	1	N/A
The teaching on my course						
1. Staff are good at explaining things.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Staff have made the subject interesting.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Staff are enthusiastic about what they are teaching.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. The course is intellectually stimulating.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Assessment and feedback						
5. The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Assessment arrangements and marking have been fair.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Feedback on my work has been prompt.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. I have received detailed comments on my work.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Academic support						
10. I have received sufficient advice and support with my studies.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. I have been able to contact staff when I needed to.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. Good advice was available when I needed to make study choices.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Organisation and management						
13. The timetable works efficiently as far as my activities are concerned.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14. Any changes in the course or teaching have been communicated effectively.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15. The course is well organised and is running smoothly.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Learning resources						
16. The library resources and services are good enough for my needs.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
17. I have been able to access general IT resources when I needed to.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
18. I have been able to access specialised equipment, facilities, or rooms when I needed to.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Personal development	5	4	3	2	1	N/A
19. The course has helped me to present myself with confidence.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
20. My communication skills have improved.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
21. As a result of the course, I feel confident in tackling unfamiliar problems.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
22. Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Looking back on the experience, are there any particularly positive or negative aspects you would like to highlight?
(More space will be provided in the actual questionnaire.)

Positive :

Negative :



Annex F

Public information about academic standards and quality of HE provision

Future TQI site (from 2007 onwards)	HEI sites (and FEC sites where appropriate)	UCAS site – Information for applicants
<p>HESA data on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • entry qualifications/tariff points • students continuing/completing/leaving without awards • class of first degree achieved • leavers entering employment/further study. <p>NSS results.</p> <p>Links to QAA reports.</p> <p>Institutions' commentaries on the data and links to their web-sites (optional).</p> <p>Institutional-level 'contextual' statistics, drawn from HESA data – to be consulted on at a later date (see <i>paragraph 58 of the main document</i>).</p>	<p>These are suggestions for the kinds of information that may be of interest to the public and that institutions should consider making available, either by publication (eg, on their web-sites) or on request.</p> <p>Information on institutional context, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • mission statement • sections of corporate plan • statement of quality assurance policies and processes • learning and teaching strategy. <p>Information about the quality and standards of programmes, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • programme specifications • information about procedures and outcomes for programme approval, monitoring and review • details of accreditation from professional, statutory and regulatory bodies • arrangements for assessment and external examination procedures • results of internal student surveys. <p>Information about links with employers.</p>	<p>Course search by subject for all UCAS institutions.</p> <p>Actual amount of information for each course varies, but can include entry requirements, financial information, notes on accreditation of the course and teaching campuses.</p> <p>Short institutional briefing.</p> <p>Guidance on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • applying to HE, including admissions tests and using TQI • student finance • qualifications/tariffs. <p>Advice for overseas students and those leaving care.</p>

List of abbreviations

DH	Department of Health
FEC	Further education college
HE	Higher education
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI	Higher education institution
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
JACS	Joint Academic Coding System
NSS	National Student Survey
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
QAF	Quality Assurance Framework
QAFRG	Quality Assurance Framework Review Group
TQI	Teaching Quality Information



**Higher Education Funding Council for England
Northavon House
Coldharbour Lane
BRISTOL
BS16 1QD**

**tel 0117 931 7317
fax 0117 931 7203
www.hefce.ac.uk**