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## **Quality Assurance and Standards in UK Higher Education**

### **Response to the Quality Assurance Agency Consultation**

*The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education has issued a consultation document on its proposals for quality assurance and standards in UK higher education. In response, the Royal Society addressed a number of wide-ranging issues. The following statement was prepared by a working group chaired by Professor J.E. Midwinter. The other members were Dr J. Ashworth, Professor P.P. Edwards, Sir Brian Follett, Professor A. Howie and Dr E. Fellman (Secretary). The statement has been endorsed by the Council of the Royal Society.*

1. The Society concurs with the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) that efficient quality assurance and standards are of great concern to the UK higher education system, and therefore welcomes the Agency's emphasis on combining and streamlining the existing process of quality control, assessment and accreditation.
2. High standards of qualifications and awards at all levels of higher education are essential for the continued economic and cultural health of the United Kingdom. The Society considers that the success or failure of the system proposed by the QAA will depend critically upon the establishment of widely recognized and accepted attainment levels defined as H1 to H8 in the Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education [The Dearing Report]. The Society firmly believes that, in order to inspire confidence in the process, the UK benchmarks and standards must ensure a high degree of international comparability at all levels. In this country at present, such calibration is embarrassingly lacking. We note, however, that international calibration must take full account of factors like course length, extent of specialization prior to the course, and similar considerations that may vary from one country to another.
3. The most critically important "test" level from the Royal Society point of view is that of H4 (Honours degree). A vital step in bringing about international comparability and credibility to the benchmark system will thus be to recruit external examiners with the requisite international visibility and stature to set and to maintain the H4 standards.
4. The Society is aware of the widely held concern that at present a disparity exists between Honours degrees from different universities. This concern is illustrated, for example in the Higher Education Quality Council Graduate Standards Programme Final Report (1997) and the CBI report "Thinking Ahead: Ensuring the Expansion of Higher Education into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" (1994).
5. The Society welcomes the new emphasis on the importance of the external examiner. The effectiveness of the examining system depends on keeping

bureaucracy to a minimum and on being able to recruit competent and conscientious examiners. At present, the large number of Honours courses available causes the examination and assessment procedure to be an onerous task for individual examiners. The new role for the Registered External Examiner (REE), as suggested by the QAA, will clearly be an expanded one over that currently practised. This will have the effect of deterring high quality examiners from committing such large amounts of time to carrying out the task. Recruiting and retaining examiners of the highest calibre must be a priority task and the requirements placed upon them must be moulded to make the position as attractive as possible.

6. Since the examination of the very many Pass and Honours degrees (H3 and H4) will require a large number of external examiners, we strongly recommend that a clear distinction be drawn between examiners for each type of the two degrees. Since we expect the number of Honours degrees will be much smaller than the number of Pass degrees, this implies a small but very highly qualified cohort of Honours degree examiners on whose shoulders will fall the primary task of setting the "benchmark degree" standards and their international linking. The task for examiners on Pass degrees will be as important, but be proportionally less demanding. The Society considers that the group of Honours degree examiners in a given subject should be supplemented by one or two individuals from major overseas universities of standing, to further emphasise the international comparability required. Each overseas examiner could serve for perhaps a 2 year term.

7. The primary task of the REE would be to monitor standards relative to other universities in the UK and abroad. Initial attention, as now, would focus on the degree classifications of individual students but the REE's report would also be expected to cover issues such as the quality of basic understanding shown by the students and whether or not an excessive number of failures or low degree classes had occurred. A copy of the report would automatically go to the TQA. In the case of an unsatisfactory report, the TQA could then initiate a more comprehensive investigation, perhaps jointly with any external accreditation body, into the teaching quality of the course. REEs would thus not be expected to take on the additional and unreasonable burdens of assessing quality or of making some immediate decision over the future of an Honours degree course which could eventually result in legal action. TQA investigations or visits would be confined to problem cases flagged by warning REE reports.

8. Further, the Society believes that those institutions which cannot meet the required standards (outlined above) for an Honours degree in a given subject should only be funded at Pass degree level in that subject.

9. The Society considers that departments offering first degree courses only at the H3 level are unlikely to be acceptable for training at the higher levels of H7/H8 (MPhil/Doctorate). Moreover, it considers that only staff who clearly demonstrate excellence in research or other similar post-graduate level activity should be allowed to teach at levels H7/H8. Indicators of such excellence might be found in a high departmental RAE rating. Alternatively, the demonstrated excellence of a small group within a department either in research or, for example, in specialised industrial or other consultancy, could form the basis for H7/H8 courses in their own specialist area.

10. The Society is concerned that the same assessment criteria and methodology seem to be proposed for use at all levels H1 to H8, both for taught courses dealing with subject matter which is firmly established and well-documented as well as for

work that is, by its nature, open ended and undefined (research, for example). Thus, the Programme Specification Template (Annex A in the QAA consultation document) would seem inappropriate for levels H7/8. The Society recommends that a much clearer distinction be drawn between established and documented learning activity and open-ended exploratory learning (research) and that the QAA proposals be amended to recognize that difference.

11. In terms of the setting of standards at the H7/8 levels, the Society is of the view that the conditions set out in paragraph 10 above would in themselves do much to prevent abuse and restore confidence in the levels H7/8 of the higher education hierarchy. The Research Assessment Exercise methodology could perhaps be modified to take cognisance of these levels more strongly than at present.

12. The Society believes that the draft proposals from the QAA form a basis from which to move forward but that they will require substantial development before they can materially assist in restoring the required confidence and credibility in the UK higher education system. A greatly strengthened External Examiner System, with a clearly visible international element, seems to be the minimum possible requirement and for that to be viable, it will be essential to attract individuals of the highest personal credibility and academic standing to serve as REEs. We believe there is no possibility of achieving this unless such examiners:-

- are used very sparingly
- are focused exclusively on setting the Honours degree (H4) standard
- are supported by a few international colleagues of similar repute

13. A much larger cohort of REEs to work only at the H3 level will be required but provided that the H4 level is very solidly established, the H3 level will be more readily set and the demands on examiners will be proportionally less, making their recruitment easier. Thus we believe it essential to make a very clear distinction between the examiners for Pass and Honours degrees (H3 and H4), in essence establishing a small cohort of Senior REEs at H4 level and a much larger cohort of REEs at H3 level.

14. We have also proposed introducing a tight linkage between the giving of approval to teach at the highest levels (H7/8) and the demonstration of excellence at both the Honours degree (H4) level and at related research or other specialist study or consultancy.

15. The Society believes that universities should be encouraged to develop their own particular niches of excellence in cases where their products exceed the minimum requirements of the QAA. These courses will require their own validation and resourcing mechanisms and, in this way, institutions would be encouraged to develop their own standards and standing in the world market for higher education.

16. The Society concludes there is a need to restore credibility to the UK higher education system and believes that the above comments and suggestions begin to address this need.

## **Related Society Publications**

**Research Capability of the University System** (NAPAG report, April 1996; £20.00; ISBN 0 85403 502 8)

**Submission to the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education**  
(November 1996)

**Supplementary submission to the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education** (Dearing inquiry, May 1997)

**The Higher Education Sector: A Statement by the Royal Society** (May 1997)

**Response to the Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education** (Dearing Inquiry, October 1997)

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