Quality Terminology

In higher education some terms concerning academic quality are used in specific ways. The main terms are as follows:

- ‘Academic standards’ refers to the levels of achievement (in knowledge, understanding and competence) that students reach to achieve their awards.
- ‘Quality’ is concerned with the conditions necessary to enable attainment of standards, in other words, how well learning opportunities help students to achieve their awards. It is the responsibility of each institution to offer good quality education and to ensure that appropriate standards are achieved.
- ‘Quality Assurance’ is the term generally used to refer to the processes of monitoring and ensuring quality. They focus on different aspects of students’ experience, for example the quality of learning resources, the support and guidance given to students, the quality of teaching and the extent to which the experience meets students’ needs.
- ‘Quality Enhancement’ is the way in which institutions seek to improve student learning through development in teaching and learning, assessment, through staff development and the sharing of good practice.

The Quality Assurance Agency (the QAA Scotland) provides substantial guidance on how different aspects of quality are defined and implemented in higher education. Governing bodies will also wish to know how their institutions use other techniques including benchmarking to assure quality more generally in business and other processes.

Quality: Key Questions for Governors

In carrying out their strategic responsibilities in relation to quality, governors may need to address a number of key questions:

- What is our institution's quality policy?
- What use does the institution make of external benchmarks?
- How does quality and how do standards of attainment match up with those of competitors and partners (as judged by performance and statistical indicators such as quality judgements, degree results and employability indicators)?
- What are the outcomes of accreditation and review processes?
- How do particular groups of students perform, and how does this relate to key strategic areas?
- How is quality enhanced and how are academic standards maintained or raised?
- Are reports on quality matters regularly reported to governors?

Quality: The Legal Context

This section sets out the legal context in relation to quality matters, but there are other legal aspects of governance.

The Further and Higher Education Act, 1992 (c.13) describes the funding councils' responsibilities in respect of the assessment of the quality of education provided by institutions for which public funding is received. The Act requires that each funding council shall:

(a) Secure that provision is made for assessing the quality of education provided in institutions for whose activities they provide, or are considering providing, financial support under this part of this Act.

(b) Establish a committee, to be known as the 'Quality Assessment Committee', with the function of giving them advice on the discharge of their duty under paragraph (a) above and such other functions as may be conferred on the committee by the council. The funding councils contract with the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) to assess the quality of education.
Powers to Award Degrees

Prior to 1992, most universities acquired their powers to award degrees through the grant of a Royal Charter. Since 1992, the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 has provided for such powers to be granted by order of the Privy Council. The Act describes the role of the Privy Council in specifying the competence of an institution to award degrees, diplomas, certificates or other academic awards. Institutions so designated also have powers to grant honorary degrees.

Universities, and a small number of specialist institutions founded by Royal Charter, may award degrees of any type, for study at undergraduate or postgraduate (taught and research) level. Other institutions may be granted the power to award degrees in respect of taught programmes of study, or programmes of research. Research degree awarding powers are normally granted in conjunction with university title, but some specialist institutions also have their own research degree awarding powers. An institution with taught degree awarding powers may use the title ‘university college’. Institutions without their own degree awarding powers usually prepare their students for degrees awarded by a university or university college under a licensing or validation arrangement.

Further education colleges normally offer higher education programmes designed and approved directly by a degree awarding institution, under a sub-contracting or franchise arrangement. They may also offer programmes leading to foundation degrees or higher national awards, which are qualifications of a national awarding body. Under the Further Education and Training Act 2007, the Privy Council may grant foundation degree awarding powers to further education colleges in England and Wales, on the advice of the Quality Assurance Agency.

Teacher Training

The Training and Development Agency for Schools funds the provision of teacher training. In doing so, it is required to have regard: To any assessment of the quality of education provided by the institution:

- Made by Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Schools or
- To which the agency think it appropriate to have regard or to which the Secretary of State directs them to have regard.

The TDA’s conditions of grant to accredited providers require that OfSTED inspectors are given access to inspect the provision of initial teacher training against the Framework for the Inspection of Initial Teacher Training 2008 - 2011. A revised inspection framework was introduced in 2008 by OfSTED.

Other Statutory Bodies

A number of professions (such as medicine and professions allied to medicine) have statutory responsibilities to set standards for undergraduate and postgraduate education and training, to accredit relevant degrees and to inspect teaching locations (such as medical schools and teaching hospitals).

Academic Quality Management

Academic quality assurance and enhancement arrangements in institutions usually contain the following features:

- A quality policy or framework, which sets out guidelines, regulations and responsibilities for managing quality and safeguarding academic standards. This policy will be published and available to all staff, governors and students.
- A charter or equivalent that sets out the expectations and responsibilities of students and the standards of care and service that they can expect from the institution and its staff.
- A cycle of validations and accreditation for new programmes of study and reviews of existing programmes.
- Systems for recruiting, training and reviewing staff and their performance.
• Systems and procedures for assessing and examining student attainment, including the recruitment of external examiners.
• Systems for seeking, reviewing and acting upon feedback from students and other stakeholders.
• Performance targets and indicators in key areas (eg student recruitment, retention and attainment).
• A programme to support quality improvement and development, building on key indicators and regular self-assessment.
• A system for monitoring success (in relation to quality and standards), for undertaking systematic reviews and for resolving problems.

External Examiners
Each institution appoints external examiners who report to the head of the institution. External examiners are independent academic experts, drawn from other institutions, or from areas of relevant professional practice. Their main role is to assure the standards of awards.
A report arising from a review of the external examining system has been published by Universities UK.
Institutions are also required to adopt as part of their internal arrangements various processes required by the Quality Assurance Agency and other external agencies.

Quality Methodologies and Benchmarking
Some institutions have adopted the use of quality methodologies, in some cases directly involving their governing bodies. The most widely used are:

• **Investors in People (IIP Standard):** This is a national quality standard which sets a level of good practice for improving an organisation’s performance through its people. The standard was developed during 1990 by the National Training Task Force in partnership with leading national business, personnel, professional and employee organisations. The Employment Department supported the work. The Investors in People Standard is based on four key principles: commitment, planning, action and evaluation. These principles are broken down into 12 indicators, against which organisations are assessed.

• **The Business Excellence Model:** The EFQM Excellence Model was introduced in 1992 as the framework for assessing applications for the European Quality Award. It is the most widely used organisational framework in Europe and has become the basis for the majority of national and regional quality awards.

• **Benchmarking:** Governing bodies increasingly use comparative data to make comparisons between the performance of aspects of their own institution and others. Although potentially very valuable, care needs to be taken in making such comparisons so as to draw valid conclusions, and for this reason some institutions measure their performance against selected peer group comparators. HESA has published a detailed study of benchmarking in higher education.

The National Student Survey
The **National Student Survey** (NSS) has been running annually since 2005. It is a survey of mostly final year undergraduates, with the main purpose to help inform the choices of prospective higher education students about where and what to study. Participating institutions and student unions can also make use of the data to improve the student learning experience. The survey is conducted across all publicly funded higher education institutions in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and some institutions in Scotland.

The trends and findings from 2006 to 2009 have been published by Hefce. The 2012 results are also available and the detailed results can be found on the Unistats website.

Results in the annual NSS are seen as important because of their possible impact on student recruitment. However, its methodology is subject to some debate, and the results of a large number of institutions are so similar that using NSS results as a
league table of academic quality can be misleading. Some of the issues are reviewed in an article by Professor Frank Furedi.

The Quality Assurance Agency in England, Wales and Northern Ireland

Although quality assurance in higher education is the responsibility of each institution, major elements of the major assurance system are set externally. Of these the work of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) is probably most important. The QAA publishes substantial information about its various processes on its web site. The QAA assures quality in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in four main areas:

- The higher education provision of institutions on taught programmes (both undergraduates and postgraduate) through a process of institutional audit in England and Northern Ireland (though it should be noted that this changed from September 2011 to a new review system), and institutional review in Wales.
- Collaborative higher education provision with other institutions. Where this is on a large scale a separate collaborative provision audit is undertaken in England and Northern Ireland.
- Overseas higher education provision either in partnership with other providers or directly by the institution.
- The capacity of further education colleges to provide a range of higher education is assured in England through a process of integrated quality and enhancement reviews (IQER).

In all four kinds of provision the QAA expects institutions to apply a set of nationally agreed reference points, known as the 'academic infrastructure', which provides a means of describing academic standards in UK higher education, and has the following four parts:

- A code of practice provides guidance on maintaining quality and standards for universities and colleges subscribing to QAA.
- The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications describe the achievement represented by higher education qualifications.
- Subject benchmark statements set out expectations about standards of degrees in a range of subject areas. They define what can be expected of a graduate in terms of the abilities and skills needed to develop understanding in the subject.
- Programme specifications are a concise description of the intended outcomes of learning from a higher education programme offered by an individual institution, and the means by which these outcomes are achieved and demonstrated.

In reviewing provision the QAA makes one of three judgements: 'confidence'; 'limited confidence' and 'no confidence'. Overwhelmingly provision in the sector receives a 'confidence' judgement, and governors should be concerned if judgements for their own institution are anything less than this. QAA reports also make recommendations for action and governing bodies should generally be made aware of these.

The Quality Assurance Agency in Scotland

Although the QAA 'academic infrastructure' applies in Scotland, other aspects of quality assurance in higher education (and the QAA's role in it) is somewhat different to the rest of the UK. With the support of the Scottish Funding Council assurance is based on an enhancement approach rather than institutional audit, with institutions demonstrating to the QAA (Scotland) how the enhancement of learning and teaching is being taken forward. Since 2009 courts (governing bodies) of Scottish HEIs have been required by the SFC to approve formally institutional learning and teaching strategies as part of an explicit link between quality and enhancement. Also in Scotland there is no separate system for reviewing collaborative provision. Nor does the integrated quality and enhancement review (IQER) process apply as most higher education provision in further education colleges is assured by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education for Scotland and not QAA.
Quality Review Processes for Teaching

There are numerous quality review processes in place, in addition to the QAA, although governors are unlikely to encounter them all. However, from time-to-time issues may emerge which will need to be addressed by the governing body. In order to provide a coordinated approach to quality reporting, some institutions produce an annual report on quality issues for the governing bodies.

The total volume of external quality review processes (including those of the QAA) has been of increasing concern to institutions, and discussions have been taken place with the funding bodies on trying to reduce the volume of such reviews, and eliminate any duplication that might exist.

The main external processes are as follows:

- **Professional/Statutory Bodies**
  Professional and statutory bodies, for example, in engineering, law, accountancy, surveying, psychology, medicine, and professions allied to medicine, provide accreditation (an approval system) for programmes and awards offered by institutions in these subjects. They accredit those programmes (and the standards within them) which lead directly to a licence to practise and membership of the professional body or those programmes that form the initial phase of professional training.

- **OFSTED**
  Since 1996, OFSTED has been required to inspect the provision of both primary and secondary initial teacher training (ITT) courses in England using a framework agreed with the Teacher Training Agency (TTA). The TTA has a statutory function to accredit and fund providers of ITT. The counterpart agencies of the TTA in Scotland and Northern Ireland are the respective General Teaching Councils (GTCs). In Wales, the inspection function is undertaken by the Office of Her Majesty’s Chief Inspectors of Schools in Wales (ESTYN), in Scotland by HM Inspectorate of Education (HMIE) and in Northern Ireland by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). Where any aspect of an institution's provision is judged to be of poor quality and thus not complying with the Secretary of State’s criteria, a further inspection and report is made. The inspection is measured against national standards. The quality of training is judged by the extent to which provision across all aspects of the course is of consistently high standard.

- **The General Medical Council (GMC)**
  The GMC Education Committee is accountable for ensuring that every medical school in the UK implements its 1993 recommendations on basic medical education ('Tomorrow's Doctors'). From 1995 the GMC has undertaken two rounds of visits to medical schools. These visits dovetail with QAA visits and are informal and designed to be facilitative and supportive of curricular change, rather than judgmental. For this reason they contain no graded assessments of the quality of the provision available, or the quality of the student experience.

- **The Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC)**
  Since 1 April 2002, the NMC has taken over responsibility for the quality assurance of nursing, midwifery and health visiting educational programmes leading to registration or recordable NMC qualifications in England. In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, there will be service levels agreements with the new education bodies in each country. At present, the NMC is in the process of commissioning an independent review of its quality assurance processes for programmes leading to registerable and recordable programmes.

- **The General Dental Council (GDC)**
  The General Dental Council is the statutory regulatory body of the dental profession in the United Kingdom. It is charged with promoting high standards of dental education at all its stages, including both undergraduate and postgraduate education. The Council undertakes regular formal visits to all UK Dental Schools which involves thorough reviews to judge whether or not the courses offered are 'sufficient' within the meaning of the 1984 Dentists Act, so that, on graduation, dentists are competent to practise. The Council publishes requirements for the undergraduate dental curriculum which all schools must meet. A revised and updated edition of the requirements was published in March 1997, entitled The First Five Years.
• **Other Health Related Areas**
The Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain, the General Optical Council, and the Health Professions Council also have powers relating to the accreditation and monitoring of education, training and examination in their respective areas.

• **The Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA)**
In England, Wales and Northern Ireland the QCDA is a guardian of standards in education and training, and in Scotland the responsible body is the Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework. Both bodies advise their respective governments about the curriculum, about the ways in which learners are assessed, and about qualifications in both general and vocational education and training - not degrees. Both the QCDA and the SCQF are responsible for developing a framework of national qualifications and for developing, regulating and monitoring these qualifications and national occupational standards. The QCDA is due to close later in 2011.

**Quality Review Processes for Research**
The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) has since 1986 reviewed research in all participating institutions, and published results. These have been used to distribute funding council resources for research selectively on the basis of quality. The exercise has taken place every four to five years and the most recent and final one took place at the end of 2008.

The successor to the RAE is the Research Excellence Framework (REF). The REF will be introduced in 2014 and will inform funding from 2015-16. The funding councils’ Assessment Framework and Guidance on Submissions has been published.

**League Tables**
League tables, which are created by the aggregation of a range of measurable indicators of institutional performance, are now published by many national newspapers and, in an increasingly consumerist age, institutions are more and more conscious of their effect on student recruitment and reputation in general. Typically, league tables are produced by combining scores created from data on input measures (such as the entry qualifications or facilities spending per student), output measures (such as the number of good degrees awarded or graduate employment rates) and processes (such as student-staff ratios). League tables also impact on performance measurement.

Find more information and resources on this topic on our website at: [www.lfhe.ac.uk/en/governance/regulatory-framework/quality](http://www.lfhe.ac.uk/en/governance/regulatory-framework/quality)