LTC09D124

Title:	**Evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure: a QAA discussion paper**
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1. **Background**
   Members will be aware that a number of reviews are in progress by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) regarding the UK Higher Education student experience and standards of UK Higher Education Awards.

2. One of the reviews, by the QAA, concerns the appropriateness of the tools used by UK HE providers to set the standards of academic awards and assure the quality of the student learning experience. These tools are collectively known as the "academic infrastructure" and include the framework for higher education qualifications (FHEQ), subject benchmark statements, programme specifications and the Code of the Practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in HE (10 sections).

3. A copy of the consultation document of the discussion document is attached (Appendix A). We are invited to respond to seven questions by 07 May, 2010. The QAA hopes to publish a summary report of responses received in the Autumn with any proposals for substantive changes being subject to formal consultation later in 2010.

4. Set out below are some bullet points that may form the basis of the University's response, subject to the Committee's consideration and agreement.

1a	How widely recognised is the academic infrastructure? • Not widely outside the institution (e.g. employers/schools/parents/prospective students); • Some knowledge generally across the institution; • More specialist knowledge resides in LTC/LTQO.
1b	Who should be the audience for the academic infrastructure? • Primarily, HEIs and in particular, those academic and administrative support staff with responsibilities for academic standards and quality assurance/enhancement; • In descending order of relevance, students and other stakeholders e.g. Schools, employers; • *Outcomes* of audit are of more relevance to other stakeholders, albeit some reference to the relevant frameworks would be useful.

1c	What should be the primary purpose of the academic infrastructure?
	• As a tool for use by HEIs; • Should be clear as to what is a requirement and what is for guidance only.

1d	Does the academic infrastructure provide an adequate basis for the comparison of academic standards between institutions and between academic disciplines?
	• A very reserved yes on the basis of the role that the academic infrastructure plays in underpinning the judgements of every institutional audit, but: • Clarify that the issue is comparison of threshold standards – do not stray into area of degree classifications; • Could recognise distinction between research-led/rich/informed and purely teaching institutions (??).

2a	How should the academic infrastructure be better connected to quality assurance and enhancement activities?
	• Affirm that the central position of the academic infrastructure with regard to audit and therefore its importance with regard to internal QA/QE activities, is reasonably clear for HEIs; • However, recommend that clear indication of what is a requirement and what is merely guidance would be helpful for audit teams as they arrive at their judgements. • Otherwise, no change.

2b	What further developments are needed?
	• Consider whether to extend subject benchmark statements to all PGT provision; • Reservations regarding extension of Code of Practice to cover areas such as learning resources (albeit recognise that this will be important to students) as these are variable across institutions. Could begin to stray into areas of institutional autonomy.

3a	Have the qualifications frameworks met their original aims, expectations and anticipated benefits?
	• Largely (with regard to the FHEQ in England, Wales and Northern Ireland).

3b	Are the ways in which they are currently used appropriate and effective in setting and maintaining standards and quality?
	• Largely appropriate and effective; • Focus on academic progression has not always been helpful with particular regard to disciplines which have a broad range e.g. environmental sciences; • Concept of discrete levels therefore not always appropriate; • Concept of demonstration of learning outcomes has been useful with regard to "Bologna".

3c	What further developments are needed? • Reservation with regard to incorporation of credit framework into the FHEQ – too prescriptive; • Reservation regarding extension of qualification descriptors in broad subject discipline categories – too prescriptive.

4a	Have the subject benchmark statements met their original aims, expectations and anticipated benefits? To some extent.
4b	Are the ways in which they are currently used appropriate and effective in setting and maintaining standards and quality? • Mostly helpful – no indication of great concern amongst academic community.
4c	What further developments are needed? • Consider whether it would be useful to extend benchmark statements to a wider range of postgraduate taught disciplines; • Consider future development with regard to interdisciplinary and joint programmes; • Avoid any moves to enhance the status of subject benchmarks as a national curriculum; • Retain ownership by the various subject communities; • Retain flexibility in approach i.e. avoid becoming too prescriptive in terms of how a subject benchmark statement should be written.

5a	Have programme specifications met their original aims, expectations and anticipated benefits? • To a limited extent; • Main difficulty arises from primary audience – whether this is for providers or for students; • Challenges exist with regard to version control and changes over time; • Legal status of programme specification requires clarification.
5b	Are the ways in which they are currently used appropriate and effective in setting and maintaining standards and quality? • Quite useful; • Now reached a point where almost all courses (or suites of courses) have a programme specification; • Useful as part of a course approvals process and in linking the processes of module, monitoring and update feeding into course review/programme update. •

5c	What further developments are needed?
	• Clarify primary purpose of programme specification; • Avoid position where institutions have to develop different types of specification for different audiences; • Avoid one-template fits all, continue to allow some flexibility in template.

6a	Has the Code of Practice met its original aims, expectations and anticipated benefits?
	• To a large extent; • The "precepts and explanation" approach using explanations to make clear why precepts are considered important and reducing opportunities for a check list approach, is welcome; • Some concern regarding overlaps e.g. Section 2 - Collaborative Provision and Flexible and Distributed Learning and Section 9 – Workbased and Placement Learning, and, to a lesser extent, between Section 4 – External Examining and Section 6 – Assessment of Student.
6b	Are the ways in which it is currently used appropriate and effective in setting and maintaining standards and quality?
	• Largely effective with particular reference to quality assurance; • Revision to take a "precepts and explanation" approach (see above) was a welcome development; • Also welcomed is clarification that it is not necessary or to be expected that all members of academic staff at department or school or staff in support services would be familiar with all sections of code of practice. This is sensible.
6c	What further developments are needed?
	• Consider whether sections of code on assessment and external examining might usefully be merged into one (but possibly resulting in a rather long section); • Reservations re. proposed additional sections: teaching and learning methods (many and varied) and learning support resources may stray into issues of institutional autonomy. Note that the Higher Education Achievement Report is not yet a sectoral requirement so avoid temptation to move into areas that are still under discussion; • Agree that the status of European standards and guidelines for quality assurance in Higher Education would be usefully clarified but should not be incorporated as a separate section of the code. This would be too potentially confusing with multiple descriptors of standards; • Clarify that the principle of subsidiarity applies.

7	What do you think the future of the academic infrastructure should be? • Suggest either Scenario 1 (revision and periodic updating of the academic infrastructure) or 2 (redefinition of the components and concept of the academic infrastructure); • Scenario 3 viz: substantial reconsideration of the function, purpose and uses of the academic infrastructure not necessary, no clear reason as to why this would be necessary. Reservation re. possible new principles of "clarity of process" and the "student voice" without further details of what this might mean; • Avoid greater complexity in the desire to join up everything.

5.   Comments from LTC members are invited.

Evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure: a QAA discussion paper

February 2010

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Foreword

'A strong university system is essential to a country's economic success and the vibrancy and depth of its intellectual and cultural life.'[1]

Higher education in the UK has an international reputation for excellence. Maintaining the highest academic standards and quality is crucial to keeping this reputation. Recently however, concerns have been raised about how the public can best be assured of the quality of the UK higher education student experience and standards of UK higher education awards.[2] The current debates were explored in some depth by the House of Commons Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Select Committee inquiry in 2009. To date most of the subsequent investigations have focused on evidence from the higher education sector in England, and the investigations undertaken have not identified any systemic problems.[3] While responsibility for higher education is devolved to the regional administrations, the questions being discussed are of importance across the UK. As such a number of reviews and activities have been instigated which will consider areas where improvements can be made to ensure the reputation of UK higher education is maintained.

To accompany this discussion paper, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) has produced a short information paper[4] that outlines many of these initiatives and explains how the various activities will together help the sector to maintain the quality of experience it provides for students in higher education. The QAA-led project to evaluate the Academic Infrastructure - which has been underway for some time and of which this discussion paper forms a part - will also contribute to this wider body of work.

The Academic Infrastructure[5] is a set of UK-wide, nationally-agreed reference points that give all higher education providers a shared framework for setting, describing and assuring the quality of the learning experience and standards of higher education awards and programmes. This discussion paper asks for your views about how successful the Academic Infrastructure has been in meeting its original intentions. It also asks how the Academic Infrastructure might need to be developed in the future to ensure its continued relevance to the contemporary environment of UK higher education.

The paper contains a number of questions (see page 27 for a summary) about the role of the Academic Infrastructure, its relationship with other ways higher education providers set and maintain the quality and standards of their provision, and about the usefulness of each individual component of the Academic Infrastructure. It also raises questions about how the Academic Infrastructure could change to meet the challenges facing quality assurance processes in the future. The Appendix (see page 28) gives details of the sources of information drawn upon as evidence for this discussion paper.

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[1] *Higher Ambitions: the future of universities in a knowledge economy,* Department for Business Innovation and Skills (November 2009), available from www.bis.gov.uk/policies/higher-ambitions.
[2] The words 'academic standards' are used to describe the level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an academic award (for example, a degree). Academic quality is a way of describing how well the learning opportunities available to students are managed in order to help them to achieve their award. See www.qaa.ac.uk/students/faqs.asp, question 23.
[3] These include: QAA's *Thematic enquiries into concerns about academic quality and standards in higher education in England* (April 2009), available at www.qaa.ac.uk/standardsandquality/thematicenquiries; The Higher Education Funding Council for England's *Report of the sub-committee for Teaching, Quality, and the Student Experience - HEFCE's statutory responsibility for quality assurance* (October 2009), available at www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09_40; The House of Commons Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Select Committee inquiry: *Students and Universities* (August 09), available at www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmdius.htm.
[4] *Evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure: a QAA information paper*, available at www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/evaluation10.
[5] More information is available at www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure.

The content of this paper is technical in places as it describes the components of the Academic Infrastructure in detail and provides evidence as a basis for debate about how it might need to develop. Those currently most familiar with the Academic Infrastructure - staff in higher education providers with responsibility for the review, maintenance and revision of academic practice - will have a specific understanding and views about the Academic Infrastructure, but we would also like to hear from non-specialists, and welcome their input to the evaluation. In order to engage a wider audience in the discussion, who may be familiar with the issues but not the terminology, a shorter, summary version of this paper is also available at www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/evaluation10.

We look forward to hearing your suggestions, which should be sent to QAA by 7 May 2010. You may also be interested in attending one of our two discussion events, 'Assuring quality and standards in higher education', in Leeds (24 March 2010) or London (1 April 2010). Further details on the events are available from www.qaa.ac.uk/events.

A report summarising the responses to this discussion paper will be published in autumn 2010. Any proposals for substantive changes to the Academic Infrastructure will be subject to formal consultation later in the year, and will take account of the findings and developments of other ongoing activities.

Anthony McClaran

1   Introduction

1.1   One of the original purposes of the Academic Infrastructure was to help to assure public confidence in higher education by providing more information about higher education qualifications. Our evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure asks whether it has and continues to do this, and invites feedback and comments on how, if at all, it should evolve. This paper asks for your views on both the [Academic Infrastructure as a whole](#) and on its [individual components](#). Finally, drawing on the evidence presented in the paper we have suggested three possible [scenarios](#) for the future:

- scenario 1: revision and periodic updating of the Academic Infrastructure
- scenario 2: redefinition of the components and concept of the Academic Infrastructure
- scenario 3: reconsideration of the function, purpose and uses of the Academic Infrastructure.

We would welcome your views on these or any ideas for other possible options which you may have.

1.2   The development of the Academic Infrastructure evolved from recommendations about quality and standards made in Higher Education in the Learning Society, the report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE 1997; otherwise known as the Dearing and Garrick reports; henceforth 'the Inquiry').[6] The Inquiry was set up to investigate how UK higher education was meeting the challenges posed by its rapid expansion during the 1990s. The Inquiry's recommendations were based on the notion that public confidence in academic standards required public understanding of the achievements represented by higher education qualifications that were being offered by a larger and more diverse set of providers. The term 'Academic Infrastructure' was later applied by QAA to the set of tools we developed in partnership with the higher education sector in order to help higher education providers maintain consistent standards of provision and outcomes. The intention was that the Academic Infrastructure would provide valid, reliable and useful information on qualifications to those with a stake in higher education: principally employers, potential students and current students. Both the concept underlying the Academic Infrastructure as a whole and features of its individual components have been picked up and used across the world - for example in Europe in connection with the Bologna process (the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area)[7] and in Australia in the Review of Australian Higher Education, chaired by Professor Denise Bradley.[8]

1.3   The Academic Infrastructure has now been in use in UK higher education for over 10 years. Periodically, each of the individual components of the Academic Infrastructure has been separately reviewed, revised and updated. During this period both the internal quality assurance processes used by higher education providers and the external audit and review methods we coordinate have also evolved. Additional reference points and supplementary guidance have been produced by QAA and others to complement the Academic Infrastructure.[9]

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[6] The reports of the National Committee, chaired by Sir Ron Dearing, and the separate Scottish Committee, chaired by Sir Ron Garrick, are available at www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/ncihe. The immediate Government response to the reports focused on the future funding structure for higher education. A subsequent fuller response to other aspects was published as *Higher Education for the 21st Century*, available at www.lifelonglearning.co.uk/dearing.
[7] The Bologna Process is an inter-governmental initiative which aims to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010 and promote the European system of higher education worldwide. More information is available at www.europeunit.ac.uk/sites/europe_unit2/bologna_process.
[8] The final report of the Review of Australian Higher Education is available at www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Review/Pages/default.aspx.
[9] For example: *Personal development planning: guidance for institutional policy and practice,* available at www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/progressFiles/guidelines/PDP; *Guidelines on the accreditation of prior learning*, available at www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/apl; *Guidelines for higher education institutions in*

1.4   The UK's world-class higher education provision is diverse, dynamic and fulfils many purposes of both public and private good. The Government, on behalf of tax payers, has a legitimate interest in knowing that the public funding which goes into higher education is well spent in supporting the UK economy and society. Students and employers also need to know what the expected outcomes from periods of study are. The Academic Infrastructure provides a means of meeting the need to make explicit the range of higher education provision and quality assurance arrangements in the UK for both local and international audiences. The evidence presented in this paper suggests that the Academic Infrastructure has served UK higher education well, but it is now time to step back and evaluate whether it can continue to be useful and effective, and whether any developments beyond periodic updating are needed in order to keep pace with changes in contemporary higher education.

1.5   Information from a range of activities undertaken by QAA and by other bodies has been used in the preparation of this discussion paper.[10] The drafting has also been informed by comments from representatives from across the UK higher education sector who were brought together as a Sounding Board for the evaluation, and from our staff, auditors and reviewers.

1.6   This paper has been circulated to individuals and institutions in the higher education sector, organisations and public bodies with an interest in higher education and to students through their representative bodies. It is also available on our website at www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/evaluation10 and has been publicised via links to from other higher education and public information websites and press releases. In order to stimulate discussion and provide a structure for your responses some questions are presented in each section of the paper. We would welcome responses to the questions or any other comments about the Academic Infrastructure that you might wish to make. However detailed or brief your response, please send your replies to:

Academic Infrastructure Evaluation
The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
Southgate House
Southgate Street
Gloucester
GL1 1UB

Or by email to academicinfrastructure@qaa.ac.uk by 7 May 2010.

1.7   A summary report of responses received will be published in autumn 2010. Any proposals for substantive changes to the Academic Infrastructure will be subject to formal consultation later in 2010.[11]

Wales for effective practice in examining and assessing in a language other than the language of tuition, available at www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeofpractice/languageguide; and *European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in higher education*, available at www.enqa.eu/files/ESG_3edition%20(2).pdf.
[10] More information about the sources used in given in the Appendix on page 28.
[11] The project plan for QAA's evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure, which sets out these stages in more detail, is available at www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/evaluation09.

2   The Academic Infrastructure: a summary

2.1   The Academic Infrastructure is a set of nationally-agreed reference points that gives all higher education providers in the UK a shared framework for setting, describing and assuring the quality of the learning experience and standards of higher education awards or programmes. The four elements of the Academic Infrastructure are described below.

The frameworks for higher education qualifications

Frameworks for higher education qualifications[12] describe the achievement represented by all higher education qualifications. They cover degrees, diplomas, certificates and other academic awards granted by a higher education provider with degree awarding powers. There are two higher education qualification frameworks in the UK: one for England, Wales and Northern Ireland and one for Scotland, because of historic differences in educational systems.

Subject benchmark statements

Subject benchmark statements[13] set out expectations about awards in a range of subject areas. They describe what gives a discipline its coherence and identity, and define what can be expected of a graduate in terms of the abilities and skills which illustrate understanding of and competence in the subject. Where there is a relevant professional or regulatory body, the benchmark statement may be combined with or refer to the required professional standards.

Programme specifications

A programme specification[14] is a concise description of the intended learning outcomes from a specific higher education programme, and the means by which these outcomes can be achieved and demonstrated. We publish guidelines on preparing programme specifications but the specifications themselves are developed by individual higher education providers.

Code of practice

The *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*[15] (hereafter, the *Code of practice*) provides guidance on maintaining quality and standards for higher education providers. It is made up of 10 sections:

1 Postgraduate research programmes
2 Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)
3 Students with disabilities
4 External examining
5 Academic appeals and student complaints on academic matters
6 Assessment of students
7 Programme design, approval, monitoring and review
8 Career education, information and guidance
9 Work-based and placement learning
10 Admissions to higher education

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[12] www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ.
[13] www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark.
[14] www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/programSpec.
[15] www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice.

2.2   The subject benchmark statements interpret the advice given in the qualifications frameworks for honours and some master's degrees, in particular discipline areas, and used together this promotes the development of programme learning outcomes to an appropriate standard. Such learning outcomes are set out in programme specifications published by individual institutions. The use of the qualifications frameworks, subject benchmark statements and programme specifications together helps institutions, departments, students, professional bodies, employers and the public to be confident that the academic standards of higher education awards are comparable with other awards at the same level.

3   The concept of an 'Academic Infrastructure'

3.1   The primary responsibility for academic standards and quality in UK higher education rests with individual higher education providers, who are independent and self-governing. Most have powers to award their own degrees.[16] There is great value and benefit to both individuals and society in this autonomy because it enables higher education providers to be flexible and responsive, and to promote innovation. However, in the absence of (i) a national curriculum for higher education; (ii) national examinations; and (iii) a state-sponsored system of accreditation, it is necessary to be able to ensure there are certain threshold levels of comparability and consistency. The Academic Infrastructure provides one way to achieve this.

3.2   The recommendations of the Inquiry, which led to the development of the components now known as the Academic Infrastructure, were intended to help higher education providers demonstrate that there is comparability in the quality and standards of higher education programmes and awards at a threshold level.

> The diversity of programme provision and of students will continue be a valued element in higher education. We welcome choice, flexibility and wide access. However, we seek to encourage diversity within a framework where qualifications are widely understood, standards are high and respected, and the quality of teaching and student learning is amongst the best in the world. In the absence of the infrastructure and arrangements of the kind we propose, pressures for increased and direct intervention from outside higher education system will intensify. (NCIHE 1997, paragraph 10.102.)

3.3   We introduced the term 'Academic Infrastructure' to indicate an interdependency between the various components that, taken together, provided an infrastructure to underpin UK higher education. As a shared framework of nationally-agreed points of reference, especially within a context of increasing political devolution in the UK, it provides important evidence of a threshold level of comparability across the UK higher education sector. This has been thought to be particularly valuable when communicating with overseas audiences.

3.4   However, it has been suggested that the Academic Infrastructure is inaccessible to many audiences, such as the general public, students and employers. This was illustrated by the lack of reference to the term in the report of the House of Commons Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Select Committee inquiry: *Students and Universities*.[17] One aspect of this is that the title 'Academic Infrastructure' is thought to be obscure and misleading. There has been support from across the higher education sector for terminology which is more inclusive, simple and overtly descriptive. On the other hand, it may not be necessary for a wider audience to know about the Academic Infrastructure in detail, as long as they are aware that there are systems in place to assure the quality and standards of higher education which are robust, comprehensive and consistent within and between institutions. These include internal review processes carried out by higher education providers, which are monitored through the external audit and review activities we coordinate. It may not be possible to have tools which can serve the dual purpose of both supporting technical quality assurance processes and provide accessible and comprehensible information about the nature of the learning experience and graduate attributes. This was highlighted particularly in connection with programme specifications, for example, in our QAA Scotland Enhancement-led institutional review (ELIR) reports, where it was suggested that the design of the documents might need to be refined.[18]

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[16] www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/dap.
[17] www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmdius.htm.
[18] *Learning from ELIR 2003-07: Emerging approaches to employability and personal development planning*, available at www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/ELIR/learningFromElir/Employability09.pdf.

3.5   Evidence from our liaison activity suggests that academic staff are aware of individual components but they do not always recognise the term 'Academic Infrastructure'. Moreover, views about the relationship between and integration of the individual components differ. There is a lack of clarity about the criteria for the inclusion of components within this larger entity. For example, in connection with the Integrated quality and enhancement review (IQER) of higher education in further education providers in England particularly, the place of the Foundation Degree qualification benchmark statement as part of the Academic Infrastructure has been questioned.[19] Operationally, how closely a higher education provider must align with some of the individual components of the Academic Infrastructure or specific elements of the components, such as individual sections of the *Code of practice*, seems to differ. Some higher education providers in England have suggested that it would be helpful to differentiate between those aspects of the Academic Infrastructure which they perceive as requiring **compliance**, and those which they perceive as providing **guidance**.

3.6   Questions have been raised about how the Academic Infrastructure can function both as a tool for higher education providers used for the technical purposes as well as providing a source of information in assuring a wider public that the systems which assure quality and standards in UK higher education are robust, comprehensive and consistent within and between institutions. It is unrealistic to expect a lay audience to have any detailed appreciation of the precise ways in which the components of the Academic Infrastructure operate, but it has been suggested that more could be done to explain how the Academic Infrastructure as a whole is intended to provide the necessary reassurance to a wider public.

Question 1

a) How widely recognised is the Academic Infrastructure?

b) Who should be the audience(s) for the Academic Infrastructure?

c) What should be the primary purpose of the Academic Infrastructure?

d) Does the Academic Infrastructure provide an adequate basis for the comparison of academic standards between institutions and between academic disciplines?

3.7   Relationship to audit and review

3.7.1   Higher education providers across the UK make use of a wide range of monitoring and evaluation processes, operated both internally and externally.[20] The Academic Infrastructure plays an important role in those processes but is not shaped to match any one process. Higher education providers engage with the different components in a way which suits their own distinctive context and external review methods are designed to suit the specific environment in which they operate. The Academic Infrastructure is intended to provide objectivity. However, in discussion with higher education providers, concerns have been expressed about the way in which auditors and reviewers interpret the detail of the various components. These concerns have given rise to questions of consistency of application and interpretation and to queries about areas which the Academic Infrastructure does not cover, such as learning support resources, but which are still included within the scope of our audit and review activity. It has been suggested that the IQER process encourages closer engagement with the Academic Infrastructure among staff delivering higher education provision in further education colleges.

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[19] www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/foundationDegree/benchmark/FDQB.pdf.
[20] Information on QAA's external audit and review methods is available at www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews.

3.7.2   Moreover, the *Academic Infrastructure* and audit and review processes change at different speeds, depending on the context and environment. Nevertheless, there is a close link between the tools that help institutions to discharge their responsibilities for setting and maintaining standards and quality in higher education, and the processes that check how well they do this in the form of external audit and review. The question of whether the comparability of standards might be better addressed in Institutional audit and through the *Academic Infrastructure* has been highlighted in ongoing discussions about future arrangements for quality assurance in England and Northern Ireland.[21]

Question 2

a) How should the Academic Infrastructure be better connected to quality assurance and enhancement activities?

b) What further developments are needed?

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[21] The consultation document *Future arrangements for quality assurance in England and Northern Ireland* (HEFCE 2009/47) is available at www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09_47. The consultation closes on 5 March 2010 and the findings will contribute to the final report of this evaluation of the *Academic Infrastructure*.

4 The individual components of the Academic Infrastructure

In this section each component of the Academic Infrastructure is presented separately with:

- an outline of its **original intentions and purpose**, as set out in the recommendations of the Inquiry
- a discussion of the **current use** made of that component
- an indication of how the component might **evolve in future**, drawing on suggestions made through the evidence collected.

4.1 Frameworks for higher education qualifications

Original intentions and purpose

4.1.1 The Inquiry proposed that there should be a national framework of qualifications that was broad enough to cover the whole range of higher education achievement; used consistent terminology; and was well understood within and outside the higher education sector. It was suggested that this would provide an important element in the approach to securing standards (NCIHE 1997, paragraph 10.9).[22]

4.1.2 The Inquiry had identified that there was, at that time, no consistent rationale for the structure or nomenclature of awards in higher education. In particular there was confusion about awards given a title of 'master's'. The Inquiry highlighted concerns about the potential for ambiguity in the standards of postgraduate-level awards. The Inquiry proposed that a qualifications framework should be developed, with a fundamental premise that qualifications would be awarded on the basis of achievement of outcomes and attainment rather than on number of years of study. This would enable higher education qualifications to be compared to others both within the UK and within a wider international context (NCIHE 1997, paragraph 10.10). The Inquiry recognised that at least in the short term, two separate frameworks, one for England, Wales and Northern Ireland and one for Scotland, would be necessary, because of historic differences in educational traditions (NCIHE 1997, paragraph 10.18).

4.1.3 *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ EWNI) was first published in January 2001. Institutions were expected to be able to demonstrate that students commencing their programmes of study with effect from the 2003-04 academic year would gain, on successful completion, qualifications that were awarded in accordance with the FHEQ EWNI. A revised edition of the FHEQ EWNI was published in 2008, in which the naming of qualification levels (for example, 'H' for honours degrees, 'M' for master's) was replaced with numbers 4-8.[23] This reflected the widely used numerical description of levels adopted by the *Higher education credit framework for England: guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England*[24] and the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW).[25] It also corresponds with the numbering of levels used in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF)/Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF)[26] for the vocational education and training sector in England.

4.1.4 In Wales, the FHEQ EWNI is a constituent part of the CQFW and all higher education institutions in Wales have signed up to the CQFW Common Credit Accord. The Inquiry proposed that a system of credit accumulation and transfer should underpin the

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[22] 'Recommendation 22: We recommend that the Government, the representative bodies, the Quality Assurance Agency, other awarding bodies and the organisations which oversee them, should endorse immediately the framework for higher education qualifications that we have proposed.'
[23] www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/EWNI08.
[24] www.qaa.ac.uk/standardsandquality/credit.
[25] www.cqfw.net.
[26] www.qcda.gov.uk/qcf.

framework of qualifications as a tool for describing and comparing learning in terms of volume and intellectual demand (NCIHE 1997, paragraph 10.38). However, at the time, not all higher education providers in England used credit-based systems in the design and management of curricula and the standards of qualifications. Following the recommendations of the Measuring and Recording Student Achievement (or Burgess) group, guidance on a national framework for the use of credit in higher education in England was developed and published in 2008. It is broad, overarching and advisory, allowing institutions to adopt and adapt elements as appropriate to their needs and circumstances.[27]

4.1.5   *The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland* was published in 2001 and is an integral part of the wider Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF).[28] The SCQF brings together all the mainstream qualifications in Scotland from school to postgraduate education and from work-based learning to academic subjects. Each qualification is expressed in terms of level and credit, including qualifications awarded in higher education. Higher education institutions are expected to demonstrate active engagement with the SCQF during ELIR.

Ways in which the qualifications frameworks are currently used

4.1.6   Institutions in England and Northern Ireland have been found to engage positively with the FHEQ EWNI. The introduction of the FHEQ EWNI generated considerable thought and debate as institutions took the opportunity to revise their award structures in order to bring them into line with national expectations. For the most part, institutions have mechanisms to ensure that an oversight is taken at institutional level of the application of and alignment with the FHEQ EWNI. Engagement with, and awareness of, the FHEQ EWNI was not always as apparent at discipline level as at institutional level.[29]

4.1.7   The use made of the separate *Higher education credit framework for England: guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England* was assessed through a joint survey undertaken by QAA, Universities UK and GuildHE during summer 2009. The aim of the survey was to determine the extent to which the credit framework for England had been adopted by higher education institutions funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). The results showed that the large majority of higher education institutions were using credit and the credit values of their programmes aligned with the framework.[30]

4.1.8   Institutional review reports indicate that institutions in Wales make full use of the FHEQ EWNI and the CQFW in programme design, approval, monitoring and review. Alignment of qualifications with the descriptors in the FHEQ is reported to be extensive and beneficial.[31]

4.1.9   During our liaison activities it has been suggested to us that a qualifications framework is useful for those institutions recently achieving their own degree awarding powers as it provides reassurance that they are conforming to a nationally-agreed framework. Moreover, the focus on learning outcomes has encouraged more creative thinking in the design of programmes, and the qualification descriptors help in the articulation of the differences between provision at different levels.

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[27] The final report of the Burgess group, *Proposals for national arrangements for the use of academic credit in higher education in England,* is available at
http://bookshop.universitiesuk.ac.uk/downloads/Burgess_credit_report.pdf.
[28] www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/SCQF.
[29] *Outcomes from institutional audit: The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, Second series* (2009), available at
www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/institutionalAudit/outcomes/series2/QAA311FHEQ.pdf.
[30] www.qaa.ac.uk/standardsandquality/credit/creditSurveyDec09.pdf.
[31] *Outcomes from institutional review, Part two: Institutions' arrangements for managing academic standards* is available at www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/reviewWales/outcomes.

4.1.10   Both the FHEQ EWNI and the Scottish higher education qualifications framework have been verified as compatible with the *Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in the European Higher Education Area* (FHEQ-EHEA).[32] The FHEQ-EHEA provides a mechanism for relating the qualifications frameworks of different European countries to each other, so helping with the recognition of qualifications from different countries and promoting mobility of learners and graduates across Europe. The overarching SCQF and CQFW are also referenced to the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning.

Possible future directions

4.1.11   At the regional seminars we organised in autumn 2005, there was support overall for the manner in which the higher education qualifications frameworks had been developed, with some delegates suggesting that these are the most useful component of the Academic Infrastructure.[33] Some delegates questioned why there had been no further guidance about the uses and purposes of qualification descriptors.[34] Further clarification of purpose and audience was seen as desirable, and it was suggested that if an audience for the frameworks beyond the academic community was envisaged then versions of the descriptors would need to be drafted to match these needs. Additional guidance, including expanding the descriptors into broad subject discipline categories, and the inclusion of further reference to practical knowledge and skills, was also suggested.

4.1.12   Feedback on the qualifications frameworks collected during the course of our liaison activity has suggested that many institutions would find an integrated credit and qualifications framework for higher education in England useful. Similar comments were also made during a recent survey of the implementation of the credit framework in England. The change to numbering the levels in the FHEQ EWNI was reported to be helpful in having made it easier to see the variety of pathways of progression from further to higher education qualifications. It was suggested that the qualifications frameworks for higher education could be better known in the areas of the UK where they are integrated with those for vocational education. In England, it has been suggested that the relationship between the FHEQ EWNI and the QCF could be clarified further. In connection with employer-responsive provision and work-based learning, some institutions have noted difficulties in aligning employer requirements with both qualification and credit frameworks.

4.1.13   The qualifications frameworks have been identified - both by the higher education sector itself and in recent reports about quality and standards - as a key reference point in demonstrating the comparability at a threshold standard of higher education awards, regardless of discipline, purpose or mode of delivery. The verification of compatibility with the FHEQ-EHEA was reported to reinforce the perceived centrality of the qualifications frameworks to UK higher education quality assurance processes.

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[32] The report verifying the compatibility of the FHEQ with the FHEQ-EHEA is available at www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/selfcertification09.
The report verifying the compatibility of the Scottish higher education qualifications framework is available at www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/SCQF/SelfCertification2007.asp.
[33] Report on the regional seminars series of meetings: October to December 2005, available at www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/academicstandards. For further information see Appendix, page 28.
[34] QAA is currently working with the sector to provide further information on the characteristics of master's degrees, see www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/masters, and the nature of doctoral qualifications.

Question 3

a) Have the qualifications frameworks met their original aims, expectations and anticipated benefits?

b) Are the ways in which they are currently used appropriate and effective in setting and maintaining standards and quality?

c) What further developments are needed?

4.2   Subject benchmark statements

Original intentions and purpose

4.2.1   An overarching concern of the Inquiry was that higher education awards should be more widely understood. As such, it suggested that the standards of attainment required for different programmes and awards should be made more explicit and publicly accessible.[35] The Inquiry recommended that agreed threshold or minimum standards should be developed by the academic subject community and that this 'benchmarking' information should be used as part of programme approval to set degree standards.[36] In addition the Inquiry stated that this information should be used by external examiners in confirming whether programmes were within the agreed standards for particular awards (NCIHE 1997, paragraphs 10.58-10.68).

4.2.2   In response to the recommendation made by the Inquiry, we worked with subject communities to develop a series of subject benchmark statements. Subject benchmark statements set out expectations of knowledge, understanding and skills in a range of subject areas, providing academic staff with a point of reference when designing and developing degree programmes and provides a framework for specifying intended learning outcomes. They are designed to act as reference points to help with developing the content of the curriculum and provide guidance on assessment and learning outcomes, as well as helping to make links to the qualifications frameworks and programme specifications. The statements are one of a number of sources of information that can be drawn upon for the purposes of both internal and external review. In some subject areas there is synergy between the subject benchmark statement and the professional, statutory or regulatory body requirements for programme recognition or accreditation.

4.2.3   A total of 48 subject benchmark statements were published in two phases in 2000 and 2002. Most statements related to undergraduate honours degrees with a few at master's level, where there is significant taught provision at that level.[37] Statements have subsequently been reviewed and revised to reflect changes in subject curricula, advances and increasing diversity in teaching, learning and assessment methods, changes in or the introduction of professional, regulatory or occupational standards and contemporary agendas such as ethics and sustainability. A further six statements for emerging discipline areas have been developed and published under the *Recognition scheme for subject*

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[35] The recommendation built on the work of the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) Graduate Standards Programme: www.qaa.ac.uk/search/publications/archive/DQE241_GraduateStandardsProgammeFinalVol1.asp.
[36] 'Recommendation 25 (part): We recommend to the Quality Assurance Agency that its early work should include:
- to work with institutions to establish small, expert teams to provide benchmark information on standards, in particular threshold standards, operating within the framework of qualifications, and completing the task by 2000.'
[37] www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark.

benchmark statements (2004).[38] Most subject benchmark statements are UK-wide, but there are also a small number of statements specific to qualifying awards for professions in Scotland.[39] The statements bring together the academic and practice-based elements of programmes and the relevant professional requirements or National Occupation Standards. Under contract to the UK departments of health, we also coordinated the production of subject benchmark statements for health care subjects.[40]

Ways in which subject benchmark statements are used

4.2.4   The introduction of subject benchmark statements created both perceived and real tensions between the promotion of the statements as 'reference points' to be taken into consideration when establishing and describing academic standards, and the explicit or implicit expectation in the wider academic community that benchmark statements were intended to provide material for curriculum design that should be followed in (some) detail - a 'national curriculum for higher education'.[41] However, the Institutional audit reports for England and Northern Ireland published between December 2004 and August 2006 suggest that the use of subject benchmark statements was becoming embedded in institutions' quality assurance and enhancement processes. Institutions were not reported as regarding the statements as demanding strict compliance, rather that they were being used creatively and as guides to develop quality processes and academic curricula.[42]

4.2.5   Institutional audit reports also indicated that staff at discipline level were engaging well with the relevant subject benchmark statements for the most part. Staff were generally reported as having an awareness of the statements and to have used them as a source of reference in articulating and reviewing programme aims and intended learning outcomes, and in supporting curriculum development and assessment. However it was also reported that there are difficulties in the use of the statements in connection with interdisciplinary and joint programmes. For master's level programmes in disciplines without a relevant subject benchmark statement, the qualifications frameworks and other reference points were used. The subject benchmark statements appear to be one of the best known elements of the Academic Infrastructure at discipline level.

4.2.6   The Institutional review reports for institutions in Wales indicate that subject benchmark statements play a key role in the approval of new programmes, while annual monitoring and periodic review activities provide further opportunities for engagement with the statements. A few review reports explicitly mentioned that external examiners were required to consider the subject benchmark statements in their deliberations.[43]

4.2.7   Comments from institutional staff about subject benchmark statements collected in the course of our liaison activities reflect many of the findings of the audit and review reports. Academic staff welcomed the fact that the format of the statements allows for differences between disciplines, does not constrain subject innovation, nor are they required to use the statements in their entirety. On the other hand, for new programmes, particularly those which are inter or multi-disciplinary, academic staff have reported that it is necessary to refer to too many different statements. The potential difficulties involved when a discipline is covered by both a subject benchmark statement and the requirements of a professional, statutory or regulatory body have also been reported as creating tension.

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[38] www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/Recognition/recognitionscheme04.asp.
[39] www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/scottish.
[40] www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/health.
[41] Report on the regional seminars series of meetings: October to December 2005, available at www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/academicstandards.
[42] *Outcomes from institutional audit: Subject benchmark statements, Second series* (2009)*,* available at www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/institutionalAudit/outcomes/series2/QAA298SubjectBenchmarkStatements.pdf.
[43] *Outcomes from institutional review, Part two: Institutions' arrangements for managing academic standards*, available at www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/reviewWales/outcomes.

Possible future directions

4.2.8   At the regional seminars, concerns were raised about the variability in length, coverage and use of language within subject benchmark statements, with some thought to be too generalised and others too specific. There was some criticism of the use of different approaches to specifying achievement within the benchmark statements with, it was thought in many cases, too close a parallel between the current honours degree classification system and the use of 'threshold', 'typical' and 'excellent' benchmark standards. It was argued by some that there is a partial and skewed subject coverage (particularly in relation to the 42 subject categories used by HEFCE), and subject benchmark statements would be more valuable if there was both a more widespread coverage of subjects, greater consideration of multidisciplinary programmes and joint awards and the programmes of study followed by work-based learners. It has been suggested that subject benchmark statements should be produced at other levels, particularly to cover Foundation Degrees.[44]

4.2.9   Further comments about the statements made to us during the course of our liaison activities include the suggestion that the statements 'do not articulate to best effect the dynamic and practitioner-based areas of the creative industries'. Further guidance about the use of subject benchmark statements in individually negotiated programmes and generic or flexible credit frameworks has also been requested. Finally, it has been suggested that feedback from students - including practitioners who are postgraduate students - on the content of subject benchmark students should be taken into account.

4.2.10   Subject benchmark statements can be used as a reference point by external examiners in considering whether the design of a programme and/or the achievement of the students are comparable with those of other higher education providers. However, questions have been raised about the extent to which valid judgements of this nature can be made for some multi-disciplinary or modular courses, where the external examiner may not be able to have an oversight of a student's entire programme of study.[45]

Question 4

a) Have the subject benchmark statements met their original aims, expectations and anticipated benefits?

b) Are the ways in which they are currently used appropriate and effective in setting and maintaining standards and quality?

c) What further developments are needed?

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[44] The *Foundation Degree qualification benchmark* provides a generic framework, available at www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/foundationDegree/benchmark/FDQB.asp.
[45] A sector-led review of external examining is currently underway, details available at www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/Newsroom/Media-Releases/Pages/UniversitiesUKtoleadreviewofexternalexaminers.aspx.

4.3 Programme specifications

Original intentions and purpose

4.3.1   The Inquiry intended that 'programme specifications' would provide clear information that would enable students to make informed choices, by giving the intended outcomes of a programme of study and identifying potential stopping-off points within it.[46] They were intended to be a source of easily comparable information for prospective students and employers.

4.3.2   However, this recommendation was based on an assumption that all higher education programmes could be defined prospectively in terms of knowledge and understanding, and that all students would follow a predefined programme with an associated set of intended learning outcomes. This did not allow for curriculum structures that enabled students to create a programme by combining different subjects in various and often unpredictable ways. It therefore became accepted that the specification of outcomes and content could only be indicative and illustrative at best, with flexible programmes being created within a set of organising or design principles.[47] Consequently a wide range of differing types of programme specifications were developed by the higher education sector. Institutions also pointed out that much of the information to be contained within programme specifications was already provided in other formats.

4.3.3   Our policy statement on programme specifications, published in 1999, stated that 'In the first instance the Programme Specification is directed primarily to the academic audience (eg teaching staff, those involved in quality assurance, external examiners, professional bodies and statutory regulatory bodies)'.[48] While students had a right to access the information contained in a programme specification, some institutions felt that as this information was more appropriately accessed through other sources such as prospectuses and programme handbooks, there was no need to publish programme specifications themselves. Moreover, at the time, subject review was still a major external quality assurance activity, and higher education institutions had found programme specifications to be a useful and valuable tool for their internal quality assurance processes.[49]

4.3.4   A revised version of the original *Guidelines for preparing programme specifications* for England, Wales and Northern Ireland was published in 2006, by which time the external policy context had changed considerably.[50] The revised *Guidelines* acknowledged that programme specifications could focus on the student audience and serve as a useful tool to help them understand, among other things, the intended learning outcomes of a programme and the teaching, learning and assessment methods used to enable students to achieve them. In other circumstances programme specifications might be primarily quality assurance documents.

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[46] 'Recommendation 21: We recommend that institutions of higher education begin immediately to develop, for each programme they offer, a 'programme specification' which identifies potential stopping-off points and gives the intended outcomes of the programme in terms of:
- the knowledge and understanding that a student will be expected to have upon completion;
- key skills: communication, numeracy, the use of information technology and learning how to learn;
- cognitive skills, such as an understanding of methodologies or ability in critical analysis;
- subject specific skills, such as laboratory skills.'

[47] This is set out in the section 'For which programmes should specifications be written?' in *Guidelines for preparing programme specifications* at www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/programSpec/guidelines06.asp.

[48] www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/programSpec/progspec.asp.

[49] More information about the development of different external quality assurance processes is available at www.qaa.ac.uk/international/enqa/sed08/sed08.pdf.

[50] www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/programSpec/guidelines06.asp.

Ways in which programme specifications are used

4.3.5   Evidence from Institutional audit reports for England and Northern Ireland published between 2002 and 2004 suggests that, 'the introduction and adoption of programme specifications is developing across institutions'.[51] Institutional audit reports published between 2004 and 2006 contained a greater volume of comment on programme specifications, reflecting the fact that many institutions had a clearer idea of their intended audience and purpose and how and why they might be used. Nevertheless, the potential for further development is also indicated, generally as a result of recognition of the role programme specifications can play in other institutional plans or processes.[52]

4.3.6   Both ELIR and Institutional audit reports indicate that institutions use programme specifications in their processes for approval and validation of new programmes and the periodic review of existing provision. They provide a means by which academic standards can be set and monitored, and this is reinforced by asking external examiners to comment on whether student achievement meets the expectations set in the programme specification. Institutional audit reports suggest that as well as being a reference point in its own right, the programme specification is one way in which links are made to other external reference points such as the other elements of the Academic Infrastructure and professional body accreditation criteria.

4.3.7   The Institutional audit reports also indicate that for some institutions programme specifications are designed for a wider audience, in particular a source of information for students, both current and prospective. In order to fulfil this function effectively, programme specifications need to be accurate and up to date, and a number of Institutional audit reports note the challenges institutions face in ensuring this is the case, for example in version control. For many institutions, programme specifications are part of an ongoing development process, and in some cases have acted as a catalyst for widespread change, resulting in improvements to arrangements for the management of quality. Some audit reports noted that where information for students was not the primary function intended for programme specifications, institutions had made revisions to make them accessible to a student readership. However, a number of reports noted that although programme specifications were available, students were either unaware of them or chose to seek information from other sources, such as programme handbooks and through virtual learning environments.

4.3.8   In Wales, the Institutional review reports indicate the comprehensive production and availability of programme specifications, including some for joint honours programmes. The evidence of the review reports is that the primary use of programme specifications in is the approval of new programmes, usually as a document provided to inform the process, although occasionally as an outcome of validation meetings.[53]

4.3.9   Evidence from the regional seminars suggest that there was an overall view that many higher education institutions found programme specifications very useful within their quality assurance processes and procedures. In the further education sector, it was noted that programme specifications could be helpful when developing and providing programmes in collaboration with a university as the awarding body. However, while further education colleges found it relatively straightforward to work to a single template when in collaboration with a single partner, it became considerably more complex if they worked with more than one higher education institution, each adopting a different approach to the production and use of programme specifications. Similarly, professional, statutory and regulatory bodies

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[51] *Outcomes from institutional audit: Programme specifications, Series one* (2005), available at www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/institutionalAudit/outcomes/Outcomes3.pdf.
[52] *Outcomes from institutional audit: Programme specifications, Series two* (2009), available at www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/institutionalAudit/outcomes/series2/QAA310ProgrammeSpecifications.pdf.
[53] *Outcomes from institutional review, Part two: Institutions' arrangements for managing academic standards*, available at www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/reviewWales/outcomes.

have reported that programme specifications are helpful when mapping their requirements and expectations with the content of a higher education programme, but the variety of templates used across the sector does not always make this a simple process. On the other hand, significant concerns were raised by seminar delegates about the different and apparently overlapping mechanisms that are used to provide information to students about programmes of study and their quality. There were strong pleas for greater coordination, and clarity of purpose, of the various mechanisms and proposals concerned with making programme information available to students.[54]

Possible future directions

4.3.10   Programme specifications have generated the greatest dichotomy of views, in part because of a lack of clarity about the primary audience and purpose. There is an overall view that programme specifications are very useful within quality assurance processes and procedures, but a recognition that when used primarily for such purposes they are often written and/or presented in a manner that is not easily accessible to students. It can be difficult to convey the full flavour of provision in a succinct document and variability of format and content sometimes makes comparison of programmes even across an institution difficult.[55]

4.3.11   Comments made during our liaison activity have highlighted that programme specifications are difficult to produce for the growing number of programmes negotiated by individual learners with a higher education provider. On the other hand academic staff have suggested that the use of a template format for a programme specification is useful in ensuring that consideration is given to other reference points, such as subject benchmark statements and the qualifications frameworks.

4.3.12   The need to provide easily understandable, comparable and reliable information about the content and nature of programmes of study for prospective students and others with an interest in higher education has been a recurrent theme in recent wider ranging discussions about quality and standards. Opinions vary on the extent to which this information can be provided through programme specifications, as currently designed, and the extent to which a single document can fulfil a dual role.

Question 5

a) Have programme specifications met their original aims, expectations and anticipated benefits?

b) Are the ways in which they are currently used appropriate and effective in setting and maintaining standards and quality?

c) What further developments are needed?

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[54] Report on the regional seminars series of meetings: October to December 2005, available at www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/academicstandards.
[55] As above.

4.4   The *Code of practice*

Original intentions and purpose

4.4.1   The Inquiry recommended that for particular areas of activity, such as collaborative provision and postgraduate work, codes of practice should be developed.[56] It was further suggested that 'institutions should adopt the codes of practice, and their adherence to them would be reviewed through periodic (perhaps five-yearly) institutional reviews that would be organized by the [Quality Assurance] Agency'. It was thought that this process of external review would help higher education providers to examine their own practices (NCIHE 1997, paragraph 10.87).

4.4.2   Between 1998 and 2001, 10 sections of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (the *Code of practice*)[57] were developed. The recommendation made by the Higher Education Regulation Review Group[58] to reduce 'unnecessary bureaucracy' resulted in a limit of ten sections, resulting in some areas, such as the accreditation of prior learning, falling outside the *Code of practice.*[59] Since 2004, each section has been progressively reviewed and the structure of the sections revised to take a 'precepts and explanation' approach, using the explanations to make clear why the precepts are considered important and reducing opportunities for a 'checklist' approach to the *Code of practice*.

4.4.3   The initial development and subsequent revision of each section of the *Code of practice* has been undertaken by an advisory group made up of representatives of the higher education sector and participants from key stakeholder groups, coordinated by QAA. Consequently, the *Code of practice* is considered to represent a consensus of opinion from the providers and users of UK higher education. Each section indicates key issues that higher education providers should consider in respect to particular areas of activity and which they could be reasonably expected to address through their own quality assurance arrangements. As part of external reviews, higher education providers are asked to comment on how they have engaged with the precepts and met the intentions of the *Code of practice*. Given the size and diversity of the higher education sector in the UK, the *Code of practice* is not intended to cover every eventuality. However, it does provide key principles designed to help an institution to assure itself and others that it has developed and is applying good practice in a range of activities.[60]

Ways in which the *Code of practice* is used

4.4.4   The *Code of practice* is generally regarded in a positive light by higher education providers. Evidence gathered at the regional seminars indicates broad support for its intentions and its value in promoting discussions about academic practice and standards and for supporting quality management by higher education providers. The principles and explanations contained within the *Code of practice* were recognised as being based on existing practice in institutions which led to a sense of 'ownership' of the various sections. It

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[56] 'Recommendation 24: We recommend that the representative bodies and Funding Bodies amend the remit of the Quality Assurance Agency to include:
- quality assurance and public information;
- standards verification;
- the maintenance of the qualifications framework;
- a requirement that the arrangements for these are encompassed in a code of practice which every institution should be required formally to adopt, by 2001/02, as a condition of public funding.'

[57] Each section of the *Code of practice* is available at www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice.

[58] www.dius.gov.uk/higher_education/shape_and_structure/better_regulation/herrg_background.

[59] *higher quality* issue 9 (November 2001) www.qaa.ac.uk/news/higherquality/hq9.

[60] The overview introduction to the *Code of practice* is available at www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/fullintro.asp.

was thought to be useful for reviewing and, where appropriate, informing, institutional documentation. It was also thought that it could be used in a straightforward manner in conjunction with associated legislation, and in responding to the requirements of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies.[61]

4.4.5   Institutional audit reports for England and Northern Ireland demonstrate that, over the period 2002-2006, the *Code of practice* has become increasingly embedded within institutions' internal quality assurance processes and influential in the development of institutional policies. In general, the audit reports indicate a thorough consideration by institutions of the individual sections and effective implementation of reviews of institutional practice in response to the publication of revised sections.[62]

4.4.6   This is also reflected in the ELIR reports for Scotland, where educational development staff have become involved in internal quality processes, using the *Code of practice* as benchmarks for comparing institutional practice and to help disseminate and implement internally identified good practice.[63]

4.4.7   In Wales, all Institutional review reports included examples of how consideration of the *Code of practice* has influenced internal policies and practices, confirming institutions' general responsiveness to this reference point. Institutions' engagement with specific sections was generally strong.[64]

4.4.8   Comments about how the *Code of practice* is used collated from various liaison activities indicate that it continues to be useful. The inclusion of examples of both good practice and innovation gives higher education providers an opportunity to make improvements to their own activities, based on the experience of others (for example, the use of independent chairs in research degree assessment procedures).[65] The publication of revised sections has also provided an impetus to institutions to regularly review their policies and procedures.

4.4.9   It is generally recognised within the sector that it is not necessary or to be expected that all members of academic staff at department or school level in institutions, or staff in support services, would be familiar with all sections of the *Code of practice*. Instead, they might be familiar with internal documents which adapt the *Code of practice* to focus on the particular institutional context. Nevertheless, individual sections of the *Code of practice* can be valuable at departmental level under particular circumstances; for example, in developing or reviewing programmes, for external examining, for staff development purposes or for student representatives or representative bodies in discussions with their institution.[66]

Possible future directions

4.4.10   Notwithstanding the general support for the *Code of practice*, a number of suggestions for future development have been made. These include having a greater clarity

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[61] Report on the regional seminars series of meetings: October to December 2005, available at www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/academicstandards.

[62] *Outcomes from institutional audit: the code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, Series 2* (forthcoming).

[63] Learning from ELIR 2003-07: Aligning enhancement strategies with staff development, available at www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/ELIR/learningFromElir/StaffDevelopment.pdf.

[64] *Outcomes from institutional review, Part two: Institutions' arrangements for managing academic standards*, available at www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/reviewWales/outcomes.

[65] A particular use was made of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes.* HEFCE contracted QAA to undertake a special review of all higher education providers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in receipt of public funding to establish whether they had policies and procedures that were robust and effective for securing and enhancing the quality and standards of research degree programmes, and in alignment with the *Code of practice.* See www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/postgraduate/OverviewRepENI.asp and www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/postgraduate/wales.asp.

[66] Report on the regional seminars series of meetings: October to December 2005, available at www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/academicstandards.

of the extent to which sections of the *Code of practice* are intended to represent strategic documents rather than perhaps operational manuals. It is generally recognised that while all 10 sections have obvious relevance for assuring academic standards and quality, some sections seem to be regarded as 'more important' than others. It has been suggested that it would be useful to clarify whether this is actually the case, and if so, provide a rationale for the decision. Suggestions have also been made that the *Code of practice* could be reorganised around general principles rather than individual sections. This might help remove some of the instances that are currently perceived as an overlap and duplication between sections and with legislation and other processes, such as those of the Office of the Independent Adjudicator.[67]

4.4.11   In the course of various liaison activities, specific suggestions about the development of the *Code of practice* have been made, such as creating new sections. These additional sections could cover: teaching and learning methods; widening participation; learning support resources; and more guidance on joint programmes and awards. Reference could also be made to the European standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ESG),[68] the Higher Education Achievement Report[69] and the European Diploma Supplement,[70] for example. In the context of employer-responsive provision, there is a perceived overlap between *Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning* and *Section 9: Work-based and placement learning* and some concern about how institutional practice might be viewed by external auditor and review teams. In general, there is a sense that the *Code of practice* is written with provision tailored to a 'traditional', full-time undergraduate student in mind. A more flexible format and accessible language would make the *Code of practice* more useful for wider audiences, including students.

4.4.12   In the period since the division of the *Code of practice* into 10 sections and the establishment of the topics they would cover, the nature of UK higher education has changed considerably. The diverse missions of higher education providers and range of methods of delivery, such as the growth in the number of part-time and work-based learners, mean that the *Code of practice* is perceived as being uneven in its coverage.

Question 6

a) Has the *Code of practice* met its original aims, expectations and anticipated benefits?

b) Are the ways in which it is currently used appropriate and effective in setting and maintaining standards and quality?

c) What further developments are needed?

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[67] www.oiahe.org.uk.
[68] www.enqa.eu/files/ESG_3edition%20(2).pdf.
[69] www.heacademy.ac.uk/events/detail/2009/04_Nov_HEAR_National_Update_Conference.
[70] www.europeunit.ac.uk/sites/europe_unit2/eu_policy___education/diploma_supplement.cfm.

5 The future of the Academic Infrastructure

5.1 As part of the evaluation, consideration is also being given to how the Academic Infrastructure might evolve to meet current challenges to quality and standards and to ensure its continued relevance and applicability to internal and external quality assurance processes. The following table provides a summary of the main points discussed in sections 3 and 4:

Strengths	Possible improvements
The Academic Infrastructure as a whole is valued as a common reference point which is shared throughout the large and diverse UK higher education sector.	The relationship between the components of the Academic Infrastructure does not appear to be clear or well understood other than among higher education quality assurance specialists. The name 'Academic Infrastructure' is perceived to be a barrier to understanding the mechanisms used in higher education to assure academic standards and quality.
The qualifications frameworks are important in helping higher education providers demonstrate that threshold standards are comparable.	The uses and purposes of qualification descriptors - particularly in relation to subject benchmark statements and other qualification and credit frameworks - is not always clear to the full range of audiences. The extent to which the qualification (and credit) frameworks support progression and 'non-traditional' forms of curricula could be improved.
Subject benchmark statements recognise disciplines vary in nature and do not constrain innovation in programme design.	The coverage of subject benchmark statements is limited, in both subjects and levels.
Programme specifications are valuable for internal quality assurance processes.	It is difficult to produce programme specifications which are both effective for the detailed requirements of internal quality assurance processes and provide information in a form accessible to students.
The *Code of practice* is a useful source of good practice against which an individual higher education provider can compare their own policies and procedures.	The *Code of practice* does not cover some areas of activity that might be relevant to the assurance of academic quality and standards, such as learning support resources.

5.2 On the basis of the evidence presented and summarised above, at least three scenarios for the future of the Academic Infrastructure are possible. We have outlined the three scenarios, see page 25, and would welcome your views on them, and/or any other comments or suggestions you may have.

Scenario 1: Revision and periodic updating of the Academic Infrastructure

The Academic Infrastructure as presently constituted is generally useful but in need of regular updates and revisions to keep it current. More consideration could be given to ensuring the language used is consistent between all components. The topics which form sections of the *Code of practice* could be revisited and revised, or more sections introduced. The effort involved in the general maintenance and revision of the components of the Academic Infrastructure could be in proportion to the use that is made of them. Clarification of the primary audiences for and purposes of the individual components is needed, alongside raising awareness of the function and purpose of the Academic Infrastructure as a whole with a broader range of audiences. The components could be available in more accessible formats.

Scenario 2: Redefinition of the components and concept of the Academic Infrastructure

Individual components are thought to be useful but their interdependency needs to be better understood. A new title for the set of components as a whole could be considered. The individual components could be clarified in such a way as to indicate the essential parts for setting, maintaining and assuring the comparability of standards, including the centrality of the qualifications frameworks, compared to the role of other parts in relation to the management of the quality of learning opportunities.

The *Code of practice* could be restructured into one document setting out key principles for the management of quality and standards, supported by sets of guidance that might apply to different situations, such as the management of collaborative provision. This could remove the duplication that currently exists between sections and could result in a more streamlined document. A single-volume version of the *Code of practice* could set more clearly the expectations for internal quality assurance processes. It could also demonstrate more explicitly the link to external audit and review activities, including judgements.

Scenario 3: Substantial reconsideration of the function, purpose and uses of the Academic Infrastructure

The Academic Infrastructure could be conceived of in a completely different way and restructured more extensively.

Reconsideration could be given to the role of the Academic Infrastructure in the broader higher education 'quality assurance landscape'. This could be achieved by developing a set of common, overarching principles for setting, maintaining and assuring academic quality and standards. The principles could be supported by clear explanations of how different reference points - including those developed and maintained by QAA and reference points from other organisations, such as the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education - are intended to be used. The explanations could demonstrate how the reference points link together to provide the necessary assurances that academic standards are set, maintained and are comparable, and that management of the quality of learning opportunities is appropriate. The principles might include 'externality', 'clarity of process' and 'the student voice'.

One way of presenting this would be to combine current and redefined components of the existing Academic Infrastructure to provide a UK 'handbook' for quality and standards in

higher education. A 'handbook' could specify essential reference points to be considered when setting standards and quality management issues that need to be considered in a range of situations.

Clearer and more explicit explanations of how each component contributes to external quality assurance processes, judgements and enhancement activities could be included.

5.3   These three scenarios are presented as a summary of the suggestions made to us and based on the evidence collated to date. They are not the only options for the future of the Academic Infrastructure - there may be many other possibilities and we would welcome your suggestions. For example, in the changing landscape of contemporary higher education greater consideration might need to be given to the relationships between those reference points used in higher education and the practice and reference points used in the wider education sector.[71] In aiming to assure public confidence about academic quality and standards, more might be needed to explain how the tools of the Academic Infrastructure relate to external review methods, the use of student feedback and the many other quality assurance and enhancement processes operated internally by institutions.

Question 7

What do you think the future of the Academic Infrastructure should be?

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[71] For example, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills strategy, *Skills for growth*, available at www.bis.gov.uk/policies/skills-for-growth.

6   Summary of questions

For ease of reference, the questions posed throughout this discussion paper are collected together below. Please send your responses and comments to:

Academic Infrastructure Evaluation
The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)
Southgate House
Southgate Street
Gloucester
GL1 1UB

Or you can respond by email to academicinfrastructure@qaa.ac.uk by 7 May 2010.

Question 1
a) How widely recognised is the Academic Infrastructure?
b) Who should be the audience(s) for the Academic Infrastructure?
c) What should be the primary purpose of the Academic Infrastructure?
d) Does the Academic Infrastructure provide an adequate basis for the comparison of academic standards between institutions and between academic disciplines?

Question 2
a) How should the Academic Infrastructure be better connected to quality assurance and enhancement activities?
b) What further developments are needed?

Question 3
a) Have the qualifications frameworks met their original aims, expectations and anticipated benefits?
b) Are the ways in which they are currently used appropriate and effective in setting and maintaining standards and quality?
c) What further developments are needed?

Question 4
a) Have the subject benchmark statements met their original aims, expectations and anticipated benefits?
b) Are the ways in which they are currently used appropriate and effective in setting and maintaining standards and quality?
c) What further developments are needed?

Question 5
a) Have programme specifications met their original aims, expectations and anticipated benefits?
b) Are the ways in which they are currently used appropriate and effective in setting and maintaining standards and quality?
c) What further developments are needed?

Question 6
a) Has the *Code of practice* met its original aims, expectations and anticipated benefits?
b) Are the ways in which it is currently used appropriate and effective in setting and maintaining standards and quality?
c) What further developments are needed?

Question 7
What do you think the future of the Academic Infrastructure should be?

7   Appendix: sources of information providing evidence for this discussion paper

7.1   Information from audit and review activity

7.1.1   Reports of external audit and review activity we have undertaken (Institutional audit, Integrated quality and enhancement review, Enhancement-led institutional review, Institutional review in Wales, special review) provide extensive information about how higher education institutions engage with the Academic Infrastructure, reinforced by our audit and review method handbooks, which explain and set out expectations for the use of reference tools for setting and maintaining standards.

7.1.2   The *Outcomes from institutional audit* series of papers are thematic analyses of the 129 Institutional audit reports published between 2002-03 and 2005-06 for higher education institutions in England and Northern Ireland. The papers discuss emerging themes from the features of good practice and recommendations identified in the audit reports.

7.1.3   Papers in the *Outcomes from institutional review* series take a similar approach for the 12 Institutional review reports published for higher education institutions in Wales between 2004 and 2009.

7.1.4   Learning from ELIR 2003-07 is a series of six reports which address a range of topics relating to the enhancement-led approach in Scottish higher education over the last five years. They are based on the reports of the 20 reviews conducted during the first cycle of ELIR.

7.2   Information from liaison activities

7.2.1   We operate liaison schemes with higher education institutions and the Higher Education Academy Subject Centres, which have produced a data bank of visit reports, queries and intelligence about the use of the Academic Infrastructure. In addition, the schemes have been used to collect information on a specific theme of current interest to the higher education sector. In 2008-09, the theme identified was 'employer responsive provision'. The responses to this survey have provided information about the use of the Academic Infrastructure in connection with this growing area of provision.[72]

7.2.2   Between May and August 2008, 18 interviews were completed at seven institutions in England, under the auspices of the 'sustaining standards' pilot project. The interviews were conducted with individuals with a range of duties and responsibilities within the institution (for example, Pro Vice-Chancellors, heads of department, institutional quality managers), and used a semi-structured interview protocol to provide some structure, while allowing for discussion about the tools used by higher education institutions to set and maintain standards to develop as dictated by the interests and responsibilities of those involved.

7.3   Information from the review and revision of the components of the Academic Infrastructure

7.3.1   Each component of the Academic Infrastructure has been progressively updated between 2001 and 2009. During the review and revision of each component an advisory group made up of representatives of the higher education sector and key stakeholder

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[72] *Employer-responsive provision survey: A reflective report*, is available at www.qaa.ac.uk/employers/EffectiveProvision.pdf.

organisations is convened to advise us. In addition, round table discussion meetings are often held, and a draft of the revised document is made available for a period of consultation. Comments from all these sources provide feedback on how the specific component is being used in higher education institutions, its strengths, weaknesses and suggestions for development.

7.3.2   The Benchmarking Steering Group is made up of senior academics representing a range of subject disciplines. It was set up to advise us on developments relating to subject benchmarking in particular and their discussions have been recorded in the minutes of their regular meetings.

7.3.3   In autumn 2005, we held eight regional seminars, organised to attract representation from different constituencies within higher education, and from staff from further education colleges involved in higher education provision. The seminars were attended by around 350 delegates. Discussion was focused on the perception and experience of delegates in relation to the implementation and application of the four aspects of the Academic Infrastructure.

7.4   Information from survey activity

7.4.1   Surveys of our staff and our auditor and reviewer cohort have been undertaken to collect their views on the utility of the components of the Academic Infrastructure in relation to our audit, review and other activities, and their ideas for its future development.