



**Evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure:
final report
August 2010**

Foreword

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 need to know what the expected outcomes from periods of study are. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is responsible for maintaining a set of reference points which help UK higher education providers to set, maintain and assure the academic standards of the higher education awards they make and the quality of the learning opportunities they offer. These reference points help higher education providers describe their awards in a way that can be useful for both a local and international audience. This set of reference points are known as the 'Academic Infrastructure'.¹

During 2009-2010 QAA has been undertaking an evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure, to reflect on its use, impact and effectiveness. The Academic Infrastructure was introduced following the recommendations of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education in 1997.² The evaluation has considered whether the Academic Infrastructure has met and, if so, continues to meet, its original expectations and anticipated benefits; whether it remains relevant and 'fit for purpose'; and whether it is sufficiently flexible to accommodate future developments in higher education.

This evaluation has considered the impact and effectiveness of the Academic Infrastructure in providing a shared understanding about academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities in UK higher education ensuring that there is a broad comparability of standards at a threshold level across a diverse and dynamic sector.³ This final evaluation report makes suggestions about how the Academic Infrastructure might need to be developed in future in order to keep pace with changes in contemporary higher education. The evidence sources used in the evaluation are listed in an Appendix, and include the feedback from the round table discussion events held in spring 2010 and the written responses to our discussion paper. This detailed evidence is available on the QAA website.⁴

This report gives some indication of the direction of travel for the future development of the Academic Infrastructure and signposts some of the areas on which we will need to consult further with all those who have an interest in higher education. There will be a formal consultation on any proposals for changes to or restructuring of the Academic Infrastructure in autumn 2010.

I would like to thank all those individuals and organisations who attended the round table discussion events, contributed written responses or have otherwise been involved in the discussions which have resulted in this evaluation report. Your participation, feedback and support is very valuable. We hope you will continue to contribute as we develop the Academic Infrastructure so that it continues to help higher education providers in setting and maintaining academic standards and the quality of provision.



Anthony McClaran

¹ More information on the Academic Infrastructure: www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure.

² Recommendations of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education: www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/ncihe.

³ QAA defines **academic standards** as 'the threshold level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an academic award' and **academic quality** as 'how well the learning opportunities made available to students are managed in order to help them achieve their award'.

⁴ Round table materials: www.qaa.ac.uk/events/AssuringQandSinHE; analysis of written responses: www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/evaluation10findings; original Academic Infrastructure evaluation discussion paper: www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/evaluation10.

1 Introduction

1.1 The Academic Infrastructure 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.⁵ It was developed by QAA in response to the 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; henceforth 'the Inquiry'), building on work already undertaken by one of QAA's predecessor bodies, the Higher Education Quality Council.⁶ The Inquiry identified two key requirements for preserving public confidence in the higher education system: first, maintaining consistent standards of provision and outcomes and secondly, providing valid, reliable and useful information on qualifications to external stakeholders: chiefly employers, potential students and current students. The term 'Academic Infrastructure' was applied by QAA to the set of reference points we developed in partnership with the higher education sector in order to help higher education providers address these requirements.

1.2 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. At the same time, internal and external audit and review methods which QAA and higher education providers themselves use to monitor the standards and quality of their provision have evolved, and additional reference points and supplementary guidance have been produced by QAA and others to complement the Academic Infrastructure. The nature of higher education in the UK has also developed and diversified. The last decade has seen a period of substantial growth in higher education with greater numbers of students studying in more diverse ways and for a wider variety of qualifications. During this period there has been an increased emphasis on and encouragement of students to be involved in their own learning experience. It is therefore timely to step back and evaluate whether the Academic Infrastructure (as a whole and its individual components):

- has met and, if so, continues to meet the expectations and anticipated benefits as set out in 1.1 above and in the Inquiry
- remains relevant and 'fit for purpose' as a means of helping to establish and maintain standards and quality in contemporary higher education
- appropriately meets the needs of quality assurance in UK higher education, both internal and external
- is sufficiently flexible to accommodate future developments in higher education.

1.3 The evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure aimed:

- to determine the extent to which the Academic Infrastructure has contributed to a shared understanding about academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities in UK higher education
- to assess the effectiveness of the Academic Infrastructure (and its individual components) in contributing to the establishment and maintenance of academic standards and enhancement of quality
- to provide evidence from which to make suggestions about the future development of the Academic Infrastructure (and its components).⁷

⁵ The Academic Infrastructure is made up of the frameworks for higher education qualifications, subject benchmark statements, programme specifications and the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*. More information is available at www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure.

⁶ Reports of the National Committee, chaired by Sir Ron Dearing, and the separate Scottish Committee, chaired by Sir Ron Garrick: www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/ncihe. Final report of the Graduate Standards Programme: www.qaa.ac.uk/search/publications/archive/DQE241_GraduateStandardsProgrammeFinalVol1.asp.

⁷ Full evaluation project plan: www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/evaluation09/projectplan.pdf.

How the evaluation was conducted

1.4 The evaluation has primarily represented an approach of consolidating, collating and analysing existing information, derived from a range of activities undertaken by QAA and other bodies. Advised by a Sounding Board of representatives from higher education providers and higher education representative bodies, this information was used to inform the writing of a discussion paper.⁸ In spring 2010 the discussion paper was circulated to individuals, higher education providers, organisations and public bodies with an interest in higher education, and to students through their representative bodies. In response 118 replies were received, from higher education institutions in all parts of the UK, further education colleges, professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, UK representative bodies and individuals. The analysis of the written responses is available separately.⁹

1.5 During the period in which the discussion paper was available for comment, four round table discussion events were held across the UK, at which over 200 delegates considered questions relating to the Academic Infrastructure. Feedback was collected from the round table discussion events and is available on the QAA website.¹⁰ QAA officers also held discussions with a number of groups and networks representing different interests within the higher education sector.

1.6 This evaluation report provides the analysis of the findings from all the available evidence sources (these are listed in the Appendix). The picture which emerges from across all the evidence sources is largely consistent. Therefore, in the following discussion, specific evidence sources are not cited.

1.7 This final report of the evaluation is in two parts.

- Part I considers the impact and effectiveness of the Academic Infrastructure within UK higher education since its gradual introduction from 1998 onwards.
- Part II makes a number of proposals for action based on the findings of the evaluation about how QAA might develop the Academic Infrastructure so that it remains 'fit for purpose' in the contemporary higher education environment.

Detailed proposals for any changes to the Academic Infrastructure resulting from the findings of the evaluation and consequent proposals will be subject to a formal consultation in autumn 2010. This will enable all those who provide higher education in the UK to participate in deciding how the ways in which the recommendations might be addressed could work in practice, and further strengthen the collective responsibility held across the UK higher education sector for the Academic Infrastructure.

⁸ Academic Infrastructure discussion paper: www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/evaluation10.

⁹ Analysis of written responses to the discussion paper: www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/evaluation10findings.

¹⁰ Round table materials: www.qaa.ac.uk/events/AssuringQandSinHE.

2 Part I - impact and effectiveness of the Academic Infrastructure

The term 'Academic Infrastructure' was introduced by QAA to indicate a relationship between the separate reference points that, taken together, provide an infrastructure to underpin UK higher education in the context of a sector made up of higher education providers who are independent and self-governing. As a shared framework of nationally-agreed points of reference, it provides an important platform on which the evidence of comparability at a threshold level across the UK higher education sector is built. Below, the Academic Infrastructure as a whole is discussed, followed by each of the individual components.

2.1 The impact and effectiveness of the Academic Infrastructure as a whole

2.1.1 The evaluation has found much evidence to support the view that the impact made by the introduction of the Academic Infrastructure on UK higher education has been very positive. The evaluation has also provided evidence that the Academic Infrastructure has created a framework for assuring the academic threshold standards and academic quality of higher education provision in the UK.

2.1.2 The value of the Academic Infrastructure is that it has brought a consistent approach and created a common vocabulary about academic standards and quality. As a framework it has meant there is a 'shared understanding' or 'a common set of expectations' without damaging the diversity that is inherent in UK higher education by demanding uniformity of practice. The fact that the Academic Infrastructure could be interpreted locally as appropriate to individual higher education providers' missions was seen to be important in not threatening institutional autonomy.

2.1.3 The Academic Infrastructure has also been found to be valued by higher education providers because it helps to explain some of the complex issues in UK higher education, and because those involved in higher education consider they have an ownership of it. This was reported as being especially fostered by the collaborative way the Academic Infrastructure had been developed. The importance of the Academic Infrastructure was thought to be both in establishing a way for higher education providers to determine that their higher education awards met threshold standards which helped to ensure a broader comparability across the UK higher education sector, but also in the important enabling role the Academic Infrastructure plays in encouraging enhancement of the management of learning opportunities.

2.1.4 There was evidence to demonstrate that the Academic Infrastructure was well embedded in higher education providers' policies and procedures. Many of those who considered the Academic Infrastructure to be important recognised a value in seeing it as a whole framework that was somehow more than the sum of parts, but there was no single view of how each of the components necessarily related to each other.

2.1.5 There was a minority of opinion that suggested the Academic Infrastructure had constrained innovation in teaching and learning, and in some cases created a perceived increased in bureaucracy and therefore had not always contributed to establishing comparability of threshold standards as well as it might. During the evaluation some questions were raised about how consistently the Academic Infrastructure had been adopted by higher education providers, with the view that a lack of consistency could limit its effectiveness.

2.1.6 The evaluation found little evidence that the Academic Infrastructure was well understood by an audience broader than the higher education sector. In helping to assure

the public about the academic standards and academic quality of UK higher education, the Academic Infrastructure was valued as a technical tool or reference point for those that provide higher education but had not fully achieved its original intention of providing valid, reliable and useful information about higher education qualifications to a wider audience because it is not well known or understood beyond those directly involved in the sector.

2.2 The impact and effectiveness of the frameworks for higher education qualifications

Frameworks for higher education qualifications 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.

2.2.1 The frameworks for higher education qualifications are the components of the Academic Infrastructure which can be considered, alongside the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (the *Code of practice*), to have most closely fulfilled the original intentions as set out by the Inquiry. However, in doing so, some evidence collected for the evaluation suggested that this may only have been an articulation of what was already what was in place. Both qualifications frameworks have achieved a clarification of the structure and nomenclature of awards which has been generally adopted by all higher education providers in the UK. However, as the diversity of provision and resulting awards increases, the evaluation has shown how there are some who think there are limitations around the relationship with vocational qualifications frameworks and with credit frameworks, particularly in England. It was considered that the existence of two frameworks for higher education qualifications - one for England, Wales and Northern Ireland and one for Scotland - is potentially confusing and makes working across country boundaries more difficult.

2.2.3 The integration in the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) of all the mainstream qualifications in Scotland from school to postgraduate education and from work-based learning to academic subjects means that the higher education qualification framework is thought to be more widely known in Scotland than other parts of the UK. The evidence of the evaluation suggested that future development should focus on how the higher education qualification frameworks could be referenced to other qualification frameworks, especially in England. In particular, as the Qualification and Credit Framework becomes more widely known through its use in the vocational education and training sector, future higher education students may expect a clearer link with the higher education qualification framework.

2.3 The impact and effectiveness of the subject benchmark statements

Subject benchmark statements 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 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.

2.3.1 The evaluation has shown that subject benchmark statements are valued by the subject communities which have developed them. Through subject benchmark statements the Academic Infrastructure has become more accessible to more people working within the higher education sector. Moreover, the process through which the statements were prepared generated very useful discussion within subject communities.

2.3.2 The fact that each subject benchmark statement is written to set out threshold academic standards for a subject allows for institutional autonomy and a flexibility. This autonomy and flexibility was not considered to constrain innovation in development of programmes and teaching and learning approaches. However, the evaluation demonstrated how difficulties could arise when several statements needed to be used for multi and interdisciplinary programmes. Generally subject benchmark statements were thought useful in helping to provide some broad comparability at the threshold level across a subject as taught by different higher education providers, but this is limited because the statements are almost exclusively at honours degree level. There was support for considering the development of subject benchmark statements at other award levels or of further generic level descriptors in order to address this. The evaluation demonstrated that where a programme or award was accredited by a professional, statutory or regulatory body, there could sometimes be a tension between the different requirements.

2.4 The impact and effectiveness of programme specifications

A programme specification 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. QAA publishes guidelines on preparing programme specifications but the specifications themselves are developed by individual higher education providers.

2.4.1 The original intention of the programme specification had been to help provide prospective students with more information about the courses they were interested in studying, and information for employers about what a potential applicant had studied. The evaluation found that in many cases programme specifications were not considered to be the most effective way for providing information for students or for employers. Many who contributed to the evaluation thought that the information prospective students required to inform choice was available in other more appropriate forms.

2.4.2 However, many higher education providers had found the programme specification to be useful in other ways. Programme specifications were in many cases valued for use in quality assurance processes, such as design and validation of new programmes and review and monitoring of existing ones. The need for clarity about the primary purpose of the programme specifications and consequently how they fit coherently within the overall framework of the Academic Infrastructure was considered important. However, there was a minority view that if programme specifications were not intended to be the vehicle for providing public information then they should be abandoned.

2.4.3 It was felt that any future developments needed to take account of other ongoing activities about how student achievement was recorded, including the European Diploma Supplement and the Higher Education Achievement Report.¹¹

2.5 The impact and effectiveness of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*

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 Disabled students
- 4 External examining
- 5 Academic appeals and student complaints on academic matters

¹¹ European Diploma Supplement: www.europeunit.ac.uk/sites/europe_unit2/eu_policy_education; Information about HEAR: www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/diversity/achieve.

6	Assessment of students
7	Programme design, approval, monitoring and review
8	Career education, information, advice and guidance
9	Work-based and placement learning
10	Admissions to higher education

2.5.1 The evaluation demonstrated that the *Code of practice* had been well used by higher education providers when developing and revising their own organisational policies and procedures. The specific sections of the *Code of practice* were well liked by many who worked in higher education because they could use the separate sections as appropriate, perhaps with different departments within an institution in revising its policies and procedures about a particular issue. However, the evaluation did identify some evidence that some of the existing sections were now considered to be of less value than others, while there were other new sections which could be added, such as on the provision of public information. Other detailed suggestions for changes to the *Code of practice* are discussed in Part II and in the analysis of written responses to the discussion paper.

2.5.2 In response to the evaluation there were also requests for more clarity about the relationship between QAA audit and review procedures and the different sections of the *Code of practice*.

Part I - conclusion

2.6.1 Overall the evaluation has demonstrated the way that over the past decade higher education providers have engaged with and embedded the Academic Infrastructure within their own institutional policies and procedures. This has been a great achievement for UK higher education and has contributed to its international reputation. The evaluation has provided evidence that for many higher education providers the Academic Infrastructure provides an adequate basis for the comparison of threshold standards and a useful baseline for the management of the quality of learning opportunities.

2.6.2 The evaluation can also demonstrate that there are no major omissions or other vital reference points which higher education providers thought they might need in order to be able to set and maintain academic threshold standards, and to manage the quality of the management for learning opportunities. The Academic Infrastructure can be seen to work as an effective specialist tool for those managing higher education provision. There was little appetite for major revisions and many higher education providers saw little need for a radical overhaul. However, there were a number of detailed revisions to individual components which were thought might improve the Academic Infrastructure.¹²

2.6.3 Moreover, overall it was considered that there could be greater clarity about the relationship between the components of the Academic Infrastructure and QAA's audit and review processes, and that there could be more transparent articulation with other reference points. This was considered especially important because of the changing higher education landscape and the changing expectations of those entering higher education (especially in the context of the development of more work-based learning, expansion of provision of higher education in further education colleges and the growing number of private providers of higher education).

2.6.4 While the Academic Infrastructure has been shown to have made a considerable impact on higher education in the UK, the evaluation has shown that much more activity could be undertaken to promote its existence in a clear and accessible way to an audience wider than higher education quality specialists.

¹² Detailed further in the analysis of written responses to the discussion paper, available at www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/evaluation10findings.

3 Part II - future development of the Academic Infrastructure

3.1 As noted in Part I, the Academic Infrastructure is considered to have had a positive impact on UK higher education and be effective as a shared framework for setting, describing, maintaining and assuring the standards of higher education awards and the quality of student learning opportunities. However, the evidence also demonstrates that there are ways in which the Academic Infrastructure could change so that it continues to be 'fit for purpose' for the contemporary higher education context in the future. In addition, there is the experience of use, development and implementation over more than 10 years to draw upon. The Academic Infrastructure was initially introduced, and has subsequently been revised, part by part: this evaluation has provided an opportunity to consider the whole, and whether more might be done to explain how the components relate to each other.

3.2 The evidence collected during the evaluation¹³ indicates that there are a number of ways in which QAA could develop the Academic Infrastructure. The proposals set out in this section of the evaluation report will form the basis of a more detailed consultation about the future development of the Academic Infrastructure. This consultation will take place in autumn 2010. Each proposal in this section is preceded by a summary of the evidence collected during the evaluation which has led to the proposal being made. The discussion also includes some examples, taken from the evidence, about how the proposals might be implemented. These will be developed into formal proposals about how the Academic Infrastructure might change or be restructured for the autumn consultation.

3.3 UK higher education providers are autonomous, independent bodies with responsibility for the academic standards of the awards they make and the quality of the learning opportunities they provide. QAA maintains a set of reference points which help them to do this. In order to maintain the international reputation of UK higher education, it is necessary for threshold academic standards to be broadly comparable across the sector. The quality of the learning opportunities available to students is also important, but there is more variation because institutions tailor the nature of the learning experience they offer according to their individual mission and values. The nature of the student body within UK higher education is increasingly diverse, and there are many different modes of learning.

3.4 The evidence analysed for the evaluation has indicated that there is a lack of clarity about the difference between 'academic standards' and 'academic quality'. It was thought that further clarification was needed about academic standards and threshold levels. QAA has established a definition for the purposes of audit and review, but the evaluation has shown that this is not always widely known:

Academic Standards: this is the description of the *threshold* level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an academic award (for example, a degree).

Academic Quality: this is the way of describing how well the learning opportunities made available to students are managed in order to help them achieve their award.¹⁴

QAA will consult further with the sector about whether these definitions are appropriate.

3.5 A further dimension of establishing a clear definition of the distinction between 'academic standards' and 'academic quality' is to make clear which of the tools used by higher education providers are relevant to each. Many respondents to the evaluation requested that this division was made clear.

¹³ For further details of sources used, please see the Appendix.

¹⁴ See www.qaa.ac.uk/students/faqs.asp question 23.

Proposal 1: QAA should state clearly what it understands by 'academic *threshold* standards' and 'academic quality'.

3.6 QAA's role is to provide public assurance in the academic standards of the awards made by UK higher education providers.¹⁵ While the evaluation has shown that higher education providers value the components of the Academic Infrastructure which help them to set and maintain the academic standards of their awards, there are doubts about the extent to which these reference points have contributed to providing the necessary public assurance. The evidence collected for the evaluation suggests that greater clarity about the relationship between the reference points used by higher education providers may help to address this concern. This could be presented in the form of a 'roadmap' which sets out the various checks and balances involved.

3.7 There was considerable support in the evidence collected for the evaluation for designating the reference points which are used primarily in setting, maintaining and assuring 'academic standards' as 'essential' requirements to which all UK higher education providers, as independent self-governing bodies, must adhere. In many cases, respondents noted that this was how the relevant reference points were already treated, but formally classifying them as such would help to address the public concerns about 'academic standards' within higher education. QAA will consult further with the sector on which reference points are the right ones for setting, maintaining and assuring threshold standards and the extent to which they can be considered 'non-negotiable' requirements.

3.8 The component which respondents suggested could be treated as (and is in practice already) 'non-negotiable' was, primarily, adherence to the principles of the qualifications frameworks. Some parts of some sections of the *Code of practice* were also suggested: section 1 (where a provider was involved in postgraduate research provision), section 2 (as it relates to collaborative provision), and sections 4, 6 and 7. These sections of the *Code of practice* would need to be revised individually in consultation with the sector in order to present them in a format which makes it clear which principles must be adhered to (where there is relevant provision) and which supplementary principles are given to encourage enhancement of practice.

3.9 In relation to section 4, respondents suggested that external examining arrangements could be considered 'non-negotiable'. There are currently two parallel areas of activity ongoing about external examining: the sector-led national review of external examining and the development of 'minimum expectations' for the role of external examiners by QAA. The sector-led review is addressing a number of key aspects of external examining with the clear starting point that external examining, as one of the key mechanisms for securing the academic standards of awards, is a strong mechanism which can be improved further, and whose function can be made more transparent and be better communicated to a wider audience. QAA's work focuses specifically on the role of external examiners and seeks to identify a 'core' role applicable across the sector which can be communicated clearly and explicitly. Its basis is the view that it is possible to define a core role applicable across the sector (taking into account subject-specific differences) relating to both academic standards and quality assurance and enhancement, and to define what is not part of that role (what external examiners do not do). To ensure clarity the final version of the minimum expectations and any recommendations of the sector-led review will be tied into the further development of the Academic Infrastructure as appropriate.¹⁶

3.10 The setting and maintenance of academic standards also requires the provision of information at a programme level. Currently, this is the role of programme specifications

¹⁵ QAA's mission is to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualifications and to inform and encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education.

¹⁶ Review of external examining arrangement in the UK:

www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/PolicyAndResearch/PolicyAreas/QualityAssurance/HowTheSystemWorks/Pages/ExternalExaminers.aspx. QAA round table materials, at which external examining was discussed: www.qaa.ac.uk/events/AssuringQandSinHE.

within the Academic Infrastructure, but the evidence collected for the evaluation clearly demonstrates that higher education providers find it difficult to use programme specifications for the dual functions of fulfilling a purpose within quality assurance processes and of providing information for students. Work is currently ongoing to establish a 'key information set' and, depending on the outcomes of this work, it may be that the function and purpose of programme specifications can be redefined.¹⁷ Respondents to the evaluation suggested that the requirement to provide information for quality assurance purposes could be incorporated within a revision of *Code of practice* section 7, while the provision of information for students - prospective, current and as graduates - could be handled separately, perhaps with a new section of the *Code of practice* setting out requirements for what should be included.

3.11 The evaluation has shown that subject benchmark statements are valued as reference points in programme design and in the setting and maintenance of threshold academic standards, and that in a large part, this value is in their status as guidance, rather than specifying a set 'curriculum'. Respondents also identified the difficulties in ensuring complete coverage for all subjects, especially for emerging disciplines, and noted that if the subject benchmark statements were more prescriptive this would constrain innovation in programme development. Nevertheless, there was considerable support for the development of guidance for the use of subject benchmark statements in relation to joint, modular, multi and interdisciplinary programmes and for continued expansion of the subject benchmark statements available (at Foundation Degree and master's level as well as honours level) within the principles of the Recognition Scheme (in order to avoid unnecessary proliferation).¹⁸ Greater attention could also be paid to the role of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies in setting outcomes.

Proposal 2: QAA should clearly set out which components of the Academic Infrastructure are essential requirements for higher education providers when they are setting and maintaining the academic standards for which they are responsible.

3.12 There are a number of key themes or principles which guide the considerations of higher education providers in the management of quality of learning opportunities they provide. The evidence analysed for the evaluation showed that the *Code of practice* as a whole is valued by higher education providers for the guidance it provides on good practice in a number of these areas. However, the restriction of the *Code of practice* to 10 sections and the changing nature of higher education means that some areas of activity in higher education are not well covered, although there are also various sets of guidance published by QAA which currently sit outside the *Code of practice*. Conversely, some sections of the *Code of practice* have been overtaken by primary legislation and regulation by other sector bodies.

3.13 Therefore, guidance on the management of learning opportunities could be arranged around a series of principles supported by individual documents as appropriate. In order to avoid proliferation, these principles could be those used in the *European Standards and Guidelines*.¹⁹ On the other hand, it may be that it would be more sensibly arranged around the stages of the student life cycle. Further consultation with the higher education sector is needed about which principles are appropriate, if any. Consultation is also needed about what areas that currently sit outside the Academic Infrastructure (for example, guidance on accreditation of prior learning and personal development planning) should be brought within it.

3.14 The evaluation also indicated that there is considerable support to talk about considering the development of an integrated credit and qualifications framework for higher education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and/or the place of higher education

¹⁷ See: www.hefce.ac.uk/news/hefce/2010/info.htm.

¹⁸ Recognition Scheme:

www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/Recognition/recognitionsscheme04.asp.

¹⁹ European Standards and Guidelines: [www.enqa.eu/files/ESG_3edition%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.enqa.eu/files/ESG_3edition%20(2).pdf).

credit and qualifications frameworks (separately) within an overarching framework for England (as in Wales and Scotland), while mindful of the evidence that some higher education providers do not use credit or use a different framework, such as the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS).²⁰

3.15 There is potential to embark on a programme of collaborative work with other stakeholders in revising and extending the current forms of guidance available. For example, revision of guidelines on academic appeals and student complaints could be in association with the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education and the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman, or the development of guidance on teaching and learning might be undertaken with the Higher Education Academy if appropriate. Moreover, the perceived limitations of the *Code of practice* as it currently stands could also be addressed, such as the overlap between sections 2 and 9, and the inclusion of guidance on technology-enhanced learning within that for flexible and distributed learning in section 2, which is widely accepted to not reflect the now mainstream position of technology-enhanced learning in UK higher education.²¹

Proposal 3: QAA should clarify the essential requirements on higher education providers in managing the quality of learning opportunities made available to students.

3.16 Higher education providers operate within a wide education context, and the reference points maintained by QAA for setting, maintaining and assuring academic standards and academic quality are only part of the set of reference points they use. The evidence collected for the evaluation demonstrated that higher education providers would welcome greater clarity about the relationship between different frameworks and guidelines. These include European and international reference points, particularly those which form part of the Bologna process (such as the *Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area* (FQ-EHEA) and the *European Standards and Guidelines*, and the vocational education qualifications and credit frameworks (which already sit within an overarching credit and qualifications framework which encompasses the higher education qualifications frameworks in Wales and Scotland).²² The relationship with the requirements of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies could also be clarified.

3.17 The Academic Infrastructure forms part of the Quality Assurance System in England and Northern Ireland and separate quality enhancement frameworks for Wales and Scotland, which are themselves based on a number of principles.²³ The principles set out the relationship between the processes institutions operate internally to manage the standards of their awards and the quality of their provision, and how those processes are monitored by external audit and review, which are all underpinned by the shared framework of the Academic Infrastructure. The evidence collected for the evaluation suggested that this relationship could be made more transparent. The higher education sector is also familiar with the principles for better regulation established by the Higher Education Regulation Review Group.²⁴

Proposal 4: QAA should set out how the components of a revised Academic Infrastructure relate to other relevant reference points used by higher education providers.

²⁰ ECTS: www.europeunit.ac.uk/sites/europe_unit2/resources/E-09-06_ECTS_Users'Guide.pdf.

²¹ *Employer-responsive provision survey: a reflective report*. www.qaa.ac.uk/employers/EffectiveProvision.pdf; *Commentary and Critique of the QAA Code of Practice Section 2* produced by the Quality assurance and quality enhancement in e-learning special interest group: www.qe-sig.net.

²² Links to the qualifications frameworks are available on the QAA website: www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ.

²³ Principles for better regulation for England and Northern Ireland: www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2010/10_17; Principles for Wales: www.hefcw.ac.uk/documents/publications/circulars/circulars_2008/W08%2031HE%20circ.pdf; Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework: www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/qualityframework.

²⁴ HERRG has been replaced by the Better Regulation Group: www.hebetterregulation.ac.uk.

3.18 It was widely recognised in the evidence collected for the evaluation that while the review and revision of the components of the Academic Infrastructure was valued by higher education providers for the opportunity it offered for them to review their own policies and processes, the programme of review had not necessarily kept pace with changes in the wider higher education environment. For example, the cycle of review and revisions means that some subject benchmark statements contain incorrect information about accreditation or professional body requirements. Similarly, guidance in the *Code of practice* in relation to flexible and distributed learning has not been updated to reflect the increasingly mainstream role of technology-enhanced learning.

3.19 There is a tension between enabling small revisions to the reference points to be made quickly so that they are up to date, ensuring that as a whole they remain robust, and making sure that all higher education providers have an opportunity to contribute to review and revision - and will therefore accept any changes made.

3.20 Further consultation with the higher education sector is also needed on what mechanisms may be used to ensure the areas covered by the Academic Infrastructure remain relevant. This may include establishing a means by which additional areas of guidance can be added and those which are no longer necessary can be removed.

Proposal 5: QAA should continue to ensure that the reference points for setting, maintaining, assuring and enhancing academic quality and academic standards remain robust, flexible and up to date.

3.21 The evidence collected for the evaluation demonstrated that the term 'Academic Infrastructure' and its individual components are not widely recognised or understood beyond staff in higher education providers with the responsibility for the review, maintenance and revision of academic practice. It is also clear that the components of the Academic Infrastructure as currently constituted are valued as technical tools for those involved in the quality assurance and enhancement of higher education provision and that useful technical detail should not be lost in any developments aimed at making them more accessible to a wider audience. However, it was widely acknowledged that there needed to be better explanation and communication about the existence of the underpinning framework and the tools which higher education providers use to set, assure and describe academic standards and academic quality and their role within the UK's diverse higher education sector made up of autonomous institutions. In part, this could be in the form of an overarching explanatory statement in plain English which sets out how the reference points for academic standards and academic quality form part of the broader framework for quality assurance and enhancement.

3.22 Moreover, the evidence collected for the evaluation indicated that the name 'Academic Infrastructure' can be a barrier in encouraging wider engagement with its components and purpose. While some suggested that little might actually be achieved by changing the name, a considerable number of respondents suggested that a new title should be considered. A new title may also better explain the relationship between the components by using different, more transparent, terminology.

Proposal 6: QAA should undertake to create public awareness of the framework for academic standards and academic quality in UK higher education.

4 Next steps

4.1 This report completes QAA's evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure. The evidence which underpins the evaluation can be found on the QAA website.²⁵ On the basis of the analysis of this evidence recommendations have been made about how QAA could develop the Academic Infrastructure in future to ensure that it remains 'fit for purpose'. Such developments would require some changes to the structure of the Academic Infrastructure as currently constituted. While QAA is the steward of the Academic Infrastructure on behalf of the UK higher education sector, higher education providers as independent self-governing organisations need to participate in agreeing to any changes and detail of how they might work in practice. Detailed proposals for changes to and restructuring of the Academic Infrastructure emerging from the recommendation made in this report will be drawn up and form the basis of a formal consultation during autumn 2010. Details of this consultation and any associated events will be made available through the QAA website early in the new academic year.

4.2 There are currently a number of other ongoing activities relating to UK higher education, several of which will result in consultations in the autumn. The background to much of these parallel and interrelated activities has already been outlined in an information paper published by QAA in February 2010.²⁶ Some of the work is UK-wide (such as the evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure and the sector-led review of external examining), while other work is country specific (such as the development of the new operational description for Institutional audit for England and Northern Ireland). Recognising the potential for overlap, the relevant officers from QAA with other higher education stakeholder bodies are working together to minimise confusion and duplication, and to ensure that higher education providers are able to make valid, informed responses.

4.3 It is anticipated that any structural changes made to the Academic Infrastructure following the consultation will be in place by the end of the academic year 2010-11. Higher education providers will have the following academic year during which they can consider the impacts of any changes on their provision, and act accordingly. Full engagement with the revised Academic Infrastructure would not, then, be expected until the beginning of academic year 2012-13. In due course there will follow a programme of revision to various components as required, and as has happened, in the past.

4.4 The operational description for a new Institutional audit process for England and Northern Ireland will be available for consultation from October 2010. Both the current audit methodology and the process that will replace it will continue to expect institutions to engage with the Academic Infrastructure and audit teams will carry out their audit explorations using the Academic Infrastructure as an agreed set of reference points. The new audit process will start in 2011-12, that is, before the revised Academic Infrastructure is expected to be fully embedded in institutions. For the first year of the new process, therefore, it is expected that audit teams will work within the context of the current Academic Infrastructure, expecting institutions to be using the revised Academic Infrastructure as reference points only from 2012-13.

²⁵ Evidence underpinning the evaluation: www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/evaluation10findings.

²⁶ *Evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure - a QAA information paper.*
www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/evaluation10/AI_evalContext.pdf.

Appendix - evidence sources for the evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure

The sources listed below are in addition to those already used in the discussion paper (list available at www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/evaluation10).

Evidence collected directly for the purposes of the evaluation

In February 2010, QAA published a series of papers in order to seek the views of all those with an interest in UK higher education in relation to the evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure. One hundred and eighteen responses to this discussion were received. A full analysis of the responses is available from www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/evaluation10findings.

During the period in which the discussion papers were available for comment, a series of four round table discussion events were held around the UK. These provided an opportunity for participants to discuss the Academic Infrastructure and the topics raised in the published papers. Feedback from these events was collected and analysed, and is available from www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/evaluation10findings.

Throughout the evaluation, the QAA project team has been able to draw on the advice and feedback of an external sounding board made of representatives of higher education institutions and higher education representative bodies, including the National Union of Students. Through the sounding board, feedback has been collected from the Universities Scotland Learning and Teaching Committee and Teaching Quality Forum.

Between December 2009 and January 2010, QAA carried out a survey of all its auditors and reviewers throughout the UK, to collect their views about the use of the Academic Infrastructure in the context of external audit and review activity.

Members of the QAA project team have held discussion with and collected feedback from groups and networks representing particular interests within higher education. These have included:

- the Academic Registrars Council Quality Working Group
- the Association of Collaborative Provision
- the Association of Colleges
- the Mixed Economy Group of large higher education in further education providers
- GuildHE quality practitioners network
- Northern Universities Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer (NUCCAT)
- QAA Steering Group for Benchmarking
- QAA Student Sounding Board
- a round table event organised by the Higher Education Academy for Subject Centre staff
- a workshop at the National Union of Students conference in September 2009.

Other evidence sources

- *Employer-responsive provision survey: a reflective report.*
www.qaa.ac.uk/employers/EffectiveProvision.pdf.
- *Commentary and Critique of the QAA Code of Practice Section 2* produced by the Quality assurance and quality enhancement in e-learning special interest group:
www.qe-sig.net.
- Outcomes of the consultation on Future arrangements for quality assurance in England and Northern Ireland: www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2010/10_17.

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2010

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

Tel 01452 557000
Fax 01452 557070
Email comms@qaa.ac.uk
Web www.qaa.ac.uk

Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786