Information Article:
External Pressures on Teaching[1]

George MacDonald Ross

Director
PRS-LTSN
University of Leeds

Introduction

The primary role of the PRS-LTSN is to improve the quality of education by encouraging the sharing of good practice and innovation, and the discussion of common problems. However, there are other forces at play, which are pursuing the same end by different means. The purpose of this article is to explain what these forces are, and how the PRS-LTSN can help departments to satisfy their demands.

The first set of pressures comes from the Government *via* the funding councils, namely the requirement for higher education institutions (HEIs) to be publicly accountable for the services they provide with Government funding. The assumption is that the two main activities of HEIs are teaching and research:

- The Research Assessment Exercise[2] (RAE) is conducted by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) on behalf of the other funding councils, and research ratings have a major influence on funding.
- The assessment of the quality of teaching and of institutional quality assurance mechanisms is the responsibility of the *Quality Assurance Agency* (QAA) (see Appendix), which is an independent body funded jointly by the funding councils, Universities UK (UUK) and the Standing Conference of Principals (SCoP). Ratings do not affect funding, except that there is the ultimate sanction of withdrawal of funding for persistently unsatisfactory programmes of study.

[1] This is a slightly revised and updated version of collated web pages available at: http://www.prs-ltsn.ac.uk/generic/qualenhance/index.html

[2] See http://www.prs-ltsn.ac.uk/policies/rae.html for further information.

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- More recently, the Transparency Review commissioned by the funding councils evaluates the extent to which funding for research is actually spent on research, and funding for teaching is actually spent on teaching.

We are concerned with the RAE only in so far as pedagogical research comes within its remit. We do not see the Transparency Review as raising any subject-specific issues, except that in our disciplines it is more difficult than in many others to draw a sharp line between teaching-related and research-related activities—particularly in the case of pedagogical research. Our main interest is in the QAA.

The second set of pressures comes from the *National Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997*[3] (the 'Dearing Report'). It is fair to say that the Government rejected most of the recommendations which implied increased Government funding (student support and academic salaries), and accepted those which merely meant more work for academics. Since it will be the task of the QAA to ensure that these recommendations are implemented, it seems sensible to deal with them under the heading of QAA review.

There is a third set of pressures—still on the horizon, and not yet fully enshrined in concrete Government policy—namely the need to compete in the global education market through courses delivered electronically. Some institutions are moving faster down this road than others, and there will be increasing pressure on PRS disciplines to enter the brave new world of e-learning, if they have not already done so.

QAA Review

At the time of writing, there has been public consultation about the future of QAA subject review. Institutional review is largely unaffected, and the QAA policies discussed in the remainder of this article still stand. The likely outcome is that, in Scotland at least, there will be no more subject reviews, and instead there will be a quality enhancement programme covering broad subject areas. In England, there will probably be an 'audit trail', in which about 10% of departments in each institution will be reviewed, under the new review method already published (the recently completed reviews of Philosophy and Theology and Religious Studies were among the last to be conducted under the old method).

[3] http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/ncihe

However, although the probability of any given department being subjected to external review will be low, all departments will have to behave as if they were going to be reviewed, for two reasons:

- First, subject reviewers will check documentation over a number of years, and policies and procedures will have to be in place, just in case a department is reviewed.
- Second, the current proposals do not affect institutional review. All institutions will continue to be reviewed regularly, and the QAA will check whether its policies have been implemented internally.

So, although the large majority of departments will be spared the stress and hard work of being reviewed, the pressure to conform to QAA policies will remain. It will be applied through mechanisms internal to each HEI, rather than directly by the QAA. In particular, institutions have recently been required by the funding councils to produce annually updated *Learning and Teaching Strategies*, which should include internal mechanisms for ensuring the implementation of national as well as local policies.

A new review method was piloted in Scotland in 2001, and it will be applied elsewhere when and if a new cycle of subject reviews is implemented. The most significant difference from the previous method is a shift in emphasis from the assessment of *quality* to the assessment of *standards*. In this context, 'quality' means 'achievement of objectives'—so that a department which sets itself low standards and meets them is of higher quality than one which sets itself high standards and narrowly fails to meet them. Now a judgment will be made about the appropriateness of the standards themselves.

There has always been some assessment of standards through external accrediting bodies (where these exist), external examiners' reports, and the inspection by reviewers of student work. To these the QAA has added a hierarchy of specifications.

At the generic level, there are *qualifications frameworks* (see Appendix) (one for England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, and a similar one for Scotland). The frameworks are designed to kill two birds with one stone: to establish a consistent nomenclature for awards at different levels, and to define in general terms the standards which will have been achieved by holders of the awards. A crucial element is that it is no longer permissible to award a lower qualification to students who narrowly fail to meet the requirements of a higher one (e.g. a pass or

ordinary degree to an honours candidate). A student in danger of failing should be counselled to transfer to a programme leading to a lower qualification whose positive requirements they can meet. Similarly, there should be exit qualifications for students who successfully complete part of a degree programme, but do not continue to the end.

At the subject-specific level, there are *benchmark statements* (see Appendix), which translate the generic descriptions of the qualifications frameworks into the knowledge, skills, and attributes ('learning outcomes') expected of students in individual disciplines for different qualifications (e.g. BA Hons, or MA), and at different levels of performance (e.g. typical, or bare pass). At present, the benchmark statements vary widely in their prescriptiveness, and they are often less demanding than the qualifications frameworks. It seems likely that the benchmark statements will be tightened up and made more consistent over the years.

At the institutional level, each department is expected to write a *programme specification* (see Appendix) for every programme of study it offers. These have to be written in terms of learning outcomes, and specify how they are calibrated against the benchmark statement (or statements) relevant to the programme, and any other external specification of standards, such as those required by an accrediting body.

However, the purpose of programme specifications is not simply to enable reviewers to make judgments about an individual department's academic standards. They are also a key element in a separate agenda deriving from the Dearing Report. The report expressed concern that applicants to HEIs had insufficient information to judge which programme of study at which institution would be must suited to their needs, and that prospective employers had insufficient information as to what applicants had actually learned. Programme specifications are a means for making such information publicly available (though how far people will actually read them is another matter).

As far as prospective employers are concerned, the Dearing Report recommends the provision of far more detailed information than is given by a simple degree classification. A number of research projects have put flesh on the bones of the Dearing recommendations, and the policy is now that graduates should be able to provide potential employers with the following three items, known collectively as a *progress file* (see Appendix):

- A detailed *transcript* supplied by the institution, with personal details, a breakdown of marks for each module or course, and the algorithm for translating marks into a degree classification in addition to degree classification itself.
- A *programme specification* supplied by the department, which makes it clear what learning outcomes the graduate can be expected to have achieved given their degree classification.
- A *personal development record*, supplied by the graduate with or without authentication by the department, which provides evidence that the graduate went through a process of Personal Development Planning (PDP) while a student, and adds details of learning outcomes not certified by the department or institution (e.g. generic skills, work experience, charitable work, or contributions to university societies).

Finally, the QAA has produced a *Code of Practice*, divided into 10 sections on different themes, with an average of about 40 'precepts' in each. Most of the sections are of relevance only to central administrations, but some have direct repercussions for teaching departments. Institutional reviews will include audit trails, to check whether the precepts have been implemented down to departmental level.

What departments need to do

Here is a checklist of what departments need to do in order to satisfy even the 'lighter touch' review system currently proposed:

- ensure that, for RAE purposes, due credit is given to publications on teaching issues;
- encourage the development of C&IT-based modules and programmes;
- maintain documentation of quality assurance procedures (minutes of relevant committees, programme and module reviews, peer observation of teaching, etc.);
- write programme specifications for all programmes of study, with reference to the qualifications frameworks and the relevant benchmark statements;
- create new programmes of study for students who would previously have been awarded a lower qualification as a consolation prise;
- institute a system of PDP, which involves the creation of a progress file for each student;

- implement the relevant precepts in the *Code of Practice*.

How the PRS-LTSN can help

We do not wish our agenda to be driven by QAA requirements. Nevertheless, we do see it as part of our role to support individual departments and the subject communities as a whole in addressing the QAA agenda.
We can help by:

- summarising and explaining policy documents emanating from the QAA, the funding councils, and other sources;
- organising workshops on the scholarship of learning and teaching, and providing a forum for publications;
- facilitating discussion of the use of C&IT in teaching (sharing examples of good practice, solving common problems, reviews of software, brokering consortia to develop new materials);
- facilitating discussion of how to apply the qualifications frameworks and benchmark statements when writing programme specifications;
- producing subject-specific model progress files for individual departments to adopt or adapt.

If you can think of any other ways in which the PRS-LTSN can help departments respond to the external pressures outlined in the present document, please contact us with your suggestions.

Appendix: Further information and resources

QAA ACADEMIC REVIEW

General

The QAA has published an excellent summary of its present and future activities as *Quality Assurance in UK Higher Education: A Brief Guide*, 16pp:

http://www.qaa.ac.uk/public/heguide/QAAintrotext-only.htm

The LTSN Generic Centre is building up an area on its website devoted to QAA policies, and the relationship between the QAA and the LTSN:

http://www.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/qaa/introduction.asp

See in particular Norman Jackson's *QAA Policies*:

http://www.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/qaa/policies.asp

and *Nuts and Bolts of Academic Subject Review*:

http://www.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/qaa/academic_review.asp

Reviews up to December 2001

The QAA publishes institutional review reports for all HE institutions in the UK:

http://www.qaa.ac.uk/revreps/instrev/instname.htm

The QAA also publishes subject review reports for all subjects in England and Northern Ireland:

http://www.qaa.ac.uk/revreps/subjrev/bysubname.htm

The first round of Scottish subject review reports are available on the SHEFC website:

http://www.shefc.ac.uk/publicat/qapubs/qareport.htm

Reviews from 2000 onwards will be on the QAA website.

Brief summaries of the Philosophy and Theology reviews have been provided by Mary Hayward of the PRS-LTSN in the subject sections of the PRS-LTSN website.

The outcomes of the first round of Welsh subject reviews are available on the HEFCW website:

http://www.wfc.ac.uk/education/hefcw/qar/index.html

Be warned that the document is 18 pages long, and the only information it gives is whether a department was 'excellent' or 'satisfactory'. Copies of the reports themselves have to be ordered from the HEFCW.

Reviews from 2000 onwards will be on the QAA website.

Future reviews

The review method used from 2000 in Scotland, and from 2002 in the rest of the UK is detailed in the *Handbook for Academic Review*:

http://www.qaa.ac.uk/acrevhbook/intro.htm

This method will have to be modified in the light of the surprise announcement by the Secretary of State for Education, in March 2001, that there will be a 'lighter touch':

http://www.dfee.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn_id=2001_0162

See also the media release by UniversitiesUK:

http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/mediareleases/show.asp?MR=233

The HEFCE, UUK, and SCOP responded almost immediately with a document entitled *Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Delivering Lightness of Touch*:

http://www.hefce.ac.uk/news/hefce/2001/gainhe.doc

Since then, it has been superseded by a consultation document: *HEFCE 01/45: Quality Assurance in Higher Education*:

http://www.hefce.ac.uk/Pubs/hefce/2001/01_45.htm

QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS

1. Frameworks and 'graduateness'

The QAA qualifications frameworks build on earlier attempts by its predecessor, the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC), to define 'graduateness'. These attempts are described and criticised in a paper written by the author in 1996.

http://www.prs-ltsn.leeds.ac.uk/generic/qualenhance/graduate.html

2. Why 'frameworks' in the plural?

The original intention was to have a single UK framework; but the historical differences between the Scottish HE system and those prevailing in the rest of the UK proved unbridgeable (in particular, 4-year degree programmes, and the ordinary degree). There are therefore two frameworks: one for Scotland:

http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/nqf/scotfw2001/contents.htm

and one for the rest of the UK:

http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/nqf/ewni2001/contents.htm

The only significant differences between the two frameworks relate to the nomenclature of degree programmes, which is a matter for central administrations rather than departments. So, with apologies to the Scots, we shall focus on the framework for England, Wales, and Northern Ireland in the present document.

3. The purpose of the framework

The purpose of the framework is to:

- provide a consistent nomenclature for qualification titles at different levels;
- define the standards to be achieved at each level.

4. The framework and other requirements

The framework comes at the top of a hierarchy of other requirements:

- the framework is generic, and applies to all disciplines;
- subject benchmark statements apply the framework to broad subject areas, with special reference to Honours level;
- programme specifications apply the subject benchmark statement to a particular programme of study in a particular institution;
- progress files apply the programme specification to the achievements of individual students.

Despite the use of the present tense, this hierarchy is not yet in place, and it is not even clear that the benchmark statements are consistent with the qualifications framework. This is not surprising, since the earlier benchmark statements were written before the framework was published in January 2001.

5. Monitoring implementation

Institutions are required to implement the framework by the start of the academic year 2003/04. Implementation will be monitored through QAA Academic Review.

6. Levels

There are five levels, covering three levels of undergraduate education, and two levels of postgraduate education. The assumption is that students will be eligible for an award after successful completion of any level, even if they do not continue with their studies. For example, a student who drops out after successfully completing the first year of a Bachelors programme can be awarded a Certificate of Higher Education. The levels are:

C (Certificate) level: normally one year of a Bachelors programme: Certificate of Higher Education.

I (Intermediate) level: normally two years of a Bachelors programme: Diploma of Higher Education, or Foundation Degree; but also three years to a lower standard: ordinary (Bachelors) degree.

H (Honours) level: *either* completion of a Bachelors Programme: Bachelors degree with Honours; *or* completion of a postgraduate programme which does not build on a Bachelors degree in the same discipline: Graduate Diploma, or Graduate Certificate.

M (Masters) level: one year or less of postgraduate study: Masters degree, Postgraduate Diploma, or Postgraduate Certificate.

D (Doctoral) level: Doctorate.

Note: The concept of a Foundation Degree completed within two years (thought up by the Government) is inconsistent with the Bologna Declaration which requires a minimum of three years for the completion of a degree. It is likely to be declared illegal by the EU within the foreseeable future:

http://www.crue.upm.es/eurec/bolognaexplanation.htm

7. Implications for departments

Departments must ensure that:

- they have programmes of study leading to an award at each of the above levels (and special attention needs to be paid to the distinction between 'postgraduate' awards for students who have a Bachelors degree in the same subject, and 'graduate' awards for those who do not);
- the programme specifications for each level of award they offer are consistent with the relevant 'qualification descriptors' (see below);
- the programme specifications consist of 'positively defined outcomes', not failure to meet the requirements of a higher level of award;
- they have procedures for counselling students at risk to transfer to a programme of study at a lower level (e.g. from Honours to an ordinary degree, or from a PhD to an MPhil), since it will no longer

be possible to award a lower degree as a compensation for narrowly failing to meet the requirements of a higher one);
- the amount of expected study time is appropriate for the level of the award (though the framework gives little guidance on this, since it recognises that institutions have very different systems for quantifying study time).

8. Qualification descriptors

Qualification descriptors for each level are specified in Annex 1 of the Qualifications Framework:

http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/nqf/ewni2001/annex1.htm

The most important is that of the *minimum* requirements for a Bachelors degree with Honours, all of which have to be satisfied. It runs as follows:

Honours degrees are awarded to students who have demonstrated:

1. a systematic understanding of key aspects of their field of study, including acquisition of coherent and detailed knowledge, at least some of which is at or informed by, the forefront of defined aspects of a discipline;
2. an ability to deploy accurately established techniques of analysis and enquiry within a discipline;
3. conceptual understanding that enables the student:
    a. to devise and sustain arguments, and/or to solve problems, using ideas and techniques, some of which are at the forefront of a discipline; and
    b. to describe and comment upon particular aspects of current research, or equivalent advanced scholarship, in the discipline;
4. an appreciation of the uncertainty, ambiguity and limits of knowledge;
5. the ability to manage their own learning, and to make use of scholarly reviews and primary sources (e.g. refereed research articles, and/or original materials appropriate to the discipline).

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

a. apply the methods and techniques that they have learned to review, consolidate, extend and apply their knowledge and understanding, and to initiate and carry out projects;
b. critically evaluate arguments, assumptions, abstract concepts and data (that may be incomplete), to make judgements, and to frame appropriate questions to achieve a solution—or identify a range of solutions—to a problem;
c. communicate information, ideas, problems, and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences;

and will have:

d. qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring:
e. the exercise of initiative and personal responsibility;
f. decision-making in complex and unpredictable contexts; and
g. the learning ability needed to undertake appropriate further training of a professional or equivalent nature.

9. Comment

The description is of the *minimum* standards to be achieved by any graduate in any discipline. It is remarkable how many of the properties of graduateness described here are the properties expected of good *philosophy* graduates. While we welcome the recognition that all higher education should be more philosophical in its approach, we do not see the qualification descriptors as giving a realist account of what is actually achieved by weaker students in any discipline—not even in philosophy.

The QAA seems to have fallen into the trap of making grandiose claims about the value of HE for the eyes of the Government and employers, without considering what it is practicable to deliver. It has not learned the lesson of the old HEQC that academics tend to define their expectations in terms the *good* graduate (the 2.1/2.2 borderline), and not in terms of the pass/fail borderline.

There is a serious question as to whether the qualification descriptors are mere rhetoric to be ignored, or whether they have teeth. If the latter (as is almost certainly the case) we face a choice between failing half or more of our students, or improving the quality of the education we provide, so that the large majority of students meet the minimum standards.

Some institutions, such as the University of Leicester (to give just one example) saw what was coming, and developed a strategy for

ensuring that all graduates would achieve at least minimum (or 'threshold') standards. It defined the Attributes of a Leicester Graduate:

http://www.leicester.ac.uk/ua/vc/ilts/lg.html

before the qualifications framework was published; but the list of skills, understanding, and personal attributes is quite similar. Whether its strategy will be successful is another matter:

http://www.leicester.ac.uk/ua/vc/ilts/strategy.html

We expect that the main pressure on departments to conform to the qualifications framework will be internal. Nevertheless, as in the Leicester example, the emphasis is likely (and quite rightly) to be on developing skills in the *subject context*.

Although helping departments to satisfy the requirements of the QAA is only subsidiary to the aims of the PRS-LTSN, we have a major role to play in ensuring that the educational values of our disciplines are not distorted by the imposition of inappropriate models. We shall facilitate discussion of the relevant issues at subject level, so that they can be addressed collectively.

BENCHMARKING

The QAA Qualifications frameworks are generic specifications of the minimum standards expected of all graduates (and holders of other HE awards). Subject benchmark statements are intended to apply the generic specifications to honours graduates in broad subject areas, and also to articulate 'the conceptual framework that gives a discipline its coherence and identity.'

The function of benchmark statements is to provide:

- an external point of reference for institutions when designing or approving programmes of study;
- a means for external examiners and reviewers to verify and compare standards;
- information for students and employers.

All the benchmarking statements likely to be relevant to our disciplines are already available:

- Philosophy:
  http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/benchmark/philosophy.pdf
  summary:
  http://www.prs-ltsn.ac.uk/generic/qualenhance/philbench.html

- Theology and Religious Studies:
  http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/benchmark/theology.pdf
  summary:
  http://www.prs-ltsn.ac.uk/generic/qualenhance/trsbench.html

- History:
  http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/benchmark/history.pdf
  summary:
  http://www.prs-ltsn.ac.uk/generic/qualenhance/histbench.html

The History and Philosophy of Science (including the History of Medicine and Technology) has been overlooked by the QAA as a distinct subject area. Enquiries by the PRS-LTSN suggest that the Philosophy of Science community is happy to go along with the Philosophy benchmark statement, whereas the History of Science community is less happy with the History benchmark statement. The PRS-LTSN is currently engaged in a consultation exercise to assist in the writing of a separate History of Science benchmark statement; indeed there is a Benchmarking and Key Skill workshop in the History of Science, Technology and Medicine on 23rd March, 2002 at University College London organised by the PRS-LTSN.

All the above benchmark statements were written before the publication of the qualifications frameworks. They were produced by members of the subject communities themselves (nominated by the relevant subject associations), under the guidance of a QAA official; and the Philosophy panel in particular went to great lengths to consult departments at an early stage. The focus is as much on what a *good* honours graduate can be expected to achieve as on minimum or 'threshold' standards.

As a result, these particular benchmark statements are somewhat less demanding than the qualifications frameworks. Even so, a strict application of the threshold standards may well mean that some students who are now awarded a third-class honours degree might have to be failed in future (in accordance with the qualifications frameworks, the awarding of a pass degree is no longer an option).

Comments

1. Inconsistencies between the qualifications frameworks and the benchmark statements mean that the whole area will have to be revisited within the near future (the QAA says that this will happen, but not before July 2003). It would be preferable for the qualifications frameworks to be revised downwards to be brought into closer contact with reality; but it is likely that the pressure will be to revise the benchmark statements upwards.

2. The benchmark statements have generally been drawn up with the single-honours student in mind—this is the almost inevitable consequence of their subject-specificity. However, a large proportion of students are registered on joint or combined programmes, or take modules as electives. To give just two examples:

- there are more students studying philosophy as a component of a named degree at Oxford than anywhere else; yet Oxford is one of the few institutions which do not offer a single-honours philosophy Bachelors degree programme at all;
- there are only two single-honours history and philosophy of science programmes, both recently instituted.

There are serious problems as to how benchmark statements can usefully be applied to degree programmes involving two or more disparate subjects, let alone to elective modules.

- first, it is unrealistic to expect a joint-honours student to attain the same standard as a single-honours student in each subject, and adding two sets of lower standards does not make a higher standard (in other words, there is a general problem as to how benchmark statements can balance depth against breadth);
- second, there may be conflicts between the attributes of graduateness expected by the two disciplines (e.g. a philosopher might be expected to question established wisdom, whereas an engineer might be expected to adhere strictly to professional guidelines—so what is to be expected of a student who combines philosophy with engineering?).

What departments need to do

Despite the above reservations, departments need to ensure that all their programme specifications are consistent with the relevant benchmark statement or statements.

How the PRS-LTSN can help

We believe that the task will be made easier if departments do not work in isolation. Although the programme specifications themselves will vary from department to department, the problem of how to apply the benchmarks statements will be largely common to departments in the same subject area. A shared understanding across the subject community of how they are to be applied will be a powerful weapon in dealing with difficult university administrations and external reviewers, since the essential purpose of benchmark statements is to provide calibration across each discipline.

Further information

The Generic Centre of the LTSN has adopted the implications for departments of the benchmark statements as one of its major research themes. It has set up an area of its website devoted to benchmarking:

http://www.ltsn.ac.uk/genericcentre/projects/qaa/subject_benchmarking.asp

This site provides links to the following documents:

- Jackson, Norman, "Implications of benchmarking for curriculum design and the assessment of student learning";
- Yorke, Mantz, "Assessment issues arising from the benchmarking statements";
- Jackson, Norman, and Smallwood, Angela, "Subject Benchmarking and Personal Development Planning";
- Dunne, Elizabeth, "Generic learning outcomes in benchmarking statements".

In addition, the Generic Centre has commissioned a number of studies into the potential influence of benchmark statements on programme specifications. The PRS-LTSN has been selected as one of the subject

centres to undertake this project and we have commissioned reports in all our subject areas.

PROGRAMME SPECIFICATIONS

Programme specifications were originally recommended in the Dearing Report (recommendation 21). They can be seen both as part of a hierarchy of requirements taken up by the QAA, and as good practice in their own right.

As part of a hierarchy, they are the second most detailed and specific item in a chain which proceeds downwards:

- from the qualifications frameworks, which define standards common to all disciplines;
- through subject benchmark statements which apply these standards to particular disciplines, and also supply information as to the scope of the discipline, and methods of teaching and assessment;
- through **programme specifications**, which apply these general descriptions to what is offered by a particular programme of study at a particular institution;
- to progress files, which apply the programme specification to the achievements of the individual student.

The consequence is that programme specifications must make explicit reference to the relevant subject benchmark statement (or statements if more than one is relevant). The benchmark statement should not be copied slavishly, but used as a point of reference against which the programme specification is justified. Conformance will be monitored by the QAA through academic review.

As good practice in their own right, programme specifications give interested parties the information they need to know about programmes of study. The QAA document *Quality assurance in UK higher education: a brief guide*, states that:

> Programme specifications are standard sets of information that each institution provides about its programmes. Each specification clarifies what knowledge, understanding, skills and other attributes a student will have developed on successfully completing a specific programme. It also provides details of teaching and learning methods, assessment, and

subsequent career opportunities, and sets out how the programme relates to the qualifications framework.

This information allows prospective students to make comparisons and informed choices about the programmes they wish to study and provides useful guidance for recruiters of graduates.

Sources

The main source of information about programme specifications is the QAA itself. It has made two documents available in the area of its website devoted to programme specifications,
QAA policy on programme specifications (October 1999)
Guidelines on preparing programme specifications (June 2000):

http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/progspec/contents.htm

Anyone who has to write a programme specification will need to refer to this document in particular.

In addition, the LTSN Generic Centre is building up an area of its website devoted to programme specifications:

http://www.ltsn.ac.uk/genericcentre/projects/qaa/prog_spec.asp

Who are programme specifications for?

Programme specifications are for:

- intending and actual students, so that they can understand the programme;
- employers wanting to know what graduates have achieved (especially subject-specific and transferable skills);
- professional regulatory bodies wanting to know whether the programme meets their requirements;
- institutions and teaching teams, as ensuring a clear understanding of aims and learning outcomes, and serving as a reference point for internal reviews;
- QAA reviewers and external examiners;
- those seeking feedback from students or recent graduates as to their learning experience.

Which programmes should have a programme specification?

Programme specifications should be written for all:

- single or major programmes;
- integrated interdisciplinary programmes;
- well-defined pathways through a modular structure, which are followed by large numbers of students.

In the case of multi-disciplinary programmes (where students merely choose options from a range of different programmes), there should be an indication of the range of choice, and the generic learning outcomes should be stated fully.

Joint-honours programmes do not normally need separate programme specifications, provided that there is a short statement of the rationale for the combination, and of the ways in which the outcomes of each subject reinforce each other.

Subject to the above exceptions, there should be programme specifications for all taught programmes from Certificate to Masters level, as defined in the Qualifications Frameworks. Where lower-level qualifications are no more than 'stopping off points' for students originally registered for higher level awards, they should be defined, perhaps by particular combinations of modules that provide the outcomes needed for the qualification awarded.

The format of programme specifications

There is no prescribed format for programme specifications. They may be written as a straight narrative, or using a template. The QAA Guidelines includes eight examples of programme specifications of different kinds of programme, in different subject areas, and in a variety of formats(pp.10-41):

http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/progspec/contents.htm

Whatever the format, the outcome must be a document which satisfies the Dearing expectation of a 'clear description' that will help prospective students to make an informed choice. Some complex documents produced during the process of drawing up a specification (e.g. those mapping module outcomes to overall programme outcomes) may be of value to course teams and internal and external reviewers, but they should not be included in the published programme specification.

The content of programme specifications

Programme specifications are normally expected to include at least the following information:

- awarding body/institution;
- teaching institution (if different);
- details of accreditation by a professional/statutory body (if applicable);
- name of the final award;
- programme title;
- UCAS code;
- aims of the programme;
- relevant subject benchmark statements and other external and internal reference points used to inform programme outcomes;
- programme outcomes: knowledge and understanding; skills and other attributes;
- teaching, learning and assessment strategies to enable outcomes to be achieved and demonstrated;
- programme structures and requirements, levels, modules, credits and awards;
- date at which the programme specification was written or revised.

Specifications could also include the following:

- criteria for admission to the programme;
- information about assessment regulations;
- indicators of quality;
- particular support for learning;
- methods for evaluating and improving the quality and standards of learning.

Module and programme learning outcomes

The expression 'learning outcomes' is used to emphasise that students do not acquire merely knowledge and understanding, but also skills, capabilities, and values—some of which will be specific to the discipline, and some of which will be generic.

Module handbooks will specify the learning outcomes, and assessment methods and criteria for that particular module. In drawing

up a programme specification, it may be helpful to map the outcomes of individual modules against the intended outcomes for the programme as a whole, in order to ensure that each student meets all the requirements. However, the programme itself should be specified holistically, and not merely as the sum of its parts.

Further advice not included in the present summary

The QAA Guidelines has two annexes (pp.6-9):

http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/progspec/contents.htm

Annex 1 makes some suggestions as to how:

- outcome statements might be phrased;
- standards might be calibrated;
- benchmark statements might be used;
- students might be expected to achieve and demonstrate intended outcomes;
- where further information might be found.

Annex 2 lists the fourteen items in the *Handbook for Academic Review* which have a direct bearing on programme specifications. This highlights the importance of having robust programme specifications in place well before any subject review.

How the PRS-LTSN can help

We believe that the task of drawing up programme specifications will be made easier if departments do not work in isolation. Although the programme specifications themselves will vary from department to department, the problem of how to apply the benchmarks statements will be largely common to departments in the same subject area. Again, none of the examples supplied by the QAA are relevant to our subject areas, and it would be of great benefit to all if PRS departments which have already undergone the exercise could provide models for publication on our website. Please contact us (see p. 172).

The PRS-LTSN will encourage discussion through electronic discussion lists and workshops, and it will provide a forum for the publication of examples and other documents. It also has limited sums available for small grants to encourage research into problems relating to

the writing of programme specifications in disciplines covered by the Subject Centre.

PROGRESS FILES

The Dearing recommendation

Recommendation 20 of the *National Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997* (the 'Dearing Report') was as follows:

> We recommend that institutions of Higher Education, over the medium term develop a Progress File. The File should consist of two elements:
>
> - a transcript recording student achievement which should follow a common format devised by institutions collectively through their representative bodies;
> - a means by which students can monitor, build and reflect upon their personal development.

The Government response

The Government's response was as follows:

> The Government welcomes the Committee's recommendation and would encourage the higher education representative bodies to agree soon a common format for Progress Files and, with the assistance of the Quality Assurance Agency, develop a document which provides the information required by employers and dovetails with records of earlier learning achievement. DfEE is already supporting, through the Higher Education and Employment Development Prospectus, six projects costing £1m to develop innovative models for recording student achievement.

The context

The recommendation arose from two concerns:
First, the fact that a graduate has been awarded a degree of a particular class in a particular discipline at a particular HEI gives potential employers very little information about the knowledge, skills, and attributes acquired by the graduate. A much fuller transcript, together with details of the graduate's extra-curricular experience and learning, would make good the deficiency.

There are similar concerns at the European level, where mobility of labour presupposes that potential employers understand what applicants' qualifications mean, despite the wide variety of higher education systems. The intention is that the UK Progress File should be compatible with the EC/Council of Europe Diploma Supplement:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/recognition/diploma.html

which is currently under development, and to which the UK is committed under the *Bologna Declaration* (19th June 1999):

http://www.crue.upm.es/eurec/bolognaexplanation.htm

The Declaration was made by the *European University Association*:

http://www.unige.ch/eua/welcome.html?http&&&www.unige.ch/eua/En/home.html

Second, it has become widely accepted among educationalists and staff developers that people's performance will be improved if they spend some time in systematic reflection on their objectives and performance as a whole, and not merely on their performance at individual tasks. It is common practice for schoolchildren and FE students to keep the *National Record of Achievement (NRA)* and professional associations require members to undergo continuing professional development (CPD), including the keeping of a record, in order to remain in good standing:

http://www.dfes.gov.uk/nra/index.cfm

Hitherto, academics have been largely exempt from compulsory CPD, apart from patchily implemented appraisal systems, and encouragement to attend courses provided by staff development units (SDUs). Another Dearing recommendation was the establishment of the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (ILT), with the intention that membership would eventually become compulsory for all HE teachers, and that they would have to give evidence of CPD in order to retain their membership.

So the thinking behind the Dearing recommendation is that, if it is a good thing for schoolchildren to keep an NRA, and for graduate employees to undergo CPD, it is natural that HE students should undergo personal development planning (PDP), as part of a continuous transition from school, through HE, to employment.

Subsequent developments

Responsibility for carrying the Dearing recommendation forward was taken up by a Progress File Implementation Group, representing Universities UK, SCOP, Universities Scotland, the QAA, and the LTSN

Generic Centre. The group worked in close co-operation with other bodies, such as the Centre for Recording Achievement (CRA), the National Union of Students (NUS), the Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR), the Institute of Personnel Directors (IPD), and the projects funded by the (then) Department for Education and Employment (DfEE). Its actual implementation will be monitored by the QAA through institutional and subject reviews.

As a result of the consultations, it was agreed that there would not be a common format for progress files. Instead, there would be guidelines which would leave a significant degree of freedom for institutions to develop their own systems. It was also agreed that it could not be made compulsory for every student to participate in PDP, but that institutions should provide the opportunity for every student to do so, and encourage them to take advantage of it.

The *Guidelines for HE Progress Files* were published in February 2001:

http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/progfileHE/contents.htm

However, they are in many respects tentative and provisional, with considerable emphasis on the problems which still need to be overcome through further research and the sharing of good practice. The general message is that, whether or not PDP is a good thing, it *must* be implemented, because it is Government policy. If HEIs adopt a minimalist approach, it is unlikely to be effective; but if a more burdensome system is imposed from above, it will be resisted by staff and students alike. As so often in HE policy making, the representative bodies are trying to formulate an approach which is sufficiently liberal and not burdensome to be acceptable to the academic community, while still being robust enough to satisfy Government demands.

Terminology

The Dearing recommendation was made after a number of institutions had already embarked on a variety of projects using their own terminology. Some people use the same expression to mean different things, and some use different expression to mean the same thing. In order to avoid confusion, we should adopt the terminology of the *Guidelines*, however unsatisfactory we may feel it to be:

- a Progress File is the totality of the documentation possessed by the student, and which can be presented to a potential employer;

- a Transcript is that part of the Progress File which is authenticated by the institution (e.g. module marks, marking scheme, programme specification);
- Personal Development Planning (PDP) is the process through which students are supported in reflecting on their learning.

A Personal Development Record is a written outcome of PDP, which a graduate may present to a potential employer, but which is not formally authenticated by the institution.

Timescale for implementation

HEIs are encouraged to introduce transcripts during 2001/02, and are expected to do so by 2002/03. This is largely a matter for central administrations, but departments may be required to supply information about marking schemes and programme specifications.

It is recognised that PDP will take longer to incorporate into the design of programmes, and full implementation is not expected to be completed across all HEIs and programmes of study until 2005/06. During the intervening period, QAA reviewers may report on progress towards meeting the guidelines, but they will not *judge* the practice seen.

The current debate relates specifically to students on taught programmes of study, and it is as yet unclear how far and in what way Progress Files will affect research students (though some initiative for developing Progress Files for research students are in progress).

Personal Development Planning

The *Guidelines* define PDP as:

> a structured and supported process undertaken by an individual to reflect upon their own learning, performance and/or achievement and to plan for their personal, educational and career development.

The intention is that PDP should help students to:

- see relations between their personal and academic development in the light of their long-term goals;
- become more autonomous in identifying their own strengths and weaknesses, and in identifying means for reinforcing the former and overcoming the latter;
- understand how they are learning, and be aware of different learning strategies;

- review their progress in the programme of study as a whole, and make informed choices as to optional elements (this is particularly important in modular programmes);
- focus on the generic learning outcomes detailed in their programme specification, and be able to articulate what they have learned;
- articulate the learning outcomes of extra-curricular activities (e.g. part-time work, or participation in student societies), and identify further opportunities for such learning;
- prepare themselves to write a CV which sums up all their knowledge, skills, and attributes relevant to employment, and not merely those certified in the transcript.

PDP should also help departments and academic staff in the following ways:

- benchmark statements refer to generic learning outcomes which might not be addressed explicitly in any given module/course, and PDP provides a means for satisfying internal or external reviewers that they are addressed systematically at the programme level;
- if students are more autonomous learners, they will need less direct tuition (or to put it another way: teaching methods which presuppose that students are autonomous learners will be more effective);
- if PDP is linked to a personal tutorial system, personal tutorials will be more focussed and productive;
- personal tutors will have more, and more relevant information when writing references for employment or further study;
- the department will have an improved graduate employment rate;
- teachers will have greater insight into how students actually learn, and will be able to adjust their teaching styles accordingly.

The major issue is that of how PDP can be 'structured and supported' without a significant increase in staff and student time, to the detriment of other aspects of learning and teaching. In general, there are two possible models, with a range of hybrid variants.
Model 1 is to absorb PDP explicitly into the programme of study—in other words, PDP activity is taught and assessed like any other aspect of the degree programme, and student and staff time are catered for through the normal mechanisms.
The advantages are:

- there is no extra burden on students or staff (apart from redesigning the programme);
- in some disciplines there are already precedents to build on, in the form of study skills or careers modules, or year-abroad or work-placement logs,
- because PDP is assessed, students will actually do it;
- as part of the programme of study, there will be a clear specification of what students are required to do, and of the criteria by which they will be assessed.

The disadvantages are:

- time spent on PDP will be taken away from time spent on delivering the syllabus (though if PDP is effective, students should gain more from other modules/courses);
- in order to ensure continuity, PDP should be practiced throughout the programme of study, and not just in an introductory skills module—but if so, the time devoted to PDP may be disproportionate;
- academic staff may not have the necessary skills to handle PDP (either they will need to be trained, or the teaching will have to be farmed out to other units, such as the Careers Service, with consequent loss of subject-specificity and income);
- PDP presupposes that students are open about their non-academic activities; but there are serious questions as to the legality (let alone the morality) of including non-academic activities in academic assessment;
- more generally, some students come from cultural backgrounds in which there is a sharper distinction between personal and academic development than there is in the UK, and including PDP within the syllabus may lay a department open to charges of racial discrimination.

Model 2 is to keep PDP separate from the syllabus, and to link it instead to the personal tutorial system. On this model, the student will be responsible for keeping a Personal Development Record (PDR), of which a summary is given to the personal tutor, as the basis for discussion at regular tutorial meetings.

The advantages are:

- no time is taken away from delivery of the syllabus;
- PDP is a regular activity throughout the student's degree programme;
- confidentiality about private matters can be preserved;
- the cost in staff time is no greater than for any properly functioning personal tutorial system (for example, the norm at Nottingham is 10 minutes per student three times a year);
- the department can build up a detailed but succinct record of each student's progress, which can be used for writing references, etc.

The disadvantages are:

- unless given strong encouragement, students may be unwilling to spend the necessary time (and it is difficult to imagine appropriate sanctions for non-completion);
- the system presupposes the active co-operation of all teaching staff, and not just a few enthusiasts (there is evidence that students take PDP seriously only if their tutors do);
- there is a significant initial cost in devising a system which is appropriate to the individual discipline and department, and in ensuring that everyone understands it.

The Personal Development Record

Content

The key element in a successful PDP system is the design of the Personal Development Record (PDR), which the student is expected to fill in. There are already many examples of PDRs used in different institutions and subject areas:

http://www.prs-ltsn.leeds.ac.uk/generic/qualenhance/pdregg.html

However, they are unlikely to be of much use as models for others unless they are heavily adapted.
Here are some suggestions as to how to write a PDR:

- involve all those who will have to use it as closely as possible, so that they feel ownership of the document—this includes students as well as staff;
- make sure that there is a clear explanation of what it is for, how it should be used, and how it relates to the personal tutorial system;
- make it *progressive*—at first it should help the student through the transition from school or previous work to university, and by the end it should help the student through the transition to employment or further study (career choice, CV, preparing for interviews);
- distinguish carefully between what is private to the student, and summaries which will be copied to the personal tutor and put on file;
- include sections on:

    - strengths and weaknesses in relation to generic skills (e.g. literacy, C&IT, participation in discussion);
    - previous experience and extra-curricular activities, and what has been learned from them;
    - performance on individual modules, how they form a coherent whole, and future choice of options;
    - extent of fulfilment of the learning outcomes detailed in the programme specification;
    - identifying preferred learning strategies;
    - (in the later stages) preparing a CV.

- provide advice about local sources of support for developing skills or overcoming problems.

Format

Normal practice is give each student a ring binder with a specially designed cover, containing all the paperwork they will need for their undergraduate career. But while it provides them with a physical object which they can take pride in maintaining, it has two disadvantages:

- it is expensive to produce (some estimates are as high as £8 per student);
- students are forced to fill it in by hand, and the sise of boxes is inflexible.

A number of institutions have been experimenting with on-line PDRs, and it is likely that these will become standard within the near future. In particular, there is a clear advantage if a summary of the PDR suitable for public consumption can be stored centrally, and printed out as an appendix to the official transcript.
A national Progress File IMS Group as been established to facilitate interoperability between Student Record Systems and electronic PDRs:

http://www.leeds.ac.uk/pdp/GARTREF.HTM

How the PRS-LTSN can help

The PRS-LTSN can help by:

- collating and disseminating examples of PDP and PDRs which have already been used in the disciplines;
- drafting discipline-specific model PDRs, for improvement through discussion lists and workshops;
- keeping the subject communities informed of national developments;
- offering grants for subject-specific research into PDP;
- providing a consultancy service for departments implementing PDP.

Further information

More information about Progress Files can be obtained from the following sites:
Guidelines for HE Progress Files, July 2001, 28pp:

http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/progfileHE/contents.htm

This is the official policy statement of UUK, SCOP, Universities Scotland, the QAA, and the LTSN Generic Centre. Appendix 4 (the last page) provides links to other relevant organisations.
The LTSN Generic Centre PDP Site is maintained by Norman Jackson of the LTS Generic Centre, who has a special interest in PDP:

http://www.ltsn.ac.uk/genericcentre/projects.asp

The Centre for Recording Achievement (CRA) has been researching and disseminating good practice in PDP since the early 1990s. Its website contains links to many other sites with information on PDP:

http://www.recordingachievement.org/

The Personal Development Planning in Higher Education (Scotland) Network (PDPHES) is primarily concerned with Scottish institutions:

http://www.eds.napier.ac.uk/PDP/

The University of Leeds PDP Site contains useful information and links, and it is not confined to the Leeds context:

http://www.leeds.ac.uk/PDP/