

Quality Convergence Study

Self Analysis Document: UK (QAA)

Executive Summary

- UK higher education institutions, and especially universities and other HEIs with degree awarding powers, enjoy a high level of autonomy. It is restricted in some respects, however, by external and internal quality assurance requirements of several kinds.
- The question of fees affects students' attitude towards higher education and may reinforce consumer-oriented approach to higher education.
- The question of devolution and the differences between England & Northern Ireland and Scotland and Wales introduces a more complex approach to quality assurance in the UK HE system.
- The increased role of students particularly in external quality assurance processes as well as in internal processes is important.
- Academic staff, in the future, may have to focus more on either teaching or research. There are efforts to ensure that teaching is seen as being as important as research.
- The UK has been slow to address the implications of the Bologna Process.

Introduction

Note for readers: A summary of quality assurance in UK higher education may be found on the QAA web site at www.qaa.ac.uk/public/publications.htm under "Brief Guide: Quality Assurance." It provides much useful detail which will provide further context and detail for this paper.

The Higher Education sector in the UK

1. The UK higher education (HE) system is a large and diverse one, comprising 116 universities and 55 colleges of higher education (i.e. non university; see para. 14) across the four constituent parts of the UK (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales). The majority of these higher education institutions (HEIs) are in England. In Northern Ireland there are 2 universities and 2 university colleges; in Wales there are 13 HEIs and the federal University of Wales and in Scotland there are 14 universities and 7 other HEIs. There is also higher education provision in many of the further education colleges in the UK.
2. Around 38 per cent of UK school leavers enter HE at the moment. The UK government target for widening participation is 50 per cent by 2010; achievement of this target varies throughout the UK. (Issues of divergence within the different parts of the UK are dealt with later in the paper).
3. Higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK are not owned by the state. They are private organisations, although the vast majority are publicly funded to a greater or lesser extent. Some areas of research are heavily funded by the private sector. Public funding for HE is administered by the Higher Education Funding Councils (HEFCs), one each for England, Scotland, and Wales, and by the Department of Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland. Funding for teaching is determined by formulae which depend mainly

on the number of students and the subject(s) of study. Public funding for research is dependent both on the results of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) which is held approximately once every 5 years and funding provided by the Research Councils who mainly fund projects. The Research Councils may be influenced by the results of the RAE but the funding they provide is not determined by these results. (Further information on the RAE can be found at www.hefce.ac.uk/research/assessment).

Quality Assurance

4. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) was formed in 1997 and is an independent organisation but owned by the organisations that represent UK HEIs (Universities UK, Universities Scotland, Higher Education Wales and the Standing Conference of Principals). It is a registered charity and a company limited by guarantee. It is paid for by subscriptions from the HEIs and by contracts with the HEFCs and other funders of HE.
5. External and internal quality assurance processes in UK HE have evolved considerably over the last 14 years. Prior to 1997, a number of separate bodies carried out external evaluation of institutions and subjects/programmes in accordance with requirements of the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. In 1997, the recently created QAA was given the task of implementing the quality assurance recommendations contained in the report of the National Committee for the Inquiry into Higher Education (the Dearing Report). This proposed that the two existing processes of evaluation (subject review and academic audit) be brought together into one UK-wide process called Academic Review. However, following complaints from some English universities that the combined burden of accountability being placed on them was unsustainable, a decision was taken by the government to reduce subject-level evaluation in England. With the consequent break up of a UK-wide consensus on a common system of external quality assurance, England, Scotland, and Wales developed their own approaches, though all decided to end comprehensive reviews at the subject level, relying instead on forms of institutional audit. As a result, external subject-level evaluation stopped in 2001 (although the Academic Review process did run in Scotland at subject level from 2000-2002) and a revised institutional audit process was developed for England and Northern Ireland. (A parallel process of development was carried out in Scotland and in Wales and these countries now have similar but different institutional review processes.)
6. The new institutional audits began in England and Northern Ireland in 2002. A transitional period is running from 2002-2005, during which time all HEIs in England and Northern Ireland will be audited. After that a six-year cycle is to be introduced. The process was agreed between the government Department for Education and Skills, the HEFC for England, the English HE representative bodies (Universities UK and the Standing Conference of Principals) and QAA, and was the subject of a sector-wide consultation before the detail was finalised. The Department of Employment and Learning for Northern Ireland (DEL) was informed of all developments. This consultative process is an important one in the UK. QAA consults the sector on its policies regularly as do the HEFCs; the sector is used to responding to such exercises and to having its opinion considered carefully.

7. Despite their methodological differences, and variations in emphasis, all the audit methods used by QAA in England, Scotland and Wales share the same baseline judgements:
 - the confidence that can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of its programmes and the academic standards of its awards
 - the reliance that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy, integrity, completeness and frankness of the information that an institution publishes about the quality of its programmes and the standards of its awards.
8. In Scotland the development of audit has focused on the evaluation of how institutions are implementing strategies for teaching and learning, and particularly emphasises the enhancement element of the process, which is called Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR). This is being introduced in 2004, on a four-year cycle and is concerned with the institution's management of the holistic student experience, including the enhancement of that management itself. In Wales a variant of the English version (Institutional Review) is also being introduced in 2004, which will offer the same type of judgements but using a less complex evaluation method. The Welsh Institutional Review will operate on a six-year cycle, like England and Northern Ireland.
9. All QAA evaluation processes are based on peer review. They do not lead to accreditation of the HEI or its programmes. QAA is responsible for the methods used in its processes and provides the infrastructure for their organisation and administration, but the judgements on standards and quality are made by a team of peers recruited mainly from within the HE sector (or the employment sector if relevant.)
10. In summary, responsibility for the assurance of academic standards and quality lies with the HEIs themselves. External evaluation is carried out by the QAA on behalf of the HEIs, the HEFCs and DEL at institutional level only. These institutional audits in England include some work at discipline level ('discipline audit trails') but the main purpose of this is to view how effectively the institution's own internal processes for evaluation and validation etc. are working. Only if a cause for concern is identified during the course of an audit is there any more intense review of subjects or programmes.
11. Full details of the institutional audit and other review processes for the UK can be found at www.qaa.ac.uk/public/inst_audit_hbook/institutional_audit.htm.
12. Those programmes of study that lead to an award regulated by a professional, statutory or regulatory body (e.g. Medicine, Dentistry, Law, Engineering etc.) must be accredited by the relevant body. If an HEI teaches one of these programmes without accreditation, the graduates will not be recognised by the relevant body and will therefore not be able to practise in that profession.

The level of institutional autonomy

13. The level of institutional autonomy of UK universities is high in comparison with many other European countries. All universities have an independent

legal identity: some have a Royal Charter, others are Higher Education Corporations, while yet others have been created through an Act of Parliament. They award their own degrees and are responsible for the design and approval of all their programmes except for those which are additionally regulated by a professional, statutory or regulatory body (see above). They are responsible for the admission of students and the appointment of staff (including Vice Chancellors (Rectors) who are Chief Executives), they set their own admissions criteria and select students, manage their own estates and are free to manage their finances within certain regulations imposed by the HEFCs in respect of the public funding they receive. (NB. There are a few entirely privately-funded HE institutions in the UK, but these are very much in the minority, and few of them have their own degree-awarding powers.)

14. Some HEIs (i.e. the colleges of higher education which do not have degree awarding powers) have their awards validated by another institution with degree-awarding powers. Such institutions have less autonomy in that they are required to work within the requirements of the validating university to assure the standards of the awards it offers in the name of that university.

15. However, there are some constraints on HEIs' autonomy:

External evaluation and its expectation of the level of internal evaluation

16. External evaluation as operated by the QAA is a condition of grant/public funding by the HEFCs; QAA reports to these bodies as a condition of its contract with them. Therefore all HEIs are obliged to be audited by QAA. (NB: at present all those private institutions referred to in paragraph 12 subscribe voluntarily to the QAA and are evaluated in accordance with Agency processes.) Teacher training programmes are evaluated externally by the Teacher Training Agency & the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED), the schools inspectorate. Teacher training programmes are offered to varying extents and at either undergraduate or postgraduate (or both) levels in a wide variety of HEIs. It is important to remember when considering the external quality assurance processes that impact on the autonomy of UK universities that, owing to devolution of certain powers to national governments, there are three QAA methods of institutional audit (Scotland, Wales and England & Northern Ireland). Education is provided in a devolved context and the UK is moving to a position of greater divergence within a framework of consistency of standards. In other words, it is expected that, although the national context within which HEIs work may be different, and although the external evaluation processes may differ, there is an expectation that the standards for an award are the same across the UK. The development of any European-wide procedures could therefore impact differently on the different constituent parts of the UK in terms of process.

17. The recent fundamental change in the methods of external evaluation has been based on an assumption that institutions' own internal processes for quality assurance are robust and that their 'quality cultures' are strong. This belief led to the development of the current institutional audit process in 2001 and to the ending of external evaluation at programme level. But because one of the main purposes of the previous arrangements was to provide potential students and other stakeholders with useful information about the standards and quality of subjects and programmes, an alternative way of providing similar or better information was needed. This has led to a requirement that each HEI makes public via a national web site (www.hero.ac.uk) a set of

qualitative and quantitative data, the accuracy and completeness of which will be verified through the QAA's institutional evaluation processes. There are variations between England (and Northern Ireland), Scotland and Wales as to the precise content of this information. Further details on the proposals for how English institutions should provide this information may be found at www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2003/03_51/.

The Government White Paper: The Future of Higher Education (England, January 2003)

18. In January 2003, the government published a White Paper on the future of higher education in England. Although its most radical proposal is seen by most to be the intention to increase students' tuition fees, several other proposals were made which, if implemented, will have a further impact on the autonomy and funding arrangements of HEIs. Some of these have been seen by institutions as an attempt to divide HEIs into teaching or research-led institutions rather than allowing both activities to continue widely in all institutions. Changes in the criteria for the granting of degree-awarding powers and university title to institutions that do not have them will mean that many of the previous requirements for university title are removed. (The 1992 Further and Higher Education Act set out the requirements for university title – both qualitative and numerical criteria had to be met, including the requirement that there should be a broad spread of subjects, which is one of the reasons why there are no specialist universities in the UK to date). For example, it will no longer be necessary for a university to have research degree-awarding powers. This means that many of the 'university colleges' which have 'taught' but not 'research' degree-awarding powers, or the previously required spread of disciplines, will, in future, be eligible to apply for university title. Some observers take the view that these changes, together with the government's wish to see research funding concentrated in a smaller number of universities, will create a 'two-tier', differentiated, HE system.
19. The White Paper can be found at www.dfes.gov.uk/highereducation/hestrategy/.

Fees

20. One of the conditions of public funding for UK HEIs is the government's retention of control over the levels of fees set for full-time undergraduate (first-cycle) students. Part-time, overseas and postgraduate students have always paid fees and institutions have been able to set the level of those fees, particularly for postgraduate students. The government's proposal in the 2003 White Paper to allow HEIs in England to charge variable fees, up to a maximum of £3,000 a year, has led to much debate amongst MPs, the general public, and within HEIs. Under the terms of the proposal, students would not pay the fees until they had graduated and were earning a certain amount of money. If they had still not repaid all of the debt after a certain period of time (expected to be 25 years), the remainder would be waived.
21. The arguments around the proposal range from whether or not fees should be charged at all to, if/when they are, will all HEIs charge the highest amount allowed since to charge less might imply that the programme/HEI is not as good as others? In fact, the principle of charging fees is not itself so much the problem as its application – should fees be variable or the same across all institutions and subjects? This question, coupled with the growing student

numbers due to a government widening participation policy (government target of 50 per cent of 18-30 year olds in higher education by 2010), and the impact of the recent introduction of the Foundation Degree (FD, a two-year intermediate qualification rooted firmly in partnership between a university, a college of further education and the workplace with the possibility of transferring to the university for the 3d year in order to complete a Bachelors (honours degree) may, many believe, adversely affect standards.

22. The main actors in all these debates, to a greater or lesser extent, are the government (DfES), HEIs, the HE representative bodies (Universities UK (UUK) and the Standing Conference Of Principals (SCOP)), the HEFCs, QAA and students. The majority of vice-chancellors (rectors) are in favour of variable tuition fees. Again, it cannot be assumed that the debates are the same across the UK – in Scotland there is little debate on variable fees since there is no intention to introduce them in that country although if English HEIs were to have higher funding levels then this would impact on Scottish HEIs. At present Scottish students pay fees after graduation and when they have started earning, in a similar way as is now being proposed for England, but they are the same across the whole country.
23. Despite considerable scepticism amongst HEIs in England and Northern Ireland, the government is insistent that it does not intend to drive institutions in the direction of teaching only or research-led missions; however, it will expect HEIs to play to their main strengths and not try to do everything. England and Northern Ireland are likely to move towards further widening of participation and full implementation of the foundation degree, while the UK as a whole is being encouraged in some government quarters to embrace further regional devolution. All of these changes, if enacted, would impact strongly on quality assurance processes.
24. Another new government policy direction, surprising in the light of its previous insistence on an intensive quality assurance regime for higher education, is requiring all 'public service inspectorates' to review their practices with a view to reducing the level of detailed scrutiny. Although QAA is not an inspectorate and is not owned by the government, but by the HE community itself, it is nonetheless included in this initiative. A new committee, the Better Regulation Review Group, has been set up by DfES to ensure that any new 'regulatory requirements placed on HEIs should be proportionate and transparent and should be preceded by a 'regulatory impact assessment' to judge their compliance with the 'Principles of Good Regulation'. A further government initiative is reviewing the cost effectiveness of all 'public service inspectorates' and, again, this will include QAA, although the direction of the Agency's developments in the past three years would appear to be entirely congruent with the government's intentions.

Bologna

25. The Bologna process has only recently begun to move into the consciousness of UK HE. In particular, debates around the length of the first cycle have now begun, following the introduction of the two Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications (one for Scotland, the other for England, Wales and Northern Ireland), as there are some important programmes within the UK that do not easily fit the 3 + 2 or 4+1 year schemes for the first/second cycles. The development of student progress files is also currently leading to debate about the European Diploma Supplement. UK institutions are

concerned that they will spend a lot of time and money putting in place a transcript and personal development planning system, following UK guidelines for the development of progress files, only to discover that something additional is required for the European HE Area in terms of a diploma supplement. Similar concerns surround moves to extend the ECTS more widely than at present. For the most part, however, it is the national HE agenda, rather than the European or wider international scene, that dominates higher education discussion and debate in the UK.

Summary of section

- There is considerable autonomy within higher education despite the requirement for external evaluation. After considerable hostility and resistance to previous external quality assurance regimes, some HEIs are now willing to acknowledge the benefits of such evaluation in terms of enhancement. Others remain sceptical.
- The relationship between the nominally autonomous HEIs and the government that funds most of them is complicated and full of inherent tensions. Although they private organisations discharging public functions, they are also readily accessible conduits for the implementation of government policies, some of which may not have a strictly educational focus.
- Devolution of political power is an important consideration and the national divergence of quality assurance processes within the UK - and their different emphases - must be borne in mind.
- Fragmentation of the HE community is a very real possibility. It is already differentiated nationally through devolution and the effect of this could become more complex if institutions were to be categorised as teaching-only or research-led. The division might become deeper still if variable fees were introduced, as this could lead to further differentiation in the level of resources available to various types of institutions and in the different parts of the UK.
- Current government policy appears to favour the reduction in the volume and intensity of inspection of public services, including the external quality assurance of HE. But the recommended approach is close to that adopted by QAA since 2001.

The place of students in HEIs and their role in evaluation

26. The student body is now very different to what it was 10 or 20 years ago. The average undergraduate student is no longer necessarily an 18 year old school leaver and might well be a mature student, someone who is doing a degree part-time because they wish to change careers or someone who has come into HE through one of the Access or Widening Participation routes rather than having completed GCE 'A' levels or Scottish Highers. Students may now decide to study on alternative programmes to the traditional English on-campus full-time three-year honours degree; they may choose to do one of the more vocational two-year foundation degrees; they may choose to study through the distance learning mode; or they may choose to drop out of their programme for a period of time and to return to it at a later date. They may also choose to study full-time or for part of their programme at a university in a different part of the world.

27. The consequence of so many options and such choice is that students must have access to high quality information both about institutions and about the programmes they may wish to study.
28. In the UK, one of the main wishes of the government for the development of the new external evaluation process was that students should be much more involved in the QAA institutional audit/review processes – and there is early evidence that this is happening and that the invitation to participate is being taken seriously, with good attendance at conferences organised jointly by QAA and the National Union of Students. Students are invited to produce Student Written Submissions for use by the institutional audit teams and auditors meet both Students' Union officers and students from different programmes and levels of study during the audit visit. The Scottish ELIR process includes a student member on each external review team and those students are trained for this role. Because of this, the QAA now has an officer dedicated to working on student matters related to standards and quality. Amongst other things, she organises joint conferences with the National Union of Students to inform student union officers of their role in the audit process and also gives advice and guidance where required.
29. Generally, owing to the expectations of internal and external evaluation, student representation and feedback in HEIs is good. Most HEIs have Students' Unions (SUs) with dedicated officers and representatives on course/university-level committees. Students can generally make their voice heard if they wish and HEIs readily accept that it is good practice for sound procedures for student feedback and evaluation to be in place. Students are frequently involved in internal programme approval and review processes.
30. The debate about fees inevitably impacts on students, as they are already more constrained financially than their predecessors and the majority now have to take employment during their course, leaving them less time for study. More students are choosing to study in their hometown in order to cut down on costs. This affects the external quality assurance processes because although seeking student views through feedback questionnaires and through the Student Written Submission in the audit process is seen as good practice and although students are given the opportunity to give feedback and also to be represented on various internal committees etc., many students are already finding it difficult to manage their time, attending lectures, doing their coursework and working part-time. Evaluation can be seen as an additional burden. On the other hand, the introduction of higher tuition fees could see a stronger consumer focus appearing in the institution/student relationship, thus placing a further importance on both internal and external evaluation.
31. The National Union of Students (NUS) is active in all national debates concerning students. Students automatically become a member of the SU at their institution unless they decide to opt out of membership. The NUS is a confederation of all SUs and is not affiliated to any political party it does not have individual members but 95 per cent of all SUs are affiliated to the NUS.

Summary of section

- The student body has changed significantly and it can no longer be assumed that students begin their HE programme straight after leaving school and complete them after three years of full-time study.

- The students' role in quality assurance processes is well recognised and established in most HEIs.
- Financial burden may have an impact on the amount of time and effort a student is prepared to spend on quality assurance matters.

The role of teaching staff in evaluation and quality assurance

32. As previously stated, all HEIs have their own appointment procedures and any suitably qualified person can apply for a particular post. The institution can decide whether the post is part-time, full-time, permanent or fixed-term. QAA's various evaluation processes examine institutions' procedures for staff development, the induction and mentoring of new members of staff, processes such as peer observation of teaching etc. All of these activities are regarded as good practice and their aim is to provide academic staff with the means and opportunities of enhancing their performance as a teacher.
33. One of the objectives in the government's apparent encouragement to institutions to identify themselves as either teaching or research-led is a desire to place more importance on teaching, which has previously been viewed as secondary to research, not least since the latter brings in more funding as well as greater professional kudos. Traditionally, it has been the old universities that have received more public research funding, with staff in other less research-intensive HEIs feeling that they have not been equally recognised for the teaching work that they do. The capacity and competence of the staff who teach, and who facilitate and assess learning, are central to the value of the education offered to students by UK institutions. UK degree awarding institutions have a crucial responsibility to ensure that students' chances of receiving a worthwhile education and securing the necessary academic standards for their qualification are maximised by effective teaching. This includes a responsibility for ensuring that staff maintain a close and professional understanding of current developments in research and scholarship in their subjects and that structured opportunities for them to do so are both readily available and widely taken up. It also means that teaching for degree-level qualifications should reflect, in a careful, conscious and intellectually demanding manner, the latest developments in the subject of study. In the case of UK degree-awarding institutions offering doctorates undertaken wholly or in part by means of courses of instruction (so-called 'taught' doctorates', which may be more accurately and increasingly being referred to as professional doctorates - contrasted from PhDs in that these are assessed by thesis and viva (although there might be other assessment requirements for progression) whereas professional doctorates have a series of assessments; some from taught elements, some re professional practice AND a (smaller) thesis / dissertation - but not always accompanied by a viva) it is particularly important that teaching is carried out by staff who are active and recognised participants in research and/or advanced scholarship. For these reasons, many academics feel that research; scholarly activity and teaching are all vitally important to students' experience and underpin the value of a higher education. The recently formed Higher Education Academy, which will build on the work of the Learning and Teaching Generic Centre and Subject Networks and the Institute for Learning and Teaching, will continue to encourage staff development and enhancement in the area of teaching.
34. Although this feeling is not quite as strong as it was, many academics find the necessity of quality assurance processes, both internal and external, to be an intrusion into what they perceive to be the main aspects of their job – teaching

and research. However, many are now prepared to accept that the enhancement of students' experience of learning is of the utmost importance and that internal and external evaluation, amongst other things, can help teaching teams to reflect and improve on what they are doing. Likewise, the introduction of the UK Academic Infrastructure (a set of common reference points describing and underpinning the common academic framework for higher education in the UK, recommended in the Dearing Report and comprising the Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications, Subject Benchmark Statements, Programme Specifications, and a Code of Practice for quality assurance; for further information see www.qaa.ac.uk/public/publications.htm) was initially viewed by many as restrictive and a threat to individual autonomy and academic freedom. However, as academics have engaged with the Infrastructure, and use it more, that debate has turned into a more useful one on how the Academic Infrastructure can be used most effectively to help set and maintain standards.

35. Other initiatives which highlight the growing importance of teaching and other elements of learning support include the creation of a new Higher Education Academy which will build on the work of the existing Learning and Teaching Subject Networks and the Institute for Learning and Teaching.

Summary of section

- HEIs have responsibility for the appointment of all posts and are responsible for the recruitment, development, promotion and reward of appropriate staff.
- Academic staff will not necessarily be offered a permanent position and may work on several fixed-term contracts. They may move jobs several times during their career.
- Academic staff may, in the future, have to focus more on only one of the two main elements of their work, teaching or research, according to the kind of HEI in which they work.
- Academic staff have had to assimilate much information about standards, quality assurance and enhancement etc over the last decade and have also had to engage with several forms of external evaluation. This has necessarily added to the administrative side of their work and has generally not been welcomed. A period of stability is sought after a period of rapidly changing and developing evaluation processes.

Programmes

36. As has already been stated, there is no longer any comprehensive external evaluation of programmes at subject level in the UK. By 2001, HEIs in England and Wales had worked with three different methods of subject-level evaluation over a period of around eight years; Scotland had had two. Throughout that period, the evidence provided by the reports of the evaluations demonstrated that the vast majority of HE provision in the UK was of sound quality.
37. Design and approval of programmes is the responsibility of each individual HEI with degree awarding powers, and even those who are validated by another university may also design and approve programmes of study under delegated authority from their validator. However, the expectations of the

QAA external evaluation processes are that certain quality assurance processes will be in place. For example, it is expected that the proposal for a new programme is scrutinised within the relevant committee structure and also by at least one person external to the institution. There is also an expectation that there should be a rationale for the proposal, backed up with evidence from students and other stakeholders that such a programme would be welcomed. Students also often form part of the scrutiny process.

38. Once a programme has been approved, it will be subject to internal monitoring and review procedures. Typically these will be university regulations applied at programme level and may be based on good practice such as that set out in the QAA's Code of Practice for quality assurance which forms part of the Academic Infrastructure. These processes are discussed during the external audit process. It should be remembered that the UK HE sector has a long tradition of appointing external examiners as independent moderators and verifiers of student assessments and these externals are relied on heavily in institutional procedures to provide assurance that the assessment processes undertaken by students are fair and that the level of achievement of students is similar to that of students on similar programmes of study at other HEIs.
39. As stated above, debate around the Academic Infrastructure is now wider than before. For example, areas such as modularity and inter and multi-disciplinary areas are the subject of discussion, particularly among and between the subject associations and professional bodies, as is the possibility of further benchmark statements for those subject areas which do not yet have a specific benchmark statement but which would like to set down the kind of standards and graduate attributes that can be expected from a student holding such an award. It is intended that the Academic Infrastructure be evaluated and reviewed over a period of time. The first area to begin work in terms of evaluation and review is that of subject benchmarking. A steering group has been set up consisting of those academics, some previously involved in developing the benchmark statements. They will consult with the sector as a whole throughout their work.
40. The UK has been relatively slow to consider the full implications of the Bologna process. However, HEIs and their staff are now beginning to look at the expectations of this process and to consider these alongside their own internal processes and also those that are in place externally. (See section under "Institutional Autonomy").

Summary of section

- Although HEIs with degree-awarding powers are relatively free to run whatever programmes and award such qualifications as they choose, there is a series of checks and processes in place, operated by the institutions and checked through external evaluation, that ensure rigorous scrutiny of proposals, followed by monitoring and review after approval.
- The Bologna process is one that will impact on UK institutions and programmes in the near future. It is likely that debate in this area will increase in the near future. (Please see below).

Conclusion

41. There is much in this document about the expectations of internal and external quality assurance processes. These expectations, once highly controversial, are now becoming a routine part of academic life and this is due in no small part to the experience of the HE community in participating in and learning from peers through external evaluations at subject and institutional level.
42. It is important to remember that the QAA is a UK-wide body but is country-specific in its approach to quality assurance processes. It should also be remembered that current processes are in a transitional phase in England which is due to end in 2005, and they will be evaluated at the end of that period. Any outcomes from the convergence study or from the Bologna process more broadly will need to be considered in the light of these points.

Areas of commonality with France

- We found it interesting to see that the institutional audit procedure in Scotland seems to target specific areas rather than covering the whole HEI with the same level of detail (focus on strategies for teaching for instance), or in Wales that the same objectives are attained with a different approach. The idea of selectivity in audit or the idea of adapting the procedures to the context are very similar to the current CNE approach.
- We think we may have to talk about the relations between national and regional policies with regard to the possible consequences of the devolution in the UK and of the "regionalisation" in France, for example.
- The question of the financial support to students could be an interesting point of comparison across the different national contributions.

Areas of commonality with Sweden

- The model of external quality assurance (self-study, peer review and public report)
- The importance of the role of students (although Sweden has longer experience of student influence through participation on committees, boards etc., and on review panels).
- A certain reluctance to introduce the Bologna model.
- Teaching staff suspicion of evaluation
- The insistence on widening participation

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