

Evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure: project outline

Topic

1 This paper provides an outline description of a project to evaluate the Academic Infrastructure.

Rationale

2 The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (1997) (the Dearing and Garrick reports)¹ identified two key requirements for preserving public confidence in the higher education system: first, maintaining consistent standards of provision and outcomes in the face of a) the expanding student population, combined with a decline of 40 per cent in the unit of resource and b) increasingly modular provision. Secondly, providing valid, reliable and useful information on qualifications to external stakeholders: chiefly employers, potential students and current students.

3 The assumption underlying this view was that traditional methods of quality assurance, especially those in the pre-1992 university sector, were too informal and lacked the transparency and accessibility which a more diverse range of stakeholders required. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's (QAA's) response to the Dearing and Garrick proposals was to develop a set of reference tools for setting and maintaining quality and standards. This comprised two qualifications frameworks, subject benchmark statements, programme specifications and a *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (the *Code of practice*). These later became known collectively as the 'Academic Infrastructure'. The concept and components of the Academic Infrastructure have now been in existence within the UK for over 10 years. Periodically, each of the individual components has been separately reviewed, revised and updated. At the same time, internal and external audit and review methods have evolved. Additional reference points and supplementary guidance have been produced by QAA and others to complement the Academic Infrastructure. The changing nature of UK higher education and emerging developments such as potential changes to fee regimes, increasing involvement of employers in programme design and funding, and calls for more information for students and the wider public, all impact on efforts to support standards and quality of provision. Given the elapse of time since the Academic Infrastructure was introduced, and these developments, it is now appropriate to consider what effect the Academic Infrastructure has had on higher education in the UK and whether the concept of an Academic Infrastructure and of its components remain useful and 'fit for purpose', or whether they should be revised and updated.

4 There are a number of **assumptions** about the Academic Infrastructure that underpin the proposed approach to the evaluation:

- the basic argument, principles and intended purposes underpinning the individual components of the Academic Infrastructure as set out in the Dearing

¹ National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE) - chaired by Sir Ron Dearing and the separate Scottish Standing Committee chaired by Sir Ron Garrick: www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/ncihe.

and Garrick reports remain valid (that is, there is a need to provide a shared understanding about academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities in UK higher education). It is acknowledged however, that the application of individual components of the Academic Infrastructure may be different to that originally intended

- the criteria for defining and describing academic standards and quality (the Academic Infrastructure) fit appropriately with the methods and processes used in both internal and external quality assurance and enhancement activities
- the Academic Infrastructure is part of a set of (complementary) reference points for determining and describing standards and the quality of learning opportunities in UK higher education. As such, it is internationally recognised and has been a key part of the UK's participation in the Bologna Process.²

Purpose (why are we doing this?):

5 The purpose of the evaluation is to examine whether the Academic Infrastructure (as a whole and its individual components):

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

Aims (what will the evaluation tell us?):

6 The aims of the evaluation are:

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

Objectives (how are we going to meet the aims?):

7 In order to meet the aims, the evaluation will assess:

- the level and nature of awareness of the Academic Infrastructure and its components among a range of stakeholders
- the extent of adoption and use of the Academic Infrastructure and its components

² The Bologna Process is a voluntary agreement, signed by the higher education ministers of 46 European countries, with the intention of creating a 'European Higher Education Area' (EHEA) by 2010. It is a means of promoting mutual recognition of qualifications, demonstrating transparency, and easing mobility of staff and students.

- the perceived effectiveness of the Academic Infrastructure and its components in meeting the original expectations and delivering the anticipated benefits
- the response of higher education stakeholders to the Academic Infrastructure and its components
- the relevance of the Academic Infrastructure in comparison to other reference points for establishing and assuring academic quality and standards.

Anticipated outcomes:

8 The outcomes of the evaluation will provide evidence, examples and suggestions for possible:

- (re)development and implementation of sustainable structures (communication, engagement with the higher education sector and its stakeholders) and tools (a revised Academic Infrastructure) for setting and maintaining academic quality and standards
- use of the ((re)developed) Academic Infrastructure in current approaches to internal and external quality assurance (including external audits and reviews).

Scope

9 The concept of, processes used for, impact and outcomes of, adopting and use of the Academic Infrastructure (and its components) will be considered from a UK-wide perspective. However, it is acknowledged that different political contexts, education systems and specific audit and review methods operate in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland.

Method

10 The evaluation primarily represents an approach which will consolidate, collate and analyse existing information. Small-scale data collection projects will be undertaken to address any identified information or knowledge gaps. For example, a survey of QAA auditors and contract reviewers is proposed for the autumn of 2009, reporting back at the auditors' 'Winter Solstice' meeting in December and the Contract Reviewers conference early in 2010. There will be regional meetings in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to complement work already undertaken in England.

11 In addition to the ongoing routine review and revision of individual elements of the Academic Infrastructure, evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure has been continuing within QAA on an ad hoc basis for a number of years: several small specific projects (for example, a regional seminar series; the 'sustaining standards' pilot project; a survey of QAA staff about the Academic Infrastructure) have been undertaken and will complement information QAA collects through its usual business (for example, audit and review reports, *Outcomes...* papers, reports from the institutional liaison scheme). The project will also be able to draw on published academic literature about the Academic Infrastructure. Appendix one provides examples, and a brief summary, of the types and sources of information collated by QAA, to date, which will contribute to the project.

12 Pragmatically, the evaluation cannot be a linear process, although the project timescale represents the project activities in a linear way. Some activities will

need to happen in parallel and at similar times and consideration will need to be given to the fact that this project is related to, and interconnects with, other events occurring in the higher education sector.

Project management

13 The existing Academic Infrastructure Maintenance Group, chaired by QAA's Director of Development and Enhancement, will maintain strategic oversight of the project. The activities of the evaluation will be delivered through a cross-QAA Internal Operational Working Group, led by QAA's Development and Enhancement Group officers and supported and advised by a specially convened UK higher education Sounding Board. An outline description of the composition and roles of each of the groups is provided in Appendix two.

14 QAA's Director of Development and Enhancement will report regularly to the QAA Executive Committee, the QAA Board of Directors and externally through existing stakeholder groups (for example, the Quality Assurance Framework stakeholder group; the UUK/GuildHE/QAA Quality Forum, the Advisory Committee for Wales; the Scottish Universities Quality Working Group; the Scottish Universities Quality Working Group; the Universities Scotland Teaching Quality Forum; and the Universities Scotland Learning and Teaching Committee).

Timescale

Phase 1

Part A: Initial collation and analysis of existing information (July-September 2009)

15 Collection, collation and analysis of readily available information to identify how the Academic Infrastructure is used, what impact this has had and what suggestions have been made about its future development (that is, specific **processes** of adopting and using the Academic Infrastructure and its components and the resulting **outcomes**, including any adjustments made by higher education institutions and the effect this has had on UK higher education). This will be completed through:

- analysis of existing data and information sources
- data collation and small-scale data collection focusing on identified 'gaps'.

Part B: Developing a consultative discussion paper (October 2009 - January 2010)

16 Meetings of the QAA Internal Operational Working Group and the Academic Infrastructure Evaluation Sounding Board will be convened to discuss the findings from Phase 1 and assist QAA to determine the content of a consultative discussion paper. The paper will be published and comment invited from the sector. The paper will summarise the findings from Phase 1, Part A (see above) and invite the higher education sector and stakeholders to respond to questions arising from the findings.

17 The discussion paper will also invite comment about what effect any revision or development of the Academic Infrastructure (and its components) might have on the:

- adoption and use of the Academic Infrastructure in internal and external quality assurance processes, including review, audit and enhancement activities
- support required for its adoption and use
- ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the (revised) Academic Infrastructure.

Part C: Analysis of responses to consultative discussion paper and final report on the evaluation of the Academic Infrastructure (February 2010-spring 2010 and ongoing)

18 The discussion paper will be published in early 2010 and circulated throughout the higher education sector. Comments will be invited from institutions, stakeholder organisations and individuals. A report on the findings of the consultative discussion paper will be published. The report will provide an analysis of the responses to the discussion paper and, if the evidence supports the need, include proposals for the future of the Academic Infrastructure and its components.

19 This paper is primarily concerned with proposals relating to Phase 1. The activities described in the paper are planned to a timescale that would provide an extensive evidence-base on which to make recommendations and a substantive analysis-based report by the end of spring 2010. The evaluation project activities and timeline have been planned to coincide with the discussions and consultation on the principles of a new Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) and specification for the operational description of a new Institutional audit method for England and Northern Ireland.

Phase 2

20 The nature and extent of the recommendations from Phase 1 will determine whether a new, separate project will be required to propose, consult on and develop significant and major changes to the Academic Infrastructure and/or its individual components, or whether smaller minor changes can be undertaken as part of routine review and revision of individual components of the Academic Infrastructure. This new activity will form Phase 2 of the project.

Communication and information sharing

21 Throughout the project, regular communication about the progress of the evaluation will be maintained via the QAA Internal Operational Working Group, the Academic Infrastructure Evaluation Sounding Board and existing networks and meetings (for example the Quality Assurance Framework stakeholder group; the UUK/GuildHE/QAA Quality Forum, the Advisory Committee for Wales and the Scottish Teaching and Learning Forum). Further discussion meetings will be held as appropriate. There will be regular public updates through articles in, for example, *higher quality* and press statements, as required. Interim papers will be published on the QAA website and highlighted through the QAA news email service.

22 Regular presentations to the UK higher education sector will be made at QAA events (for example, the 'Winter Solstice' meeting for QAA auditors in December 2009) and in response to invitations from partner organisations and stakeholders. There will be a sector-wide event in spring 2010 to discuss the findings from the consultative discussion paper and present the final evaluation report. If appropriate, this event may be held in parallel with discussion about other related QAA projects (for example the development of a new Institutional audit method for England and

Northern Ireland and follow-up activity to the 'thematic enquiries into concerns about standards and quality in higher education in England').

Appendix one: Examples of types and sources of information contributing to the project

A substantial amount of data and information has been accumulated by QAA to inform the evaluation. This includes, for example, but not exclusively:

- audit and review reports (Institutional audit, Integrated quality and enhancement review, Enhancement-led institutional review, Institutional review in Wales, special review)
 - reports of external audit and review activity undertaken by QAA over the past 10 years represents an extensive, independent and authoritative source of information about how higher education institutions engage with the Academic Infrastructure and use its individual elements
- audit and review method handbooks
 - method handbooks explain and set out expectations for the use of reference tools for setting and maintaining standards
- *Outcomes...* from papers
 - analytical and thematic reports on the findings of individual Institutional audits have been produced on a number of themes, including the components of the Academic Infrastructure. The reports represent a composite of features of good practice and recommendations for improvement
- Enhancement Themes reports
 - the Enhancement Themes initiative aims to enhance the student learning experience in Scottish higher education by identifying specific areas (Themes) for development. The Themes encourage academic and support staff and students to share current good practice and collectively generate ideas and models for innovation in learning and teaching
- notes of 'Academic Infrastructure regional seminar' meetings
 - a series of discussion seminars held in 2006 with focus groups made up of (separately) academics, senior institutional staff and institutional quality assurance managers to discuss individually each of the elements of the Academic Infrastructure
- notes of advisory group meetings convened to support the review and revision of individual components of the Academic Infrastructure (for example sections of the *Code of practice; The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*)
 - all components of the Academic Infrastructure are now in their second edition. Each component has been updated progressively between 2001 and 2009. During the review and revision of each component an advisory group made up of representatives of the higher education sector and key stakeholder organisations is convened to advise QAA. The notes of each meeting of each group provide an authoritative source of information about the Academic Infrastructure
- notes and reports of roundtable discussion meetings convened to support the review and revision of components of the Academic Infrastructure (for example sections of the *Code of practice; The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*)
 - during the review and revision of each component a series of round table discussion meetings is held across the UK with representatives of the higher education sector and stakeholders to gain feedback on how the component is being used in higher education institutions, its strengths, weaknesses and to capture suggestions for development. The notes from

each breakout group at each meeting for each of the components of the Academic Infrastructure constitute a rich source of evidence

- outcomes of the 'sustaining standards' pilot project
 - discussions with individuals with a range of duties and responsibilities from a representative sample of higher education institutions about the tools (including the Academic Infrastructure) used by higher education institutions to set and maintain standards has provided a wealth of data
- institutional liaison scheme reports
 - reports of regular visits and communication between QAA staff and higher education institutions has produced a data bank of visit reports, queries and intelligence relevant to the use made of the Academic Infrastructure by higher education institutions.

Appendix two: Project management groups

- The QAA **Academic Infrastructure Maintenance (AIM) Group** will maintain strategic oversight of the project. The AIM Group, QAA Executive Committee and Board of Directors will receive regular updates on the progress of the project.
- A QAA **Internal Operational Working Group** will provide cross-agency intelligence and feedback from all areas of QAA activity. It will provide an initial steer on the emerging themes, make comment about ongoing outcomes from the project and help to identify any gaps in the work done to date. The group would comprise cross-agency representation. It will report to the AIM group through the DEG lead officers.
- A UK higher education **Sounding Board** will provide 'externality' to the project. The group will advise QAA on the emerging project themes, provide feedback on the sector's experience of the Academic Infrastructure and its components generally and help make suggestions about how the Academic Infrastructure might be developed in discussion with the sector. The group will comprise representatives of key stakeholder organisations and higher education practitioners.

Appendix three: Key dates

Activity	Date
QAA circulates Academic Infrastructure Evaluation project plan to key stakeholders	July 2009
Publication of the House of Commons Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Select Committee report	August 2009
Publication of the HEFCE Teaching, Quality, and the Student Experience (TQSE) sub-committee report	October 2009
Publication of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) Higher Education Framework	November 2009
Meeting of the QAA-led Academic Infrastructure Evaluation Sounding Board	November 2009
Consultation on the revised Quality Assurance Framework	December-March 2010
QAA's Academic Infrastructure Evaluation consultative discussion paper available for comment by the sector	February-April 2010
QAA round table discussion event for sector on the content of the consultative discussion paper	Date to be confirmed February-April 2010
QAA proposed consultation on the new audit method	July-September 2010
QAA publishes final report on the Academic Infrastructure Evaluation	September 2010

