Quality in Higher Education
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cqhe20

The Current Brouhaha about Standards in England
Roger Brown

Liverpool Hope University, UK


To cite this article: Roger Brown (2010): The Current Brouhaha about Standards in England, Quality in Higher Education, 16:2, 129-137

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13538322.2010.487699

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
The Current Brouhaha about Standards in England

ROGER BROWN*
Liverpool Hope University, UK

ABSTRACT Following a report by a Parliamentary Committee, the Higher Education Funding Council for England is consulting the sector about a strengthened national quality assurance system, with an enhanced role for information about quality and a closer focus on academic standards. This article provides a critical review of the main proposals.

Keywords: quality assurance; academic standards; external examiners

Introduction and summary

In August 2009 a House of Commons Select Committee report drew a number of conclusions which, taken together, amounted to a sharp criticism of the mechanisms for protecting quality and standards in UK higher education. This article describes the background to the report and analyses the authorities’ response to it. It concludes that the programme envisaged by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the sector through its representative bodies and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), will be unlikely to deal with the pressures that will be exerted on quality assurance over the next few years.

Background

In so far as any historical development can be dated to a single originating event, the current brouhaha about standards in England may be traced to the inaugural professorial lecture given by Professor Geoffrey Alderman at the University of Buckingham on 17 June 2008 (Alderman, 2008). This recounted the recent history of quality assurance in UK higher education. Professor Alderman commented on the irony that whilst external quality assurance had become ‘more intrusive and directive’, there had been a decline in academic standards. He gave three examples of cases where universities appeared to have taken action to damage their own standards. Alderman attributed these to a combination of factors, including the league table culture now permeating the sector, the ‘consumerisation’ of students and poor levels of student preparation (especially international students). Running

*9 Blenheim Avenue, Southampton, 5017 1DW, UK. Email: rogerbrown4@googlemail.com
through the lecture was the theme that some institutional managers were more concerned about their institution’s external reputation than its record in rigorously upholding standards (see also Alderman, 2009).

Alderman’s lecture attracted a good deal of media attention. Matters were not helped when the QAA chief executive, Peter Williams, admitted in a BBC interview shortly afterwards that the degree classification system was ‘rotten’ and that there was ‘no consistency [in standards] between subjects and institutions’ (Coughlan, 2008). In early July Alderman and the present author wrote to the chair of the Innovation Universities, Science and Skills Committee of the House of Commons (IUSSC) suggesting that they might wish to conduct an enquiry.

On 17 July, the Committee interviewed Williams and some of his senior colleagues. The same day, the *Times Higher Education* published an article by Alderman and the author in which we welcomed the Committee’s response and suggested that existing institutional and external quality assurance processes needed to be strengthened, with the QAA focusing more closely on academic standards and given a greater degree of independence in order to do so (Alderman & Brown, 2008). On 30 October, and after further inputs from QAA, the Committee announced it would be conducting a wide-ranging enquiry into students and universities. Although—doubtless in response to lobbying by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, the Funding Council and the representative bodies—the remit chosen was a wide one, no one was in any doubt that the Committee’s main focus would be on quality assurance, with particular interest in the long-standing system whereby external examiners monitor institutional assessments for fairness and comparability.

The Committee announcement was not the only action taken in response to the concerns ventilated in the media. Also in July, the QAA commenced its own programme of work on a number of specific issues raised in the media, including student contact hours, international students’ English language capacity, the recruitment of international students, external examining and student assessment. At the vice chancellors’ Annual Conference in September, the then Universities Secretary, John Denham, called upon the QAA to respond more proactively and quickly to the concerns that were being raised (Lipsett, 2008). In November, as well as agreeing to support the QAA enquiries, the HEFCE launched its own enquiry through its Teaching Quality and Student Experience Sub Committee (TQSC) under the chairmanship of Professor Colin Riordan, vice chancellor of the University of Essex. Also in November, and ahead of the game, UniversitiesUK published a guide outlining ‘how quality and standards are assessed and assured within UK universities’ (UniversitiesUK, 2008). The conclusions of the QAA and HEFCE work will be considered in a moment. Let us first look at the Select Committee Report (IUSSC, 2009).

**The Select Committee report**

The Select Committee took evidence from a wide range of organisations and individuals. There were more than 100 separate submissions of evidence. The organisations involved included not only the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, the Funding Council and the sector-wide bodies but a number of universities, organisations and individuals. Broadly speaking, those giving evidence either defended the *status quo*, albeit with qualifications or glosses, or called for reforms. The latter group included a number of witnesses who gave direct evidence of insecure practices (one of these, Walter Cairns, a senior lecturer in law at Manchester Metropolitan University, was subsequently removed from the University’s Academic Board, an action for which the vice chancellor very nearly incurred the charge of contempt of Parliament).
The Select Committee concluded that the QAA should be reformed and re-established as a quality and standards agency, with the responsibility for maintaining ‘consistent, national standards’ in higher education institutions in England and for monitoring and reporting on standards. The new remit should include a duty to safeguard and report on standards; it should also report annually on standards to Parliament. The reformed QAA’s remit should include the review of, and reporting on, the quality of teaching in universities and, where shortcomings were identified, ensuring that they were reported publicly and addressed by the institution concerned. The Agency should develop its current policy of giving greater attention to institutions’ policies and procedures for improving quality and should produce more guidance and feedback based on its institutional reviews.

The Committee also recommended that all English higher education institutions should have their accreditation to award degrees reviewed no less often than every 10 years. Where the Agency concluded that all or some of an institution’s powers should be withdrawn, the government should draw up and put in place arrangements that would allow its accreditation to be withdrawn or curtailed. The reformed QAA should also have powers to carry out reviews of the quality of, and standards applied in, institutional assessment, in response to external examiners’ or public concerns about the standards in an institution or at the direction of the Secretary of State. The government should require publicly funded institutions to publish the details of the methodological assumptions underpinning assessments for all degrees whilst the QAA should review these assumptions to ensure that they met acceptable statistical practice.

As regards external examiners, the Committee favoured the implementation of the recommendation in the Dearing Report of 1997 that the Agency should create a national cadre from whom institutions should draw their external examiners. There should be a national ‘remit’ for external examiners clarifying, ‘for example’, what documents they should be able to access, the extent to which they could amend marks and the matters on which they could comment. This should be underpinned by an enhanced system of training that would allow examiners to develop the generic skills necessary for multi-disciplinary courses. External examiners’ reports should be published in full except where they identified an individual’s mark or performance.

Finally, the Committee called for greater openness and transparency on the part of the sector in relation to such matters as academic standards, external examiners and the safeguarding of the student experience.

The QAA report

The QAA report (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2009) looked specifically at student workload and contact hours; language requirements, recruitment and admission of international students; the use of external examiners; and assessment. It recommended a review of assessment practices ‘supported by developmental activities aimed at improving the robustness and consistency of assessment and classification practices within and between institutions’ (4), together with clarification and explanation of the reasons for, and meaning of, variation in particular approaches to assessment. It declared that external examining needed to be more transparent and that there should be further discussion at national level about training and support for external examiners (this is now being taken forward by a new UUK-led review (see below)). It recommended increasing awareness of existing quality controls, something to which the UUK report just mentioned will contribute.
The HEFCE report

Increasing public awareness of the extent to which, and the ways in which, institutions protect quality and standards was also a theme of the TQSC report (HEFCE, 2009a). It proposed that students should receive much more information than they currently do about things like contact hours, together with a review of the national student survey. The audit method should be made more flexible. The role of external examiners should be clarified and there should be independent recourse for examiners to raise concerns, along with greater scrutiny of external examiners’ views during institutional audit. Institutions should continue to improve and promote their assessment systems and criteria as well as their processes for offering formative feedback and to make sure that students understand those processes. The report concluded that ‘the greatest need … is for more accessible public information about quality and standards, and about the wider student experience’ (6). In spite of this generally incremental approach, the TQSC chairman was quoted in The Guardian in October 2009 as denying that the sector had been given a clean bill of health. The report could herald some ‘really quite radical changes: a much greater level of accountability and transparency that would really make universities focus much more on these areas’ (R. Williams, 2009).

The review of external examining

In September 2009, UUK and Guild HE announced a review of external examining. The terms of reference are to ‘consider and recommend what improvements need to be made to ensure that external examiner arrangements effectively support the comparability of academic standards and are robust enough to meet future challenges’ (Universities UK, 2009). A committee has been appointed under Professor Janet Finch, vice chancellor of the University of Keele. It is intended to report later in 2010. In the meantime, and presumably in consultation with this exercise, QAA is developing a ‘set of minimum expectations for external examiners’ (QAA, 2010).

The current quality agenda

The authorities’ response to the issues raised in the Select Committee report has now been brought together in a consultative document, ‘The future arrangements for quality assurance in England and Northern Ireland’, published by the Higher Education Funding Council for England on behalf of HEFCE, UniversitiesUK, the Department for Employment and Learning (Northern Ireland) and GuildHE on 1 December (HEFCE, 2009b). How far will these be likely to address the concerns raised by the Select Committee?

Future arrangements for quality assurance in England and Northern Ireland

The consultative document follows the TQSC report in finding that in general existing quality assurance mechanisms work well. However, there are a number of issues that need to be addressed, notably:

1. concerns that standards between institutions are not comparable, or consistently applied;
2. a need for improved information, advice and guidance for prospective students;
3. limited flexibility of the current system to respond to changing circumstances;
4. external examiner arrangements that may not be able to respond to future challenges unless reformed;
5. the use of overly technical language that does not meet the needs of different audiences;
6. the perception that higher education is too insular in its approach to quality assurance;
7. the need to ensure that the different institutional and sector-wide elements of quality assurance, including those that fall under the remit of professional and statutory regulatory bodies (PSRBs), are seen as a comprehensive whole;
8. poor public understanding of quality assurance processes, and sometimes poor sector understanding (HEFCE, 2009b, paragraph 29).

To deal with these, the document proposes that the existing elements of quality assurance should be brought together into a single quality assurance ‘system’ overseen by a new ‘Quality Assurance System Group’ jointly owned and serviced by UniversitiesUK, GuildHE, Department for Employment and Learning (Northern Ireland) and HEFCE, and chaired by Professor Philip Jones, vice chancellor of Sheffield Hallam University. This will be further strengthened through changes to institutional audit and through greater use of information.

Changes to audit

The present institutional audit cycle runs until the end of 2010. QAA will consult on detailed changes in the second half of 2010. In the meantime, the consultative document proposes that the new process should be:

1. more proactive and flexible, able to investigate particular themes or concerns should the need arise;
2. better explained and presented in reports and handbooks, with the public as a principal audience, using simpler language;
3. clearer about the importance attached to the provision of robust and comparable public information by institutions;
4. clearer about the comparability of threshold standards between institutions, including the vital role of the academic infrastructure in supporting this;
5. as far as reasonably possible, of [sic] no increased overall level of demand, ensuring that maximum funding is devoted directly to learning and teaching (HEFCE, 2009b, paragraph 38).

Within this, the QAA should concentrate on the provision of accurate and appropriate information to current and potential students on the nature of the learning experience they can expect; academic misconduct (for example plagiarism, cheating); mechanisms for ensuring high quality and standards for international students, including English language proficiency checks; staff training and development; and the provision of effective feedback to students on their work (HEFCE, 2009b, paragraph 40). QAA should require ‘strong and scrupulous use of independent external examiners in summative assessment procedures and use of independent external participants in internal quality management procedures’ as preconditions for a future judgement of ‘confidence’ (HEFCE, 2009b, paragraph 42).
There are two ways in which the consultative document envisages that information will play a greater role in quality assurance in future.

First, there will be greater information available to students and others about the subjects and courses at each institution. For this purpose the HEFCE-led Teaching Quality Information/national student survey steering group will be reviewing how what is currently available can be improved. The aim is to:

1. provide timely and readily accessible public information, on a consistent and comparable basis, on the quality and standards of the educational provision for which each institution takes responsibility;
2. report results on a robust, consistent and comparable basis that meets public expectations (HEFCE, 2009b, paragraph 32a).

Second, greater effort will be made to produce information about quality and standards which is ‘jargon-free … and can be understood by a non-specialist audience’ (paragraph 23). For this purpose, QAA will be asked to produce summary audit reports ‘in an entirely standalone form that does not require any specialist knowledge of quality assurance or of its technical vocabulary’ (HEFCE, 2009b, paragraph 61).

Analysis

The consultative document emphasises the need for the revised arrangements to ‘be able to respond to concerns and be sufficiently flexible to adapt to the continually changing nature of higher education, while remaining robust’ (HEFCE, 2009b, paragraph 23). How far will these proposals deal with the concerns raised by the Select Committee and individual commentators such as Alderman and the author? There are five main issues: information, comparability, external examining, the protection of academic judgements and the role of the QAA.

Information

There can be little objection to the proposal that students should receive more information about such things as contact hours, support for learning and assessment regimes, provided the costs are not disproportionate. But it is naïve to expect this in itself or the data that are already available about such things as entry qualifications and initial employment outcomes, can, will or should play an important part in maintaining or raising standards (for the full argument, see Brown, 2006). In a quality assurance context, the crucial information is the information that institutions receive about the quality of their provision, including feedback from students, and the crucial issue is what use they make of it to improve their provision (see Harvey, 2003). There is actually a very real danger that so far from greater information improving matters, institutions will just put even more resources into improving the ‘quality’ of the published information, such as the National Student Survey, at the expense of actually improving their teaching (Brown et al., 2007).

Comparability

The consultative document talks about the importance of comparability (for example, HEFCE, 2009b, paragraph 46), then appears to define that as meaning ‘common threshold
The Current Brouhaha about Standards in England

standards’ (for example, HEFCE, 2009b, paragraph 32biii) and then equates those with the reference points in the academic infrastructure (HEFCE, 2009b, paragraph 36b). Both the document and the sector need to be much clearer: (a) about what such terms as ‘comparability’ and ‘threshold standards’ actually mean; and (b) whether it is both desirable and feasible for such standards to be adequately assured, for example by external examiners.

Work by the former Higher Education Quality Council more than a decade ago (Higher Education Quality Council, 1997) raised serious questions not only about comparability but even about thresholds, not to mention the ability of external examiners even then to be able to protect them. There is little sign that the sector is any more ready to grapple with these issues than it was then and, in the meantime, the competitive pressures that began to erase the notion of common standards from the mid-1980s have become even more intense. Nor does the quality of the staff work behind these various documents suggest that those responsible for them fully understand the technical complexities (for a fuller discussion of the issues, see Brown, 2010).

External examining

By the author’s reckoning, the UUK-led review is at least the fifth such major review since the mid-1980s. In what remains the most comprehensive and rigorous survey, Warren-Piper (1994) noted that a significant proportion of degrees entailed the study of more than one subject yet they were being examined by people without a common disciplinary training; that nearly all exams involved a mixture of assessed work done under different conditions (for example, examination scripts and project reports) and at different stages of a student’s education; that most degrees involved the combination of the marks of at least 10 and sometimes 40 examiners, yet only rarely did one internal examiner have an overview of all the examined work; that it was similarly unusual for one external examiner to moderate all the candidates’ work; and that as a result a great deal of reliance was placed on complex schemes for aggregating marks where examiners’ often limited statistical training and capabilities were often evident. Warren-Piper also found that when external examiners took decisions these were usually at the margin (rather than recalibrating whole ranges of marks), that it was rare for externals to adjust degree-class divisions and even rarer for them to decline to sign-off examination board reports. Since then the number and proportion of multi-disciplinary and modular programmes has increased, externals have become even more distanced from student work and more questions have been raised about their independence, given that they have to work within institutionally determined parameters.

Protection of academic judgements

As already noted, one of the strongest features of the cases that led to the Select Committee report was management interference with academic judgements. It is therefore striking, and disappointing, that the protection of academic judgements is not listed as one of the cardinal principles set out in paragraph 31 of the consultation document (HEFCE, 2009b).

The role of the QAA and the shifting balance of power

In Quality Assurance in Higher Education: The UK Experience Since 1992 (Brown, 2004), the author argued that the origins of the ‘quality wars’ of the 1990s lay in a fundamental disagreement between the government and the institutions about how quality is best
protected. The government view has increasingly been that market competition is the best stimulus to quality, whilst the institutions favour academic self-regulation. The arrangements agreed in 1997, whereby the Quality Assurance Agency was established to take over the conduct of teaching assessment from the Funding Council together with the functions of HEQC, represented a compromise between these two views but one born of exhaustion rather than conviction or resolution. In return for what seemed even at the time to be very limited benefits (a reduction in ‘unnecessary bureaucracy’), the sector gave up its own regulatory agency. Together, the combined costs of Teaching Quality Assessment and HEQC represented an arithmetical fraction of annual expenditure on teaching. The reduction in scrutiny which followed the 2001 integration of the two processes through the device of ‘disciplinary audit trails’ was even more marginal.

Since the collapse of its then chief executive’s proposals for combining assessment and audit in 2001, the QAA has been very much the ‘junior partner’ in the exercise, with the Funding Council and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills in the lead, dragging a reluctant and defensive sector with it, and with the QAA nearly reduced to the role of technical adviser, as Williams has publicly confirmed (P. Williams, 2009a, 2009b).

Even in 1992 the government and the Funding Council accepted that academic standards were the institutions’ business and kept out of standards-related issues, as is reflected in the 1992 Act. This line became blurred after 1997, another consequence of the vice chancellors’ surrender. Now we read in the government’s November 2009 policy statement on higher education, *Higher Ambitions*, that ‘to allow funds to be diverted to courses that meet strategic skills needs they will be diverted away from institutions whose courses fail to meet high standards of quality or outcome’ (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2009, p. 12). One wonders whether the people who wrote this are even aware of the provisions of the 1992 Act.

**Conclusion**

As one of the principal protagonists in the debate, it is very hard to offer an objective view of the current position. Britain has some of the most elaborate—if not the most elaborate—institutional quality-control mechanisms in the world. The vast majority of audit reports are favourable (there has only been a handful of ‘limited’ or ‘no confidence’ judgements). Student satisfaction surveys remain very positive. The actual number of reported cases of inappropriate practice remains small.

However, whilst some of the problem areas, such as grade inflation, are relatively recent, others, notably external examining and assessment, are of long standing. Moreover, the imminent intensification of competition allied to an almighty resources squeeze will test both institutional and external quality-control mechanisms as never before. It must be seriously questionable whether the limited, incremental and frankly muddled programme of work set in train by the Funding Council, the sector and the QAA will prove adequate in these circumstances. We may be back at all this again before very long.

**References**


Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), 2009, Thematic Enquiries into Concerns about Academic Quality and Standards in Higher Education in England (Gloucester, Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education).


Williams, P., 2009a, ‘The result of intelligent effort. Two decades in the quality assurance of higher education’, lecture given at the Institute of Education, University of London, 3 November.
