Defining and Measuring Academic Standards: A British Perspective

by

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Historically, the definition and measurement of academic standards in British higher education have been the exclusive prerogative of the academic community. The calibration of standards across institutions was the responsibility and purpose of the external-examiner system. But the mechanisms in place to achieve these ends have broken down under the weight of the massification of UK higher education, the need to recruit international students to sustain revenue streams, and the league-table or rankings culture that has resulted in academic standards being sacrificed in order to maintain or improve institutional image. In 2008 the House of Commons inaugurated a wide-ranging inquiry into these matters. Its August 2009 report proposes radical solutions, the adoption of which will represent a definitive break with the traditions of the past.
Définition des critères de qualité et évaluation des performances universitaires :
une perspective britannique

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In the summer of 2008 the Select Committee of the UK House of Commons on Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills, announced a wide-ranging inquiry into Britain’s higher education system. Periodically since then the Committee has listened to oral testimony from the leading players in UK higher education – and from a wide range of students and teachers – and has solicited, and published, no less than one hundred written submissions – over 500 pages of text (UK House of Commons, 2009a). Formally entitled “Students and Universities”, the remit of this investigation – arguably the most important examination of higher education in the United Kingdom since the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education chaired by the late Lord Dearing in 1996-97 – has ranged over a wide terrain: admissions; the balance between teaching and research; degree classification; and mechanisms of student support and engagement. But a major focus of the Select Committee’s work has been on “the actions that universities, Government and others have taken, or should take, to maintain confidence in the value of degrees awarded by universities in the UK”.

In this crucial respect the deliberations of the Select Committee have been conducted on a level quite different from that of the Dearing inquiry, which steered well clear of this topic of how academic standards are set, how they are measured and how they are assured. The evidence received by the Select Committee, submitted under the protection of parliamentary privilege, tells a sad story, of academic standards being deliberately undermined (“dumbed down”) in the interests of public image, league-table ranking position and student-derived revenue. Academics whose voices had been silenced by the obsessive managerialism that now pervades public-sector higher education in the United Kingdom have used the freedom given to them by the Select Committee to tell the truth. It does not make pleasant reading.

The members of the Select Committee have asked the awkward questions, for which the Vice-Chancellors – the university chief executives – have been ill-prepared. Each of them, without exception, has sought to paint a rosy picture: the unit of resource has declined and class sizes have grown, but the quality of the student learning experience has been maintained, even improved. And academic standards have actually risen (the Select Committee has been told), as evidenced by the ever-larger proportion of students graduating with First and Upper Second Class honours degrees.
But the evidence presented paints an altogether different picture: interference by administrators with the judgments of teachers; deliberate lowering of thresholds; external examiners being pressured into toning down critical comments; even evidence allegedly being withheld from a Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) inspection (“audit”) team.²

Inevitably the QAA itself has been a target of the Select Committee’s inquiries.

Although the Committee began formal hearings in autumn 2008, there was a dramatic prelude to its work, namely a special session, held in July 2008, at which the only witnesses were the QAA’s executive (UK House of Commons, 2008). During the course of this interrogation the Committee’s chairman characterised the QAA as a “toothless dog”. What he meant was that the QAA’s entire inspection process is currently focused on process, on paperwork and on document-checking. While the QAA has been harsh on private institutions, it seems to have bent over backwards to protect the reputation of public sector institutions. In 2009 it gave a verdict of “Limited Confidence” to the University of Buckingham (to date the United Kingdom’s only university to be completely privately funded). Three years previously it had slapped a verdict of “No Confidence” on the London campus of American InterContinental University, owned by the for-profit Career Education Corporation of the United States. Compare – by contrast – the sanitised conclusions it published in the spring of 2009 of a “Special Review of the Circumstances Surrounding the Amendments to an External Examiner’s Report” at Kingston University (West London) with the actual findings of its investigation, shared only with that university (QAA, 2009).³ Yet Kingston is deemed by the QAA to be, still, “in good standing”.

But a verdict of “No Confidence” or “Limited Confidence” does not mean that there is necessarily anything untoward about the academic standards of a particular institution – any more than a verdict of “Confidence” signifies robust standards robustly enforced. Indeed, as the QAA’s then chief executive was at pains to point out to the Select Committee in July 2008, the Agency as presently constituted neither sets the academic standards of the United Kingdom’s universities nor monitors them. Why is this?

Before answering this question – or, rather, in order to answer this question – we need to be clear about what we mean by academic standards in higher education, and how this meaning differs from academic quality. Much public debate on the issues of academic standards and higher education quality, certainly in the United Kingdom, has been marked and marred by deep confusion over these two very different concepts.

Academic standards are discrete levels of intellectual performance, the attainment of which results in the award of academic credit, leading invariably to the conferment of an academic qualification – a degree, say, or a diploma. The
QAA is, as its name implies, a quality assurance body; its remit does not actually extend, currently, to the direct scrutiny of standards. It is true that the Agency insists that its mission – as enunciated on its website – is to work with higher education institutions “to define academic standards”. But it does not do so, and never has. By “quality” I mean the totality of the student learning experience: the learning resources, the pastoral support and so on. You can in fact have poor “quality” in an institution that enforces and whose students reach high standards. Conversely, you can – and all too often do – have poor or indifferent standards in an institution brimming with support mechanisms. The current methodology of the QAA is compliance-driven. Its approach is underpinned by the belief that high standards will be maintained through standardisation of procedures (this theme is explored at length in Greatrix, 2004). This approach is false and dangerous.

Two hundred years ago there were only a handful of universities in the United Kingdom – just two in England (Oxford and Cambridge), four in Scotland (St. Andrews, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Edinburgh), one in Ireland (Trinity College Dublin) and none at all in Wales. “The academy” was exceedingly small, and it was overwhelmingly clerical. Oxford and Cambridge were founded as purely vocational institutions, to train men for the priesthood and later, for the legal profession. Academic standards – the discrete levels of attainment required for the conferment of a degree – were not written down, save in the most generalised sense that the examiners had to be “satisfied” over this and that. Indeed it was not until well into the second half of the 20th century that Oxford began to include in its Examination Statutes anything more than the driest of lists of topics to be covered in respect of each of the degrees it awarded. And this would be true of the other universities in this elite system, catering (say, in 1960), for less than 10% of 18-year-olds.

Academic standards were then largely an oral tradition, handed down from one generation to the next by word of mouth. When new universities were established (starting with Durham, in the north-east of England, in 1832), academics from established institutions (initially Oxford and Cambridge) were employed to oversee the transmission of this oral tradition on a subject-by-subject basis. Thus was born the much-vaunted “external-examiner” system, which expanded considerably with the foundation of the great “redbrick” or “civic” universities of Victorian England. But the tradition remained an oral one.

That being the case, and given that little evidence now survives that would permit us to make informed judgments about the history of the process by which standards were set, confirmed and/or modified, we cannot say how standards had evolved over time, certainly in the period before the mid Victorian Age. Anecdotal evidence suggests, however, that the oral tradition existed at the level of the individual, not the institution at which he (or, later, she) taught. Degree syllabuses were indeed confirmed by university senates or...
academic boards. But this was largely a rubber-stamping exercise. When this author joined the University of London in 1968, the “power” to establish and enforce standards lay very much with the members of the subject-based departments and boards of study.

What was the purpose of these standards – or rather, what was the purpose of the syllabuses that gave them life? It was certainly not; even in vocational subjects such as law or medicine, to prepare students for “the world of work”. The syllabuses had a heavy academic bias. A student graduating with a good degree in modern history or a language was ready to move straight into doctoral research; there was no need to complete a taught Master’s to bridge a gap that did not then exist. A medical graduate certainly had a great deal of medical and surgical knowledge; but he would have had no training in the social or ethical aspects of medicine, in “bedside manner” – for example how to tell a patient that a diagnosed medical condition was terminal – or in the business and managerial aspects of running a general practice. Within these syllabuses “transferable skills” certainly existed. But they were never explicitly taught, less still assessed. That was not the purpose of assessment at all. Assessment was academically driven, to fulfil academic ends. And since the academy was still small, assessment criteria were virtually unknown and “benchmarks” unheard of. “What were the characteristics”, I once asked as an academic auditor at a Victorian “redbrick” university, “of a first-class degree in French?”. The head of department looked puzzled and then replied that the academic regulations were silent on this matter but that he could always recognise a first-class answer because it reflected a certain “je ne sais quoi!”.

The definitive break with this system came with the inauguration of the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) in 1964. The establishment of the CNAA was a pivotal plank in the expansion of higher education opportunity in the United Kingdom post-1945. Much of this expansion was planned to take place outside traditional universities, in technical colleges and, later, polytechnics, all with unashamedly vocational missions closely tied to the needs of local and regional economies. None of these non-university institutions enjoyed degree-awarding powers. Instead, they taught for degrees awarded by the CNAA.

The CNAA was mandated, by its Royal Charter, to ensure that its degrees were comparable with those awarded by the universities. It did this in three ways. It established panels of experts drawn, largely, from the universities and industry to oversee and approve the drafting of syllabuses. It employed external examiners – again drawn from universities and from industry and commerce – to guarantee, on its behalf, that appropriate academic standards were enforced and maintained. And it insisted that each award it approved should have attached to it not merely a detailed curriculum but also an explicit set of learning outcomes, invariably drafted in terms of the skills and
competencies that would need to be demonstrated in order for a module to be passed and, ultimately, for the award to be conferred.

So it was that the oral tradition began to be replaced by documentation and record. Wound up in 1992, when the polytechnics became universities in their own right, the CNAA boasted a quarter-of-a-century of meticulous supervision of standards as well as of quality in the UK higher education sector. But those nostalgic for a return of the CNAA (in some form or other) need to recognise and acknowledge its limitations and weaknesses. Its very intrusiveness – understandable enough in its early years – became a burden both to itself and to the evolving sector whose interests it served. As CNAA-accredited institutions matured, the prescriptive systems that it mandated served (it was said) to stifle innovation; they were also time-consuming and costly to operate. Central to these systems was the vast network of external examiners that it employed to ensure comparability of standards between one CNAA-validated degree and another in the same subject, and an inspectorate (Her Majesty’s Inspectors) that visited every institution under its aegis and published reports.5

As to the external examiners, it soon became clear that they were not, in fact, able to ensure comparability, not least because of the diverse nature of the institutions that the CNAA served, and the modular multi-subject qualifications for which they taught. As to the second, the inspectors were hardly academics of the first rank, and the esteem in which they were held was never high. We would, in fact, be fooling ourselves if we thought that CNAA degrees enjoyed, in practice, parity of esteem with those awarded by the traditional universities. They did not. The universities operated within a framework of academic autonomy. Other than in subjects that were professionally accredited – notably law, medicine and engineering – the academic standards that obtained in the universities were, literally, the property of each awarding university institution. And even in the subjects that were professionally accredited, the accrediting bodies were composed, for the most part, of peer academics. Over the totality of the subjects they taught, the universities were not subject to inspection, and were not inspected. And it is worth adding that even in respect of the subjects that were accredited – for professional-practice purposes – universities were free to teach them, and award degrees, regardless of the accreditation status.

This autonomy was totally lacking in the CNAA world (Alderman, 1996). The quality of the polytechnics was underwritten by an army of Her Majesty’s Inspectors. Their standards were delineated and supervised by the CNAA. What we have seen in the sector in the 17 or so years since the “emancipation” of the polytechnics has been a classic case of “academic drift”. The “new” universities – the former polytechnics, that is – have wanted to behave like the old. And, it has to be said, this academic drift has been materially assisted by successive governments, which have insisted on judging the new universities
by the yardsticks of the old – primarily in terms of blue-skies research – and in bestowing monetary rewards accordingly.

That is not to say that the inspectorial regime to which the polytechnics had been exposed was abandoned when the coveted title of university was bestowed upon them. Far from it. Between 1993 and 2001 a costly attempt was made to widen the inspection of teaching quality to which the polytechnics had been subject so as to embrace all universities, new and old. As Lord Dearing’s report noted, this attempt was being comprehensively subverted by the academic community, which treated “Teaching Quality Assessment” (TQA, as it was known) as a merry game to be played and won.

At first TQA (in England) led to verdicts of Excellent, Satisfactory or Unsatisfactory for each department inspected; but in 1995 these literal gradings were replaced by numerical grades, from 1 (“not approved”) to 4, in each of six “aspects of provision”: so a maximum of 24 points could be scored for each inspection. Strictly speaking the grades were not supposed to be aggregated, but of course everyone did so. The government looked to these aggregate scores to judge departments against each other, and many Vice-Chancellors decreed that their university websites would announce points scored out of 24 almost as soon as the inspectors had given their oral verdicts at the end of each three-day inspection. For the compilers of the university league tables the scores were, of course, manna from heaven.

But we need to be clear that TQA was concerned only in the most tangential way with academic standards. Of the six aspects of provision only one – “Teaching, Learning and Assessment” was at all focused upon standards, and even here the emphasis was on pedagogy in the technical sense, procedural clarity and student feedback. TQA assessors were actually forbidden to question or challenge academic standards, or to “second-guess” the judgments of external examiners. As TQA results rolled in, they suggested a strong but hardly surprising link between an above-average resource base and “teaching excellence”. Academics, meanwhile, devised cunning strategies for obtaining the best possible inspection outcomes. Departments preparing for inspection were put through dress rehearsals, at which external experts (often inspectors themselves operating on a freelance basis) offered advice and guidance. Staff, students, alumni and employers of alumni were coached as to what to tell the inspectors. A teaching inspection carried out by the QAA was not an inspection against a “gold standard”. Rather, it was an inspection of the extent to which a department attained the aims and objectives that it set for itself. So departmental “Aims and Objectives” were meticulously drafted so that they only referred to goals that could be comfortably achieved.

High scores fell like confetti at a wedding (Times Higher Education Supplement, 1999). The proportion of departments obtaining an aggregate score of at least
22 points rose from around a third in the 1996-98 round of assessments to over two-thirds in 2000-01. “Old” universities could no longer look to TQA to differentiate them from the ex-polytechnics. And when high scores were so universal, how could TQA ever be used to inform government funding of the university sector, as had been originally envisaged?

Side-by-side with TQA the sector had itself operated a voluntary system of academic audits, initially under the auspices of the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals but from 1992 run by the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC), a legally independent body that was nonetheless wholly owned by the universities. But if TQA inspections were only tangentially concerned with academic standards, HEQC audits were not concerned with standards at all. Teams of auditors – senior academics – went from institution to institution inquiring whether the systems each institution claimed to have in place to assure quality and underpin standards really existed, and worked. Reports – originally confidential but later public – were compiled, incorporating praise and criticism. In broad terms, academic audit was and has been a success story, forcing academics to confront issues which most had hardly bothered to think about hitherto: Why were they doing what they were doing? How did they know they were doing it well? How could it be done better? Many issues which had lain buried under the ivory towers of academe were brought to the surface at last: the real criteria used for promotion, for example, and the right of students to complain about shoddy teaching, and to be taken seriously. As one Vice-Chancellor uncharitably put it, audit asked “the devil’s questions”. But he did not deny that such questions needed to be asked.

But academic auditors did not test quality and they did not pass judgements on standards. Academic audit was conceived as a means of deflecting Thatcherite intrusion into the academy. Margaret Thatcher demanded to know what the universities were doing with taxpayers' money. Audit was designed to offer reassurance. In 1997 the HEQC was wound up, and its audit activities subsumed within a new Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). Four years later the costly farce that TQA had become was brought to an end. Since then, the QAA has employed academic (now called institutional) audit as its major tool for the discharge of its responsibility “to provide independent assessment of how higher education institutions in the UK maintain their academic standards and quality”. But, as its website emphasises, “The primary responsibility for academic standards and quality rests with individual institutions. QAA reviews and reports on how well they meet those responsibilities, and encourages continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education”.

When an institution undergoes QAA audit, its systems and structures are tested against the QAA’s “Academic Infrastructure”. This consists of four elements: two nationally-agreed frameworks for higher education qualifications
(one for Scotland and the other for the rest of the United Kingdom); a mammoth "Code of Practice"; a series of "Subject Benchmark Statements"; and the institution’s own "Programme Specifications". The Code of Practice is concerned with quality, not standards. The Subject Benchmark Statements, drawn up by academics, are couched in terms of sweeping generalisations focused, in the most superficial way, on subject content. The frameworks for higher education qualifications are, again, superficial and shallow. Bachelor's degrees “with honours” form the largest group of university qualifications offered in the United Kingdom. Here is part of what the framework says about them:

Bachelor's degrees with honours are awarded to students who have demonstrated:
- 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;
- an ability to deploy accurately established techniques of analysis and enquiry within a discipline;
- conceptual understanding that enables the student:
  - to devise and sustain arguments, and/or to solve problems, using ideas and techniques, some of which are at the forefront of a discipline;
  - to describe and comment upon particular aspects of current research, or equivalent advanced scholarship, in the discipline;
- an appreciation of the uncertainty, ambiguity and limits of knowledge;
- the ability to manage their own learning, and to make use of scholarly reviews and primary sources (for example, refereed research articles and/or original materials appropriate to the discipline).

Holders of a bachelor's degree with honours will have developed an understanding of a complex body of knowledge, some of it at the current boundaries of an academic discipline. Through this, the holder will have developed analytical techniques and problem-solving skills that can be applied in many types of employment. The holder of such a qualification will be able to evaluate evidence, arguments and assumptions, to reach sound judgements, and to communicate them effectively (Quality Assurance Agency, 2008).

None of this is concerned with academic standards at all.

The final elements in the Academic Infrastructure are the so-called Programme Specifications. A programme specification is merely (in the words of the QAA) “a concise description of the intended learning outcomes from a higher education programme, and how these outcomes can be achieved and demonstrated”. But who will decide whether a particular student has in fact achieved her or his relevant programme outcomes? Certainly not the QAA.
Periodically throughout the history I have described, there have been calls for a national agency that would define and enforce academic standards throughout the entire United Kingdom. Such proposals have been fiercely resisted by the academy, and successive governments have gone out of their way to disabuse the sector of any suspicion that such calls might be positively answered. For instance, in 1994 and again in 1995 the then Secretary of State for Education, Gillian Shephard, emphasised that standards were the responsibility of individual institutions. In July 1995, in its proposals on the development and refinement of quality-assurance in the sector (Developing Quality Assurance in Partnership with the Institutions of Higher Education), the CVCP reminded the government that “Standards are in law solely the responsibility of the institutions individually”. This is indeed the constitutional position, but it is widely misunderstood. In his evidence to the Commons’ Select Committee on 11 May 2009, Secretary of State John Denham made the following astonishing mis-statement of fact: “I think it is right that the universities hold the responsibility for the processes by which they establish quality and standards and QAA checks whether they are good enough.”

The QAA – as currently constituted – does and can do no such thing. But should it be reconfigured so that it did?

If the deliberations of the Select Committee have achieved nothing else, they have certainly made it abundantly apparent, to the public at large, that each UK university sets its own standards. This freedom is clearly open to abuse, and if the evidence given to the Committee is to be believed, has indeed been widely abused. Following my own appearance before the Committee (9 March 2009), I was asked to submit a supplementary paper to answer a question that had exercised Committee members: what if anything would prevent a university from designing and launching a Bachelor of Science degree in Astrology? The answer is – of course – nothing whatever. As I pointed out, universities in the United Kingdom are free to launch and assess degree programmes in whatever subjects they please, no matter how controversial, sensational or inappropriate; and neither the QAA nor any other body “has authority to prohibit a university from launching a particular programme of study”. I added:

In the USA universities must seek the specific approval of their regional accrediting commissions for each degree programme that they wish to run, and for which they wish their students to be eligible for Federal financial aid. An accrediting commission could tell a university that Astrology was not a suitable subject for the award of a BSc degree, and that approval of it, therefore, would not be forthcoming. There is – currently – no body with a similar authority in the UK.
In the United Kingdom both the definition and the measurement of academic standards are in the hands of the academy. Members of faculty decide what body of work is adequate for the award of a particular degree, what skills and competencies must be demonstrated, and at what level and to what intensity, in order for the degree to be conferred. This is obviously a highly subjective process, even in scientific disciplines. And the process, by its very nature, makes it exceedingly difficult – I would say impossible – to compare qualifications across even a small range of institutions. Such a state of affairs is unsatisfactory at best. At worst, as the United Kingdom moves more closely towards a market economy in higher education, such a system is simply not fit for purpose.

Epilogue

On 2 August 2009 the inquiry inaugurated by the House of Commons the previous year published its final report (UK House of Commons, 2009b). Amongst its many observations and recommendations are the following:

- “The system in England for safeguarding consistent national standards in higher education institutions is out-of-date, inadequate and in urgent need of replacement. The current arrangements with each university responsible for its own standards are no longer meeting the needs of a mass system of higher education in the 21st century with two million students. … it is not acceptable … that Vice-Chancellors cannot give a straightforward answer to the simple question of whether students obtaining first class honours degrees at different universities had attained the same intellectual standards” [page 5, Summary].

- “The body that currently ‘assures quality’, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), focuses almost exclusively on processes, not standards. This needs to change. We call for the QAA to be transformed into an independent Quality and Standards Agency with a remit, statutory if necessary, to safeguard, monitor and report on standards” [page 5, Summary].

- “We are looking to see a fundamental change in the operation of the QAA and that, if this cannot be achieved within two years, the QAA/Quality and Standards Agency should be abolished and an entirely new organisation be established in its place” [page 97, paragraph 220].

- “All higher education institutions in England [should] have their accreditation to award degrees reviewed no less often than every 10 years by the reformed QAA. Where the Agency concludes that all or some of an institution’s powers should be withdrawn, we recommend that the Government draw up and put in place arrangements which would allow accreditation to award degrees to be withdrawn or curtailed by the Agency” [page 101, paragraph 229].
In the short time that has elapsed since the publication of the Select Committee’s report, two broad defences of the status quo have been launched. The first, typified by reaction of the body that represents British university Vice-Chancellors, Universities UK (UUK), seeks to deny that there is – or ever was – a “standards” problem that needed to be addressed. In a press statement issued on 2 August 2009; UUK condemned the Select Committee’s proposals as “a sledgehammer to crack a nut”. The second response is altogether more refined and measured. Far from denying that standards are lower in some UK university institutions than others, this response admits at once that they are, but celebrates this fact as a matter for congratulation, and as an inevitable consequence of the move from an elite to a mass higher education system in the United Kingdom. “Undergraduate education has changed”, writes Professor Robert Brecher of the University of Brighton (a former polytechnic), “let’s accept it and move on”.

With far more students, much larger classes, most students being in effect part-timers everything changes. Where once most students could do pretty well with minimal teaching – only the brightest figured, and the rest could be given a third [i.e. a third-class honours degree] provided they just showed up to the exams – most of today’s students need to be taught, and to be taught well. Where students who may not really have needed one-to-one tutorials and genuine seminars had them, today the situation is exactly the reverse: most students need that sort of teaching but can’t have it. Where once both academics and students had time to talk, think and read all day, five days a week, if not more, now they do not. In these circumstances, the absolute level of intellectual attainment marked by a BA or BSc is bound to be lower compared with 40 years ago. (Times Higher Education, 2009)

The fact remains, however, that the recommendations of the Select Committee enjoy cross-party support in Parliament. They will, therefore, form the core text for the national debate to which the Committee’s report has now given rise.

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Notes

1. The full terms of reference are at www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/ius/ius_301008.cfm.

2. The Select Committee's report contains an entire chapter devoted to the attempt by Manchester Metropolitan University to expel from its Academic Board a teacher who had given evidence which was not to its liking.

3. The QAA's full, internal report into this incident at Kingston has however been published independently at www.sirpeterscott.com (search under “Quality Assurance Agency”).

4. On the work and impact of the CNAA, see Pratt (1997).

5. These themes are explored in Brown (2004), Harris (1990) and Piper (1994).

References


