

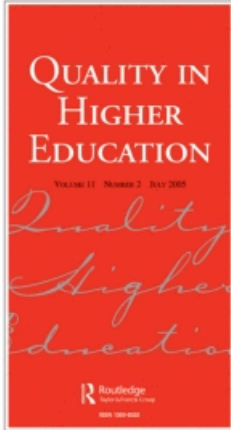
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FORUM

Co-operation or Compliance? The National Committee of Inquiry Proposals on Quality and Standards

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ABSTRACT *The recently published report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, Higher Education in the Learning Society, is the most wide-ranging official inquiry into UK higher education since the 1963 Robbins Report (NCIHE, 1997). One of the most important, and radical, sections of the new report is that dealing with quality and standards. The Committee's main proposals are summarised and the author comments on their desirability and feasibility. It draws on the author's knowledge and experience as the former Chief Executive of the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) [1].*

The Immediate Background

The National Committee ('the Committee') was appointed by the then Secretary of State for Education and Employment, Mrs Gillian Shephard MP, in February 1996. Its terms of reference were:

To make recommendations on how the purposes, shape, structure, size and funding of higher education, including support for students, should develop to meet the needs of the United Kingdom over the next 20 years, recognising that higher education embraces teaching, learning, scholarship and research.

Its central task was to find a way through a not-unfamiliar conundrum: how to find additional resources for higher education at a time when the judgement of politicians of the two main parties was that taxpayers were not prepared to pay more for the privilege of educating mainly middle-class students. The immediate trigger for the setting up of the Committee was the threat by Britain's university Vice-Chancellors in January 1996 to introduce top-up fees for students with effect from the academic year 1997-98 if the Government did not quickly come up with a means of increasing funds for higher education.

The main theme of the Committee's report is the notion of a higher education 'compact'. The Committee identifies a number of stakeholders—society and taxpayers as represented by the Government, students and graduates, institutions, staff, employers and students'

families. The Committee enumerates the benefits each stakeholder obtains from higher education. Each of these benefits is matched by a corresponding contribution, or obligation.

The Committee's central conclusion is that students and graduates, particularly those from wealthier family backgrounds, should make a greater contribution not only to their living costs but also to the costs of their tuition. In return, they should receive better information and guidance on which to inform choices, a high quality learning experience, a clear statement of learning outcomes, and rigorously assured qualifications. By this means institutions will receive a new source of funding for teaching but should also make a collective commitment to rigorous assurance for quality and standards. Greater attention on the part of institutions to quality and standards is therefore a clear *quid pro quo* for unlocking new sources of funding.

It is not that the Committee find that quality and standards of institutions' existing programmes and awards necessarily lacking. In fact:

Institutions and their staff have demonstrated great commitment to ensuring the quality of provision over the last decade, at a time of an expansion of student numbers unmatched by increases in funding [moreover] the systems in the UK for assuring the quality of higher education provision are among the most rigorous in the world (NCIHE, 1997, 10.6).

Nevertheless:

the expansion of student numbers has put the existing quality assurance arrangements under strain. The system of external examiners alone cannot guarantee comparability of standards across the diverse mass system of higher education. In some areas professional bodies are expressing concern about present arrangements. There have been a few highly publicised cases where concerns exist about the adequacy of arrangements to ensure that quality and standards are safeguarded where an institution franchises programmes to another, whether in this country or overseas. We are also concerned about the low level of confidence among some employers about standards of qualifications awarded (NCIHE, 1997, 10.7).

The Committee therefore argues that:

there is the need to develop quality assurance practices which allow for diversity throughout the system, yet ensure that diversity is not an excuse for low standards or unacceptable quality.... Our concern is to maintain the high global reputation which higher education in the UK has justifiably earned. We are no less concerned to ensure that students who commit themselves to several years of study can be assured that the awards they earn continue to be respected and valued. The importance of these issues becomes the greater as we look forward to further growth in the number of students in higher education (NCIHE, 1997,10.8).

The Committee's Proposals

The Committee's central proposal is for *a new framework of higher education qualifications*:

broad enough to cover the whole range of achievement, consistent in terminology, and well understood within and outside higher education (NCIHE, 1997, 10.9).

The framework would extend from Higher Education Certificate level (an award gained at the end of the first year of higher education) up to Doctorate level. All awards should bear

one of the common titles proposed. There should be agreed common credit points at relevant levels. There should also be additional and recognised 'stopping off points. The framework will:

cater for a wide range of aspirations and achievement; have recognised standards; enable students to progress through higher levels, as well as move between programmes as appropriate; enable attainment to be recognised, provided it can be reliably assessed; articulate with other areas of tertiary education; encompass vocational and academic qualifications; and have standing here and abroad (NCIHE, 1997, 10.43).

In the first instance the framework will cover England, Wales and Northern Ireland, with Scotland coming in at a later date.

Other major proposals are to:

- improve information about programmes of study; institutions should develop *programme specifications* giving the intended outcomes;
- improve information about student achievement; institutions should develop *Progress Files* incorporating a transcript recording achievement and a means by which students can monitor, build and reflect upon their personal development;
- develop 'threshold' or *minimum standards of achievement*; the new Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) should work with institutions to establish small, expert teams to provide benchmark information on standards, operating within the framework of qualifications;
- protect such standards; the QAA should create, within three years, a UK-wide pool of academic staff from whom institutions must select their external examiners;
- support the framework; the QAA should develop codes of practice covering areas such as collaborative provision, postgraduate work and student guidance. Institutions should adopt the codes and their adherence to them should be reviewed by periodic institutional reviews organised by the agency;
- protect quality in collaborative programmes; after 2001 no such programme should take place either in the UK or abroad except where the QAA has certified that it complies with its criteria;
- protect students; the QAA should develop a fair and robust system for complaints relating to educational provision at individual institutions.

The Committee summarises its proposals thus:

- the adoption of a framework of qualifications based on agreed credits and levels of achievement;
- the development of recognised standards of awards;
- a learning experience for students that enables them to meet the standards of the award;
- clear and accurate information for students, employers and others about the content, standards and delivery of programmes;
- confidence, internally and externally, that standards are assured and that the quality of education supports those standards through a system which is easy to understand and not burdensome to operate; and
- the potential for action to be taken swiftly to protect students (and the reputation of the higher education more widely) if problems with regard to standards or quality occur (NCIHE, 1997, 10.79).

It is clear that the Committee sees these proposals not as discrete but as constituting a coherent and integrated framework for quality assurance. It is also clear that what the

Committee sees as important is the *broad thrust* of its proposals. The report sets out a model, not a detailed blueprint. The Committee acknowledges that, as in other areas, much will depend on how the proposals are interpreted and implemented.

How desirable are these proposals? How feasible are they? To address these questions it may be worth distinguishing the following aspects:

- the focus of quality assurance: standards, programmes and student achievement;
- the means of assurance: institutional review, assessment, external examining;
- the provision to be assured: on- and off-campus; and
- the role and capability of the new national quality assurance agency.

Standards, Programmes and Student Achievement

Concerns about academic standards between institutions surfaced politically early in 1994. In a speech to the April 1994 HEFCE conference, Mrs Shephard's predecessor as Secretary of State, John Patten, asked HEQC to 'place more emphasis on broad comparability in the standards of degrees offered by different institutions' (DES, 1994). A few months later the then Chairman of the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (CVCP), Dr Kenneth Edwards, stated that:

Broad comparability of standards can best be achieved in a diverse system through assurance of threshold (minimum acceptable) standards; CVCP and HEQC will develop definitions of threshold standards and mechanisms for providing assurance about their achievement (CVCP 1994).

This was the background to what later became known as the *HEQC Graduate Standards Programme* (GSP), a co-ordinated programme of development and applied research into academic standards across the whole of the higher education sector in Britain. The Programme produced an *Interim Report* in December 1995, a draft final report a year later and a final report in July 1997 (HEQC 1995b, 1996b, 1997). The first two reports were available to the Committee, to whom HEQC also gave detailed evidence.

The main findings of the *GSP Interim Report* were that:

- with certain exceptions, institutions treated academic standards as implicit in the methods they used for the design and approval of courses and the assessment of students, rather than as explicit;
- the notion of comparability of standards had become increasingly problematic in the mass diverse higher education system;
- in fields where classified honours degrees predominated, the concept of threshold standards was unclear and tended to be defined in somewhat negative terms;
- it was not yet obvious whether it would be feasible to establish threshold standards at the level of broad subjects: it was more likely that this could be done with specialisms within them;
- the most promising approach to establishing shared, explicit standards seemed to lie in exploring the generic qualities that might be expected in any graduate—what had come to be called 'graduateness';
- there was confusion and ambiguity in the use of titles of awards. The distinction was not clear, for example, between 'honours', on the one hand, and 'pass', 'ordinary' and 'unclassified' degrees, on the other;
- nevertheless, in all parts of UK higher education, there was an increasing desire to find

ways of articulating, in explicit and publicly accessible terms, the basis, standards and criteria for judgement of programmes of study for the benefit of intending students, employers and society at large (HEQC 1995b).

These findings were broadly confirmed by the work carried out in the second stage of the Programme.

Following discussion at the 1995 Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals' (CVCP) Residential Conference, the second-stage work focused on four issues:

1. whether it would be possible to develop agreement on the qualities expected of graduates, including generic attributes and skills;
2. the development of a convention governing the use of degrees and other award titles;
3. the strengthening of the system of external examiners to underpin standards;
4. the identification of what might constitute threshold standards for degrees and diplomas (CVCP 1995).

On these issues the conclusions in the draft *Final Rqmrt* were that:

- the notion of 'graduateness' was not yet sufficiently robust to be used to define the nature of the UK degree or to offer a threshold for all degrees, though it might serve as the basis for establishing the range of expectations that UK degrees now encompassed;
- there was considerable support for the development of a convention or set of guidelines governing the structuring and nomenclature of awards and the levels at which they were offered;
- the new external examining framework (see below) provided a basis for strengthening the system but only if the expectations of it were realistic, that is, that the limitations to comparability were acknowledged and that explicit benchmarks for standards were developed;
- whilst in due course it might be possible to establish 'direct' threshold standards (specified attributes, the possession of which could be demonstrated to a sufficient extent through assessment) in some specialisms or sub-disciplines, in the immediate future the best approach across the sector as a whole would be an 'indirect' one, creating the conditions within which such standards could be established.

The report also stated the Council's view that:

the dominance of the classified honours degree, and the values and practice embodied in the classification process, hinder the establishment of positive thresholds for first degrees. What is more the dominance of honours level degrees (rather than a balance between ordinary and honours level degrees) seems out of line with the needs of an expanded HE system (HEQC, 1996b).

The draft final report accordingly recommended that:

- all institutions should make explicit, and publicly accessible, the standards of attainment associated with different programmes and awards;
- the new quality agency should develop and confirm, in partnership with institutions, a range of generalised expectations for degrees (building on the work on graduateness) that would describe the range of attributes that were already embedded in programmes and awards. Institutions collectively should adopt a set of expectations based on these as a framework for the profiling of individual programmes;
- the new agency should develop, in partnership with institutions and their representative

bodies, a descriptive awards framework (linked to credits in the longer term) to provide a rationale for different types and levels of awards. Institutions should review and profile their own awards in relation to this framework;

- the new agency should develop and pilot, in partnership with institutions and other relevant groups, a typological framework of programmes. Such information, if publicised nationally, would illuminate the diversity and choices of programme available for different purposes;
- to achieve greater consistency in presenting information about the achievement of students, the new agency should review current approaches to student transcripts and consult on the adoption of a consistent form across institutions;
- the new agency should undertake a survey of relevant stakeholders and international experience to test the value of the current degree classification system and any specific consequences of change to it (HEQC 1996b).

The report also recommended a number of ways in which indirect thresholds could be established.

Comparison of the Graduate Standards Programme and National Committee Reports

There is a good deal of common ground between the recommendations of the Graduate Standards Programme (GSP) and those in the Committee report, including:

- the emphasis upon greater explicitness and clarity about the standards and level of achievement required for different awards;
- the recognition that the achievement of this greater explicitness and clarity is the responsibility both of individual institutions and of the academic community collectively;
- the need for such explicitness and clarity to be achieved without sacrificing diversity or institutional autonomy.

Nevertheless, there are some significant differences between the GSP conclusions and the National Committee recommendations.

Categorisation of programmes. The GSP proposal was for institutions to categorise their programmes within certain broad categories (for example, subject mastery, intellectual or cognitive, practical, individual, social). Whilst the categories would be common it would be left to institutions to determine the balance of outcomes. For instance, it would be perfectly possible—indeed, implicit in individual institutional responsibility and autonomy—for a programme *not* to aim to equip students with a particular category of attributes. By contrast, the National Committee report is quite clear that *all* programmes should have specified outcomes in terms of the four categories of knowledge and understanding, key skills, cognitive skills and subject-specific skills. This is a more prescriptive approach than that envisaged by HEQC, at least in the first instance.

Awards framework. Similar issues arise in relation to the awards framework. The GSP framework was intended, at least in the first instance, to be essentially *descriptive*, as indeed was the parallel and slightly earlier proposal by the Harris Committee (HEFCE, 1996). However, the National Committee report clearly envisages that *all* award titles will conform to the proposed framework and indeed that there will be fewer award titles (NCIHE, 1997, paras. 10.42, 10.44).

The approach to thresholds. As the foregoing summary will have made clear, HEQC had doubts about the feasibility, if not the desirability in principle, of thresholds, at least in terms of directly specified categories and levels of achievement, which would apply *across broad subject areas*. The Council's preference was to approach the issue indirectly by:

- developing a range of *generic expectations* for degrees that expressed degree outcomes in generalised terms so that individual programmes or elements and awards could be profiled and positioned in relation to this range;
- promoting *greater clarity and explicitness* as to the nature of different types of award, at both national and institutional level, and of different types of programme leading to specific awards;
- fostering harmonisation or convergence of rules and procedures governing *assessment practice*: finding mechanisms and opportunities to clarify, make more explicit and strengthen the judgements of academic peers (not only external examiners);
- developing *greater consistency* in grade boundaries and the specification of relevant assessment criteria, including a sharper specification of the boundary for progression from non-honours to honours degrees.

By contrast, the Committee appears to envisage that broad subject-based groupings will identify both minimum and maximum achievements and expectations for programmes of different types (presumably according to a different categorisation than that recommended elsewhere in the report). This task should be completed by 2000. It is not clear what *institutions'* contribution to the establishment of thresholds is intended to be: this matters because the subject dimension is only one aspect of standards, and anyway standards are ultimately (and legally) an *institutional* responsibility. *Whose* standards will those to be devised by the proposed subject groupings actually be? Who will underwrite or validate them?

Honours classification. The GSP report made clear HEQC's view that a major obstacle to the development of direct threshold standards was the continuing existence of the classified honours degree system. The Committee appears to acknowledge the argument (NCIHE, 1997, 9.52) but hopes that its proposals for Progress Files will lead to the present classification system becoming redundant. Nevertheless, the Honours degree occupies a central position (as Level H4) in the proposed awards framework.

Degree expectations. An omission from the Committee report is any reference to the GSP work on degree expectations. Annex G to the draft final GSP report suggested a provisional list of expectations of graduates that had emerged from the various strands of the work on graduateness and other elements of the GSP. Such a list had value in its own right as a means of answering the question: what can reasonably be expected of a graduate in any subject from any higher education institution? But even more important, it was the basis of the other core recommendations, particularly those relating to the awards framework and programme profiling [2].

Conclusion. Although the broad thrust of the Committee's proposals in this area is consistent with the GSP report, in a number of important respects they appear to have gone further than HEQC at that stage thought desirable or feasible. Much will clearly depend upon how they are taken forward. However, there is also a more fundamental issue: diversity or comparability? On the one hand, the general thrust of the National Committee report is to reinforce diversity by emphasising that in future the needs of the

individual student should, and will, play a much greater part in the design of what will increasingly be individual learning programmes. On the other hand, the message of the quality and standards recommendations is the need for a greater degree of commonality, so that like learning experiences can be evaluated and compared. In principle, these two approaches can be reconciled, but this may not be easy in practice, particularly if institutional autonomy is also to be safeguarded.

Quality Assurance: Institutional Review, Assessment and External Examining

Another common feature of the GSP and National Committee reports is the emphasis on the need for external quality assurance to apply to outcomes rather to inputs or process. It was the clear message of the GSP that if the nature of the higher education 'product' could be more clearly specified, less effort would need to be put into evaluating the processes by which that product was created. The Committee clearly shared this view. Some further background may be helpful.

Since 1992 the UK has had three main forms of external quality monitoring in higher education:

- academic quality audit of institutions' quality assurance arrangements;
- assessment of the quality of teaching and learning in broad subject areas;
- accreditation of (usually) programmes in certain vocational areas by professional and statutory bodies.

These have co-existed with the traditional mechanism of external examining, the system under which institutions employ academic staff from other universities and colleges to participate in student examination and assessment in order to try to ensure some comparability of standards between institutions and to see that students are fairly assessed. HEQC published a new national framework for external examining in 1996 (HEQC 1996d) [3].

Each of these processes has been the subject of considerable critical scrutiny in recent years:

- in 1994 the Higher Education Quality Council commissioned an independent evaluation of academic quality audit;
- in December 1996 a Joint Planning Group representing the Higher Education Funding Councils and the representative bodies of the heads of higher education institutions agreed to create a new integrated quality assurance process to replace audit and assessment. The new process would be administered by a new quality assurance agency for higher education, which would subsume HEQC and the main assessment functions of the Higher Education Funding Councils in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (CVCP, 1996);
- in addition, some progress has been made by both HEQC and the Higher Education Funding Councils in creating a closer alignment between audit and assessment, on the one hand, and professional body accreditation on the other hand.

The underlying driver for these developments has been the concern on the part of institutions to reduce or simplify what has been perceived as an excessive regulatory burden (Brown, 1997a). This concern is acknowledged by the National Committee. However, it is too early to say whether, taken together, its proposals will assist in this objective. The issues include four areas of concern.

First, what will be the precise purpose, nature and extent of the proposed institutional reviews? Will these be in effect 'ticking off exercises, or will they be a serious attempt to

address whether each institution is achieving its educational objectives in the context of its mission? How will the reviews relate to the proposed five-yearly reviews by institutional governing bodies of their effectiveness, and that of their institutions, proposed elsewhere in the Committee's report? How will the line be drawn between the review of quality management and other management reviews, for example, the periodic scrutiny of institutional financial management by the Funding Council?

Second, what will happen to teaching quality assessment? At one point the report speaks of its disappearing altogether, at another it speaks of its being continued but with 'a lighter touch'. Will the Funding Council's statutory duty to secure the provision of assessment be repealed, or just disregarded? How, without assessment or some form of programme review, will its duty to obtain value for money for the public funds invested in higher education be fulfilled? On the other hand, if assessment does not effectively disappear, where will the resources to implement the other proposals come from? If assessment does disappear, though, what guarantee is there that the resources will be retained for quality assurance?

Third, how will institutions react to the proposal that they should limit their choice of external examiner to those to be included within the national pool? To whom will such examiners be accountable? Is there a danger of conflicts of interest? How will diversity and autonomy be safeguarded if a national *corps d'élite* is created? In the early days of teaching quality assessment there were fears, not entirely without foundation, that this was a ploy by the Government to impose Her Majesty's Inspectors on the newly integrated higher education system. Are these fears likely to recur?

Fourth, will the proposal for 'national' external examiners lead to any important changes in their functions? If so, will they be acceptable to the institutions or, indeed, implementable?

In short, it is not clear whether all this will lead to a net reduction in the demands on institutions, which was the whole purpose of bringing audit and assessment together under a single agency.

Off-campus Provision

In its valedictory message to the Higher Education Quality Council in 1992, the soon-to-be abolished Council for National Academic Awards mentioned, as one area of potential concern, the growing development of collaborative off-campus programmes. In 1993, HEQC decided to carry out separate audits of universities' collaborative provision. The first overview report, *Learning From Collaborative Audit: an interim report*, contained some critical messages for the institutions concerned, (HEQC, 1995a). The following year, HEQC's attention was drawn to the overseas activities of certain UK universities and colleges. This led to the first audits of institutions' overseas partnerships involving visits to overseas partner institutions by teams of auditors in 1996. Once again, the Council's overview report was less than complimentary, though it discovered no serious cases of misbehaviour (HEQC, 1996c).

The National Committee has now proposed that all such partnerships should in future be licensed or accredited by the new agency wherever they occur. This raises a number of issues:

- what precisely is it that will be accredited? Franchises are only one of the many different forms of partnership that currently exist and, arguably, those least in need of external regulation if they are indeed truly franchises;

- what does such accreditation imply? What obligations will the agency be entering into? Could it be sued by aggrieved third parties?
- is such a 'strong' solution necessary? Whilst there is a good deal of evidence of sloppy practice, there is no evidence of widespread abuses of their powers by UK institutions;
- might there be other and less 'strong' alternatives, for example through local regulation of overseas agents?
- what will the scheme cost, and who will pay for it?

Finally, there is a question of *vires*. In the great majority of cases collaborative programmes are funded privately, with the costs being met by registration and validation fees. Given that this is the case, should accreditation be a function discharged by an agency to which the Funding Councils appoint Directors, and of which it is a principal contractor?

The New Agency

The new Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) was established in March 1997. It took over the functions of the Higher Education Quality Council on 31 July 1997 and will take over the main assessment functions of the English and Welsh Higher Education Funding Councils (and the Northern Ireland assessment function) on 1 October. The Agency will provide services to the Funding Councils and the institutions under detailed service-level agreements. It will be funded through a mixture of Funding Council grants and individual institutional subscriptions (it will continue to be a condition of grant that publicly funded universities and colleges should subscribe to the QAA).

The National Committee report gives an enlarged and more prominent role to the new agency than that envisaged by its principal sponsors, the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals and the Higher Education Funding Council for England. This is recognised by the proposal in the report that QAA should have three main functions:

- quality assurance and public information;
- standards verification (*sic*);
- the maintenance of the awards framework, including in due course the development of a national credit accumulation and transfer scheme.

The arrangements for these should be encompassed in a code of practice that every institution will be required formally to adopt by 2001-02, as a condition of public funding (Recommendation 24). This is another departure from HEQC practice. The Council's Quality Assurance Guidelines were voluntary, and were essentially intended to provide information about best practice and not to prescribe particular approaches (HEQC, 1996a). By contrast, it appears that the various codes of practice will incorporate minima to which institutions will have to conform or lose funding.

The proposals in relation to the new agency raise three main sets of issues: whether the new agency will have the necessary powers to secure adherence to the new framework; whether it will have the necessary resources; and whether it will command the necessary institutional and wider support.

Neither of the first two issues is new (Brown, 1997a,b,c). As already noted, universities and colleges are autonomous institutions. The power to determine the conditions upon which their awards are based, and indeed the titles of those awards, is an important part of that autonomy. If individual institutions are unwilling to bring their awards or programmes into line with the Agency's requirements then, under the existing legislative

framework, there are only two possible sanctions: peer pressure by the academic community collectively or withdrawal of funding by the Funding Council. The former may or may not prove to be effective. The latter seems questionable, since the power to make awards lies with individual institutions and not with the Funding Council or the Agency. Could the use of its funding powers by a funding council to enforce compliance with the judgements of the Agency (a third party) be held to be *ultra vires*?

The second issue is that of resources and, linked to that, expertise. The National Committee report contains no costings for its various proposals. The necessary resources will be found by reallocating monies away from assessment. There are a number of problems with this. It is not yet clear whether this will be sufficient even if assessment disappears completely. Will the Funding Councils anyway be content to switch resources away from their own function of assessment, so potentially reducing their own leverage on the Agency? Even if they are, will the institutions be prepared to allocate the necessary resources to the Agency?

It needs to be borne in mind that as things stand the Agency is dependent upon the institutions for its resources in a dual sense (this will be even more the case if the resources currently put into assessment are indeed transferred to institutions' block grant for teaching). First, the institutions collectively determine through the representative bodies what services the Agency provides to them and what they are prepared to pay for those services. Second, the institutions also provide the Agency with the personnel resources (and much of the technical information and advice) it requires: the Agency itself can command only a fraction of the resources it needs for its activities. Neither the Agency nor the Funding Councils can compel institutions to make staff available as reviewers, assessors or reporters.

In the end, both powers and funding come down to the question of the degree of support and confidence in its work that the Agency can command. Institutional support is only a part, albeit a vital part, of the picture. The Agency also needs the support and confidence of the Government, employers' organisations like the CBI, students, and professional bodies. However, in the end it, is the support of the institutions that will be critical, at least until such time as the Agency's authority has a statutory basis.

Conclusion

Some of the main technical issues raised by the National Committee proposals have been rehearsed. In a number of important respects they take the quality debate forward, notably by concentrating on programme outcomes. However, the proposals cannot be implemented as they stand (especially given the absence of detailed argumentation in the report) but will require a good deal of careful working through. For this, the institutions' input will be vital. Whether that input will be forthcoming, and whether it will be of sufficient quality, will depend in part on the way in which the new agency goes about its task and in part on the broader institutional response to the report.

Institutions' attitudes towards the National Committee's proposals on quality and standards will ultimately be shaped by what happens on funding. If the report leads to significant additional resources, together with some greater degree of societal support, for higher education, then institutions will be more likely to go along with the proposals in other areas such as quality and standards, none of which are cost-free, and some of which (such as those on external examiners) have considerable cost implications. If on the other hand there are no perceived financial benefits, then things could become more difficult. The 'quality debate' will continue for a while yet.

Notes

- [1] This article does not in any way commit or represent the views of the new Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.
- [2] Sir George Quigley has confirmed to me that the graduate expectations work was a very important influence on the Committee's thinking and indeed underpinned the other proposals (personal communication with the author).
- [3] A separate peer-review monitoring of research quality is undertaken periodically, known as the Research Assessment Exercise (Editor).

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